

THE FRONT LINE OF ATHLETICISM

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As breeders, we simply cannot do justice to our breed if we don't understand the purpose that brought it into creation. In fact, if we don't have a grasp of this, we can do a lot of harm. We see that whenever a poorly constructed animal is put into the gene pool.

Every breeder, whether we course, do obedience, or exhibit our dogs in the show ring, must keep in our mind's eye the borzoi as an athlete, first and foremost. The Borzoi was created and developed to be one of the ultimate athletes of the canine world; a hunting machine. The opening comments of the breed standard makes this crystal clear:

"The Borzoi was originally bred for the coursing of hare, fox and wolves on more or less open terrain, relying on sight rather than scent. To accomplish this purpose, the Borzoi must be courageous, powerful, and capable of great speed. Special emphasis is placed on sound running structure, strong neck and jaws, keenness to game, and agility combined with proper condition." CKC Borzoi Standard

Yes, I know they're pretty and sweet. But if you love this breed enough to propagate it, please get a fix on the athletic history and purpose that necessitates their structure - the whys and wherefores of borzoi. There are many volumes translated, researched and written on the history of the borzoi to chronicle this. I recommend you access them if you haven't already done so. The structure and form of borzoi today must continue to reflect this athletic hunting dog, as that is what they are. If you love them, you must love them for what they are, not for what you wish them to be.



The entire structure of a borzoi is meant to be a well-knit, efficient machine, with each part supporting the whole. However, to learn more about the entire animal, we must train ourselves to break each aspect down into smaller bits, and then dissect those into great detail for study. Then we can put it all back into the greater context. I'd like to focus here on one of the most difficult aspects of athletic Borzoi structure - both to understand and to manage in a breeding program - the front assembly. Seeing the lack thereof in the gene pool, it's obviously a tough nut to crack - both cognitively and genetically.

In a breed developed for athletic hunting prowess, a proper front assembly is essential. This is the support structure for the entire front half of the body (which is heavier than the

back half) and the part of the anatomy that is taking the full weight of the dog at speed when it lands, and when it pushes into a turn.

So what is a good front assembly? Honestly, this escaped me for years, so if you are still struggling with what a good front is all about, take heart.

Think about a triangle laid over the front of the dog. The well laid back shoulder is the top part of a triangle (with the point towards the front of the dog.) This allows for a wide base for the neck muscles to attach on to, and gives the dog a neck that is set well back into the body. It has a deep base, and this gives the dog a very powerful neck, the kind a wolf would rather not experience the power of.



The bottom part of the triangle is formed by the upper arm. This should be long, and well “returned” back, so that the dog’s elbow will lie underneath the point of his shoulder up top, giving strong structural support right where it is needed: underneath the animal’s center of gravity. This upper arm will fit neatly to the body, having the ability to slide smoothly along the rib cage with fluidity and ease. The back base of this triangle will be an imaginary line that runs from the top of the shoulder down to the back of the elbow.

This large, deep triangle will allow maximum space for muscle and ligament attachment. The bones of the front are not articulated at joints like other parts of the skeleton; they are attached within the body only by muscle and ligament. This allows for the shock absorption function that the front must perform on a hard running hound, both on the straight and in sudden turns (or for even jumping off the couch!). A front “triangle” that is altered by shorter/straighter bones will affect how the muscles are able to fit in and function. While the bones can come in different sizes, the number of muscle/ligament attachments remain the same. Short, straight upper arms or shoulders often come with bunched up muscles - all jammed into a shortage of space – and their function will be compromised.

We cannot talk about fronts without also mentioning the necessity for adequate width between the front legs, and correct pasterns. It has been observed that appropriate width

between the front legs (generally a hand's width, depending on the size of the dog and the hand) allows for good muscling and the power to push into turns with strength and stability. Pasterns should not be too long, nor more than slightly sloping.

"Pasterns slightly sloping, strong, flexible and springy...The sternum is slightly pronounced with adequate width of forechest." CKC Borzoi Standard

Another aspect of a good front: it will not be too far forward on the body, nor too far back. A front set too far forward leaves the chest and topline hanging without support, and has about as much strength as it will need to support the dog's ears – because that's where it sits under.

A front set too far back would result in an overly prominent forechest, and that would be a detriment to the borzoi function as well. The prow-like prominent forechest of breeds such as Dachshunds suit their function of digging and going to ground, but not in an animal built for running at speed.

Now, let's put this dog in motion. Not just a show trot, but the full force of the gallop it was meant to do as a hunting dog. Yes, that fabulous rear provides the power to explode that dog off the mark. However, the front assembly, which even at rest is supporting more than half of the dog's body weight at its center of gravity, is accepting that full weight *multiplied* by the force provided by that strong rear engine (get out your calculators all you mathematicians).

Add the fact that this dog at some point is going to turn *while moving at full speed*. His front will push right to turn him left, and push left to turn him right. At that moment, the front will not only be accepting the full force of acceleration and body weight, it will now add the strain of pushing the body into the turn to change direction. This calls for a physics degree to figure out, but the rest of us can agree that incredible forces are being put upon the front half of that dog.

If our dog has its front set where it should be, with good length of bones and appropriate angles, he will be able to support his center of gravity as he pushes into that turn. He will have good shock absorption due to the proper angle placement of his shoulder and upper arm, and he will have optimum use of his muscles and ligaments.

Compare this efficient use to the straight-fronted/short boned hound. He is going to have to enter every turn without proper support for his center of gravity; he will have poorer shock absorption, taking more of a pounding at every step, and his muscle and ligament attachments, being crammed into smaller space, will be compromised in their use. Everything this dog does is going to be more punishing to his body, and less efficient.

In every day living - whether playing in the yard, coursing, trotting, doing obedience or agility - borzoi are landing on their fronts countless times a day. Even getting off the couch! Do not ever underestimate the importance of the front assembly in your breeding program, and how it impacts not just the original function of the dog, but its ability to live a healthy,

vigorous life. This will help guide our breeding decisions beyond what is pretty or what wins, to what is functionally correct and athletic. Because that is Borzoi.

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