

# On Balance

By Jason Nicolai

When I was a kid I once participated in a science competition whereby each contestant was handed one box of plastic drinking straws and about 10 feet of masking tape. We were given a pair of scissors, a ruler and 20 minutes on the clock. Our task was to produce a structure that stood at least 4 inches high and spanned 1 foot in length. The structure was to serve just one purpose; to provide solid support for a series of progressively increasing weights. Last one to collapse would win. After the full 20 minutes the result of my labor was a drinking straw bridge that was somehow even weaker than the straws themselves had I not "engineered" them at all. It crumbled under about ¼ the weight of the winner. Consequently I thought that the whole exercise was stupid. Frankly, I still do. However, it is not altogether without its merits if applied to something that really matters...like Staffords.

Here's a test for you. Take 38 pounds of clay in one hand and the breed standard in the other. Mold a dog that is 16 inches tall and 16 inches long. Now make him look like everything the standard says he is supposed to be. Take each section of the standard and identify some of the main descriptors you have to work with:

General = of great strength, muscular, active, agile

Head = short, deep, broad

Neck/Body = muscular, short, deep, close, wide

Fore = well boned, rather far apart

Hind = well muscled

The breed standard clearly defines ideal size, proportions, and substance which essentially tells us the proper balance between bull and terrier. Make no mistake; there is little room for personal interpretation of those descriptors, "deep," "broad," "wide," "rather far apart." The parameters of balance are handed to us in objective language, and our personal understanding of "deep," "broad," "wide," and "rather far apart," must comply with what the standard says about Proportion and Substance, and to a lesser degree, but still important, Size.

## Size, Proportion, Substance

*Height at shoulder: 14 to 16 inches. Weight: Dogs, 28 to 38 pounds; bitches, 24 to 34 pounds, these heights being related to weights. Non-conformity with these limits is a fault. In proportion, the length of back,*

*from withers to tail set, is equal to the distance from withers to ground.*

Taken out of context the reoccurrence of words such as short, deep, wide, and broad may be quite misleading. How deep is deep? How wide is wide? The answers to these questions lie in the fact that you only have 38 pounds of clay to work with. Without the guideline for Substance words like "short" and "broad" could mean whatever we want them to mean according to our own preferences and even physical stature. After all, isn't a "thin" hippo still quite massive to a "wide" gazelle? With the Stafford, we are not discussing size as much as we're talking about proper proportion, ideal substance / correct balance. The Height and Weight guidelines are not in the standard because male Staffords must weigh 38 pounds - for some mystical reason. That measurement on its own is somewhat arbitrary. Rather, these guidelines are key to the much more important concept of understanding proper balance.

Blindfold a fat man and read the breed standard to him. Leave out the section about Size, Proportion and Substance. In his mind "wide" may mean huge and "broad" may mean massive. Throw "well boned" into the mix and it's easy to see why he may begin to envision a Bullmastiff. Although the standard takes most of the guesswork out of it for us, we still insist on complicating matters by detaching the subjective elements from their objective roots and applying modern tastes, selfish agendas, and our own images. We should all remove the blindfolds and re-align our interpretation of these subjective words (like "Deep", "Wide", and "Broad") with what they really mean within the context of those 38 pounds of clay. Whether we like it or not, just as with the straw bridge competition mentioned above the materials we are given have limits. Any interpretation that is not within the bounds of those limits is not an interpretation at all. It is at best "poetic license", but according to the guidelines for the project (the breed standard) it is more accurately a *mis*interpretation resulting in a fault that we are often deliberately selecting. There are other faults mentioned in the standard. What if we decided that a curled tail is really more attractive than a pump handle? Should we deliberately breed for curly tails and argue that this is our personal interpretation of the standard? Of course not. That's ridiculous, right? The standard very clearly indicates this is a fault. Yet that is exactly what we're

doing with the substance and balance of our dogs, which is a hell of a lot more important than the tail.

I don't know how many times I've heard breeders say "I don't mind a 45 pound dog as long as he's balanced." What they don't realize is that in order to fit the standard's guideline for proper proportion and substance he'd have to be 17 ¼ inches tall. This is not just opinion nor conjecture. It is outlined for us in simple, certain terms. At just 16 inches a 45 pound dog may be a beautiful animal with lots of presence about him. He may give the appearance of a powerful, proportionate canine, but he is by no means a "balanced" Staffordshire Bull Terrier unless you totally detach the concept of balance from how the AKC / SBTCA breed standard directs us to define proper substance and proportion. There is one gray area/exception to this. We are assuming that the dog in question has a proper length of back and is in "show" weight; i.e. fit and with a tuck. The standard still calls for our breed to be "rather light in the loin." On the other hand, if the dog is in fact carrying 45 pounds of couch potato fat and a massive "hotdog gut" on a frame that should have 38 pounds if he were "show fit," then it's possible that there is proper balance hidden beneath the surface. In this case the owner has ruined it by making him fat. This condition (or lack thereof) is not uncommon. On the day that fat dog shows up in the ring he is still out of balance due to the extra weight, and should be judged accordingly. However, this is a problem that is easy to remedy. With diet and exercise he may be more competitive the next go 'round since the underlying substance and proportions at the proper level of fitness may indeed be there. For the purpose of this discussion let us return to the assumption that the non-conforming dogs mentioned are not simply fat, but they naturally exhibit excessive substance even with a good tuck, i.e. "being rather light in the loins."

A breeder recently showed me his dog and asked what I thought of him. In my estimation he was a top sized dog at 16 inches but weighed in excess of 46 pounds. I told him that the dog was too short. I said that I'd like him more if he were at least an inch taller. Though my response was truthful it was of course not 100% accurate. In this case it was a lot quicker to just say the dog should be taller than to explain that his chest is too low, his shoulders are too wide, his muscle is too bulky, his bone is too heavy, on and on. The man looked at me strangely and asked why on Earth I'd wish for the dog to be taller than the standard calls for. He ad-

mitted that the dog is heavier than the standard says is correct, but contended that if the dog is still the appropriate height, then he only has the one fault. Whereas if he's heavier and also taller then he would have two faults. I could literally see the bull's-eye he was drawing on his forehead with that comment!! One of the very first things every person should learn about this breed is why that line of thinking is utterly destructive. I hate to keep writing on this subject, but any number of respected experts will tell you that we (US breeders) simply haven't gotten it right after all this time. If we don't have a contingency advocating the side of moderation and strict conformity to the breed standard's definition of substance then the exaggerations will continue to get out of hand and the breed will not be just be "changed." It will be lost.

In the exercise above we began with 38 pounds of clay. We were asked to take the raw materials and build a dog using the standard as a recipe. In reality this is the opposite direction we should move. The standard is of course neither a blue print nor a recipe. It is a description of what already exists, not a formula for building it. This distinction is very important. We begin with the whole dog and put him to the test of the standard. We cannot piece together the dog from the Standard. If you find a (whole) Stafford who you think is muscular, wide, short, close, deep, broad, and otherwise could be described using all of those subjective adjectives in the standard, then to fully evaluate him you must put him to the test of the rest of the standard. Does he fit the objective bits as well as the subjective ones? How would you classify his substance and balance; not by your own personal preference, but according to what the standard gives us? If you look at a dog and in your mind he is "Terrier" yet you measure him and according to the breed standard he is of ideal substance and proportion, then who is correct? Hint: The breed standard always wins! Take every dog in your house and put them to the test until your personal interpretation of those elusive adjectives fits all parts of the standard. Learn to identify what 38 pounds of clay looks like and what 48 pounds looks like. Many of us are willfully choosing faults that are in conflict with the breed standard. This is unacceptable. Remember, plain and simple; the goal is to breed dogs that best **fit** the standard. To this end, we may need to adjust our own perspectives that we've formed over the years, and we should certainly demand that the SBTCA direct AKC judges

do the same. It's a simple request: Please judge our dogs to the breed standard - every part of it. On the other hand, you may not like what the standard says about substance. You may not want to follow the standard at all. That is of course every individual's right as a breeder. But if this is the case do not assert that your "interpretation" of an objective passage allows for an animal to carry 20+% more mass than what is clearly defined as correct substance. Admit that you consciously choose not to follow the breed standard then either fight (in opposition to every other KC in the world) to change the way the SBTCA / AKC standard defines "substance" or start a new breed all together. I suggest "American Staffordshire Bulldog" for the name of your new breed. Recent trends suggest that AKC recognition should be a cake walk.

If you aren't comfortable with limiting yourself by that pesky height/weight clause, or if you feel that the issue has been overly discussed and argued to death in the breed, then I understand completely. This argument is common, and the sheer thought of it being brought up again can wear on a person. Over the past 25 years I have been involved in several other breeds. Believe me when I tell you that the size issue comes up in almost every breed from the smallest sight hounds to the largest cart dogs. You're always going to have folks ranting about how big the animals have gotten or how exaggerated they are these days. This issue is certainly not exclusive to Staffordshire Bull Terriers. As mentioned, it is not actually an argument of "size" with the Stafford. Size is secondary. We're talking about disproportionate weights to heights which change the entire dog by altering substance and balance. This issue is probably more important to a fighting dog than to a guard dog, sheep dog, sled dog, bird dog, rabbit dog, bear dog, and cattle dog combined. Think about how important proper proportions and balance are to efficiency and athletic performance. Like it or not we're dealing with a dog who was originally designed as a combat animal. Think about what wrestlers and boxers go through to get their weight in proportion to the rest of their bodies for optimal balance between strength and agility. Pound-for-pound efficiency is the key concept here. There is no tolerance for excess with these athletes. Also consider that the word "wide" to a welter-weight boxer does not mean the same as "wide" to a power lifter since they have completely different functions. A broad terrier is more svelte than a narrow mastiff. The Stafford is wide, thick, and broad;

but he is all of these things for a 14-16 Inch terrier, not for a powerhouse of a working dog.

On the surface, height and weight should be quite simple. Getting a feel for it is typically one of the first issues people tackle as they begin learning about the breed. For being such a simple concept it's still an obvious problem when quite often the most standard dog appears to be the weakest one in the ring. Everyone knows 15 inch 29 pound bitch looks totally out of place at most AKC shows, yet according to the standard she couldn't be of more ideal substance. How sad is that?

What if we could just throw this whole height/weight thing out the window? We're all tired of hearing about it anyhow, right? If we took the H/W clause out of the standard completely would we then have no guidance at all for deriving a common meaning of phrases such as "well sprung" and "set rather far apart"? How would we know how deep is "deep" and how wide is "wide"?

Consider that in 1935 Great Britain when these adjectives were first chosen to describe the Staffordshire Bull Terrier the average man in the UK was right at 5' 9" and weighed 163 pounds. Today in the US he is also very close to 5' 9" but weighs upwards of 185. This is not meant as a shot at modern US culture, but the point is that our perspectives tend to change as we ourselves change. Everything we see, hear, touch, taste and smell is filtered through ourselves and our experiences with the time in which we live. I once saw a Pontiac Trans-Am on the narrow streets of Kyoto Japan. That thing was an absolute Monster! Likewise, a 6 ft tall 200 pound man in 1935 England would have been considered quite large, yet a man of this stature certainly doesn't illicit stares today. The dogs that were used to formulate the breed standard by our lanky British ancestors also carried considerably less weight for their height (33 pounds at 17.5 inches) versus the modern Stafford who should be 38 pounds at 16 inches. Ponder that for a moment. When the standard was first written those early 17.5 inch 33 pound dogs were the very models that bore definition to the words "wide", "deep", and "well sprung." Today, we'd call them thin, wispy, rangy, and would never think of them as balanced. Even without the explicit height / weight parameters printed in the standard, the historic context of the breed would dictate what these descriptors mean.

We have seen a progression toward more weight per height over the years. The standard has been loosened up over time to allow for the fact that

we now have show dogs, not fighting dogs. That move was already made, and our current Standard accounts for it, so anyone who argues that a 45+ dog is fine since they're now show dogs is dead wrong. They should still be show Staffords, not show bulldogs. We arrived at 16 inches and 38 pounds for a top end to make allowances for modern size variations and specifically for the new role of our breed as a show dog. Had we not done this the standard would still call for our dogs to be 30 pounds at 17 inches. Obviously, there should be allowances made for non-conformity, and I don't know many people who suggest disqualifying Staffords outside of the H/W parameters set forth within the standard (though there are a few). Perhaps it's like speeding just a little bit on the interstate. The trick is knowing how much is too much. While that may be somewhat of a personal question for every breeder and judge to ask him/herself we all need to come up with a threshold of tolerance and stick to it. Keep in mind that the standard does not define a threshold of tolerance; it just says that the heights are related to the weights. It sets the IDEAL limit. How close to "ideal" you want to be is up to you. I'll be the first to admit, I will only consider it a very mild fault for a dog to be 40 pounds on a square, 16 inch frame. I will fault a 17 inch dog for being too tall, but I won't totally dismiss him as long as his general H/W ratio and is similar to that of a 16 inch 38-40 pound dog thus resulting in proper substance / balance. In this case, the 17 inch dog should carry about 43-44 pounds, but he would otherwise have to be an absolutely superb example of the breed in order to make up for the size fault. Once again, size isn't the most important issue here. It's proper substance. In evaluating a 15 inch bitch, I personally like her to be about 30-31 pounds, which I realize is also heavier than the standard calls for in its strictest translation. I don't kid myself. I realize that I have a tolerance for slightly more substance than the standard says is ideal, and I'm ready to admit that. I will never argue that such non-conformity actually "fits" the standard. It simply does not. All other things being equal, the guidelines given in the standard always rule!

In all actuality I can't look at every dog and tell you his exact height and weight. No one can. Judges do not have a wicket and scales in the ring, so there has to be some level of tolerance for variations in heights and weights since we're not actually keeping strict tabs on them. At the same time we cannot hide behind the fact that measurements

aren't taken at shows, and thus contend that they do not matter. You can call it proper "substance", "balance," or "blend between bull and terrier." Any way you look at it the breed standard gives us specific heights and weights that are to be related while explicitly stating that nonconformity within the limits is a fault. We should be taking measurements at home and come to understand what the proper substance of a top sized bitch (16 inches and 34 pounds) looks like at a glance. It might not be obvious to the naked eye if she's 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches as opposed to 16" or 36 pounds instead of 34, but we should certainly be able to identify that something is awry when we see a 40 pound bitch. Unless she's 17 inches tall she's out of balance. Any judge or breeder should be able to recognize this in an instant. Regardless of whether or not specific numbers (height/weight measurements) come to mind it should be obvious when an unbalanced specimen stands before us. The best way to train yourself on how to recognize ideal balance and substance as outlined in the standard is to get your hands on as many 16 inch 38 pound dogs and 15 inch 29 pound bitches as possible. Make sure they are of proper length as well, since a long back will make the dog heavier than desired and could throw off the perception of substance.

The tables provided below take a very literal and mathematical look at the definition of "substance" and consequentially balance as outlined within the standard which states that the given heights are to be related to given weights. Previous versions of these tables have been published in the US, UK, South Africa, Australia, and Russia. They have been used for educational purposes and fun match competitions whereby the dogs are measured and judged on their strict compliance and deviation from the standard ratios for H/W. Use the tables to compare how your own dogs stack up. If necessary adjust your perception of balance to match what our breed standard dictates.

**These tables are based upon the progression of Pounds-Per-Inch from 14 inches to 16 inches as objectively inferred using the SBTCA / AKC breed standard to which Staffordshire Bull Terriers should be judged.**

**Size, Proportion, Substance**

Height at shoulder: 14 to 16 inches. Weight: Dogs, 28 to 38 pounds; bitches, 24 to 34 pounds, these heights being related to weights. Non-conformity with these limits is a fault. In proportion, the length of back, from withers to tail set, is equal to the distance from withers to ground.

**Dogs**

The standard dictates that dogs begin at 2 PPI and progress to 2.375 PPI from 14-16 inches. This is an increase of .375 PPI over a 2 inch increase in height. Which translates to increments of .0469 PPI for each 1/4" of height increase. The table below carries out these proportions all the way through a hypothetical 18 inch dog.

**Bitches**

The standard dictates that bitches begin at 1.714 PPI and progress to 2.125 PPI from 14-16 inches. This is an increase of .411 PPI over a 2 inch increase in height. Which translates to increments of .0524 PPI for each 1/4" of height increase. The table below carries out these proportions all the way through a hypothetical 18 inch bitch.

Height	Pounds Per Inch	Standard Weight
14 inches	2.0 (given)	28 pounds (given)
14.25 inches	2.05	29.21 pounds
14.5 inches	2.10	30.45 pounds
14.75 inches	2.15	31.71 pounds
15 inches	2.19	32.85 pounds
15.25 inches	2.25	34.31 pounds
15.5 inches	2.29	35.50 pounds
15.75 inches	2.34	36.86 pounds
16 inches	2.38 (given)	38 pounds (given)
16.25 inches	2.42	39.33 pounds
16.5 inches	2.47	40.76 pounds
16.75 inches	2.52	42.21 pounds
17 inches	2.57	43.69 pounds
17.25 inches	2.61	45.02 pounds
17.5 inches	2.66	46.55 pounds
17.75 inches	2.71	48.10 pounds
18 inches	2.76	49.68 pounds

Height	Pounds Per Inch	Standard Weight
14 inches	1.71 (given)	24 pounds (given)
14.25 inches	1.76	25.08 pounds
14.5 inches	1.81	26.25 pounds
14.75 inches	1.87	27.58 pounds
15 inches	1.92	28.80 pounds
15.25 inches	1.97	30.04 pounds
15.5 inches	2.02	31.31 pounds
15.75 inches	2.08	32.76 pounds
16 inches	2.13 (given)	34 pounds (given)
16.25 inches	2.18	35.42 pounds
16.5 inches	2.23	36.80 pounds
16.75 inches	2.28	38.19 pounds
17 inches	2.33	39.61 pounds
17.25 inches	2.39	41.23 pounds
17.5 inches	2.44	42.70 pounds
17.75 inches	2.49	44.20 pounds
18 inches	2.54	45.72 pounds

### **What This Tells Us All As Judges:**

According to the current breed standard a 45 pound dog would need to be 17.25 inches tall in order to be of proper substance. Of course a 17.25" dog is "out of standard," and some would say is beyond the acceptable limits of what should be considered appropriate breed type. However, shrinking that same 45 pound dog down into a 16 inch frame puts him nearly 20% out of balance which undoubtedly is in conflict with proper breed type. A 45 pound Stafford is equally out of standard as a 17.25 inch Stafford, but an unbalanced Stafford is a greater fault than non-conformity with the size guidelines.

A 16 inch 45 pound Stafford carries 2 distinct faults:  
#1 At 45 pounds he is to be faulted for being outside of the size guidelines. This on the surface could be a minor fault if it didn't affect anything else, perhaps like a tail that is set too high.

#2 However, at just 16 inches he carries as much mass as a 17.25 inch dog should, and is thus grossly out of balance. This is a much more serious fault.

A 17.25 inch 45 pound Stafford carries 1 distinct fault:  
#1 At this height and weight he is to be faulted for being outside the size guidelines.

If fit, assuming he's not stripped down to 45 pounds or fattened up to 45 pounds, this dog is of proper balance, and with all other things being equal exhibits better conformity to the breed standard, and should be placed above the 16 inch dog of the same weight.

When it comes to size, most judges may have a limit in mind beyond which they will not tolerate. Remember that the judge should penalize a 45 pound dog to same degree he/she penalizes a 17+ inch dog as these are equal non-conformities of size. If 17.25 inches is too big, so is 45 pounds. Every judge should realize however, that balance is much more important than size. If a 45 pound dog is just 16 inches tall or the 17.25 inch dog is only 38 pounds these faults are much greater than a balanced specimen who is simply oversized.

I know of a bitch who stands 15—15.25 inches. She once weighed right at 32 pounds in "show fit" condition. This girl won several specialty shows and was awarded wins under 11 different international breeder/judges. She proved herself an excellent example of the breed by an impressive number of respected opinions. She then set out to impress the AKC judges as well. In the process of

doing so she put on about 6 pounds. To say this bitch fared well under the AKC judges would be a gross understatement. While being campaigned she dropped a few pounds, became more fit and once again conformed to the standard a little better. When this happened the wins under the AKC judges slowed down, and the big (group) wins ceased all together, so she gained the weight back. Also while being shown she found herself on several occasions back in the ring under UK breeder/judges. She always got a good look, but never got another big win under a UK judge. When the judges were asked what they thought of her. Each time they would say she's a lovely bitch, but there's just too much of her, or that her condition throws her out of balance. Why does there exist such a disparity between the understanding many UK judges have about balance and what it takes to win under the large majority of AKC judges? It's a poor argument to contest that most UK judges just like skinny Staffords. They don't, but many do require that our dogs be within close adherence to what the standard outlines for proper substance as well as fitness. I cannot fathom anyone suggesting that the average AKC judge who is exposed to 5 or 6 Staffords every other month has a more correct understanding of our breed than most UK breeder / specialists who are accustomed to an average dog show on any given weekend with an entry 2-3 times as big as our national specialty. Obviously we are showing to non-specialist AKC judges 95% of the time. In many of those rings you will find a preference for faults, contradictions to the standard, and an improper image of substance. Should we be striving to appease judges who have a misunderstanding of our breed or should we strive to correct their understanding? I'm as guilty as the next person. I have personally put excess weight on my own dogs to play to a judge's preference when I knew they would not consider a dog with proper substance. It has been proven that adapting to the judges' tastes (and misunderstandings) can work. At the same time, I believe we as a fancy should reclaim the wheel. The SBTCA is charged with educating judges to follow every aspect of the breed standard from nose to tail and more importantly, everything in between. Judges should be taught to recognize when they're looking at a dog that has ideal substance for a Staffordshire Bull Terrier verses one that simply looks powerful and attractive yet is in fact out of balance. They also need to know when they're looking at an otherwise balanced dog who is being exhibited at an excessive weight, and they

should certainly stop selecting for this fault. If we (SBTCA) direct judges to discern when exhibits are in proper condition then we could further eliminate personal preferences for substance that are in blatant non-conformity to the breed standard.

The old AKC breed video tells judges that there are 3 distinct "Types" of Staffordshire Bull Terriers: A "Bulldog **type**," a "Terrier **type**," and a "Balanced **type**." This is a fundamental misnomer with flawed logic that contradicts the breed standard and should be forgotten. How inaccurate and ironic is it to say that **type**, (*that which make the Stafford distinctly Stafford, setting him apart from all other breeds*) can be identified in three different blends from two different influences (bull and terrier)? Type is singular to a breed or variety. Three "types" suggest three different varieties. There exists no such allowance for this variation in balance in the breed standard which addresses Substance by indicating that heights are to be related to weights, not that "Terrier," "Balanced" and "Bully" are all acceptable. When conducting ring-side mentoring sessions for judges seeking AKC approval for our breed I am often asked about this notion of the "Trinity of Types" to which I reply, ***All you need to remember is that if a Staffordshire Bull Terrier is not of the "Balanced type" then he is by default of the "Unbalanced type."*** Plain and simple: It doesn't matter what name you give it. If it's not balanced, it's unbalanced. Should judges be taught that the unbalanced "type" is acceptable?

In the end I'm not suggesting that if you find yourself with a 15 inch bitch that is 35 fit pounds that you don't consider her worth of showing or breeding. Not at all, but I do suggest that you consider this a moderate fault that needs correcting. She is in fact carrying 20% more substance than what the standard dictates for her height, and is thus unbalanced. Stop and imagine how different you would look and feel with an additional 20% of your own body weight at the same height. When it comes time to breeding her, work on eliminating that very evident fault just as you would if she had a sloppy top line, light eyes or a gay tail. It's time we call a fault a fault even when it's on an attractive animal. This is key to the athleticism and agility of the breed which is imperative we maintain even without the original combat function. The Stafford still needs to theoretically look the part to be a proper Stafford. There are other breeds of dogs that carry more mass for their height, and there is plenty of room for bulldog aficionados to go play in that yard. But do not blur the lines that separate our breed from all the others. We're not talking about size.

We're talking about messing with the very definition of "breed type" here. Take an objective look what you've got and always be striving to get more conformity with the breed standard. That is the definition of "conformation" and the goal of the contest. If your dog has 20% non-conformity to the H/W guidelines, then don't ignore it or accept it as your personal preference or interpretation of the standard. You wouldn't do that with an undershot mouth or "scorpion tail." It's a fault, but not just any fault. It's one that skews the proper blending of bull and terrier which is paramount to defining what a Staffordshire Bull Terrier is. Consciously work to tighten it up over the next generation or two. The more accurately our dogs fit the breed standard the more consistent the stock will be, the better the judges will become, and the longer the Staffordshire Bull Terrier will be around to share its world with us all.