



“ There are always tradeoffs in structure. You must know your sport and what it takes to excel in that sport and choose accordingly. ”



PICKING YOUR PERFORMANCE PUPPY

by Helen Grinnell King



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*Does your puppy have the makings
to be an athletic superstar?*

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my friend and mentor, Rachel Page Elliott, with hopes that she would be proud of its contents.

- Helen

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Reference Drawings	8
Structure Basics	10
GETTING TO KNOW THE DOG	22
Fronts	23
Backs	27
Necks	29
Ewe Neck	31
Rears	33
The Pelvis	35
Slipped Hocks	38
LOOKING FURTHER	39
Do Your Homework!	40
The “Breed Type” Debate Continues	42
Choosing A Breeder	49
Thoughts On Spay/Neuter Contracts	50
OPTIONS AND CHOICES	51
What Do We Want?	52
Pick Your Poison	53
Photos Can Be Deceiving	55
Practice Picking	59
YOUR PUPPY	63
From Puppy To Adult	64
Picking Puppies	68
Formulating A Plan	72
Exercise For Puppies	74
Feeding	75
Vaccinations	75
Training	76
Conclusion	77
Acknowledgements	78
Photo Credits	79

INTRODUCTION



The greatest show winning pedigree in the world doesn't guarantee a good performance dog.

Many of us enter the wonderful world of dog agility by accident. I know I certainly did. I was taking an obedience lesson and saw some old agility equipment lying around and asked what it was. As she was explaining it to me, I knew right then that I had taken my last obedience lesson. It was AGILITY FOR ME!

My first agility dog was bought as a pet before I knew anything about the sport. I had no intention of competing in dog sports. I had wanted a standard Poodle and a Border Collie for 40 years. We thought the Border Collie might be too much to live with so we opted for the Poodle. I knew someday, however, I would have a Border Collie and then I would know the answer to the question: “Which breed is smarter — the Border Collie or the standard Poodle?”

Our standard Poodle came from a top show breeder. Her sire had won many Bests in Show and her mother was a Group winning AKC breed champion. Our dog's sire had taken top honors at the Poodle Club of America Specialty more than once and this breeder came highly recommended by those in the dog show world “know. “

I went into it looking for a great puppy to love, brush and spoil. I wanted a fun personality and structure wasn't that important to me. I had an extensive background in conformation from a breed show viewpoint but not canine performance. I did have many years under my belt of breeding performance horses and competing in jumping, dressage and eventing competitions as well as fox hunting in New England. We also bred Thoroughbreds for the race track as well as performance. I had bred and showed dogs in the '70s and '80s and had some top winning Great Danes and Basset Hounds. I also bred a few litters of Afghans. My mother bred and raised Boxers when we were kids, so dogs and horses have been a HUGE part of my entire life.

The greatest show winning pedigree in the world doesn't guarantee a good performance dog, however. The dog I originally bought as a pet became my first agility dog but, because I hadn't put much time into thinking about performance, her structural issues

not only limited her athletic ability, they limited her career as well. She was retired by the age of six due to structure and health issues.

Over the years, I have bred and/or owned many dogs of many different breeds. I have lived with Labs, Newfoundlands, Irish Wolfhounds, Greyhounds, Whippets, Afghans, Great Danes, Basset Hounds, Foxhounds, mini Poodles, standard Poodles, German Shepherds, Border Collies, Dobermans, Shelties, Boxers, Cocker Spaniels and numerous mixes and rescues, including a feral dog.

I have always been fascinated with structure and how it relates to movement and performance. I have attended countless seminars on the subject both for horses and dogs. Sometimes I agreed with the speakers but sometimes I found myself scratching my head at some of the comments made, especially when they spoke in absolutes. There are no absolutes in structure. For every rule, I can find you an exception. One seminar presenter claimed that dogs with ewe necks couldn't swim. Well, I knew that to be false because I owned three dogs with severe ewe necks that swam like little torpedoes! When I questioned it, they said that they couldn't swim AND carry anything in their mouths. So I went out and made videos proving this to be false. More about that later.

For years I have watched thousands of dogs and horses competing in sports. Before I became heavily involved in agility, I judged horses and was an inspector for the American Connemara Society. I spent quite a lot of time in Ireland learning about structure and the breed, both recently and for a summer back in the mid 1960s.

As a sculptor, studying anatomy and structure has been very helpful to me. One becomes quite familiar with structure when you use your hands to mold likenesses from clay. I will always be a student of structure. It is an ongoing process and one is never finished. There is always more we can learn.

My husband and I compete in agility with standard Poodles and a Border Collie. We also both ran the feral dog that we adopted 11 years ago. We have put multiple agility championships on all four of our competing Poodles and our oldest is the top AKC point winning standard Poodle of all time in agility. She is 12 years old and, as of this writing, still sound and competing.

We do more than agility with our Poodles. They swim, hike, compete in rally, go sheep herding, dock diving and anything else that seems like fun. Our dogs work and play hard but every year they get at least two straight months off from agility competitions and training of any kind. They just run and play on their own. They come back strong with well rested bodies and minds. This well-deserved rest allows their bodies to rebuild and is a very important reason our dogs compete well into their advanced years.

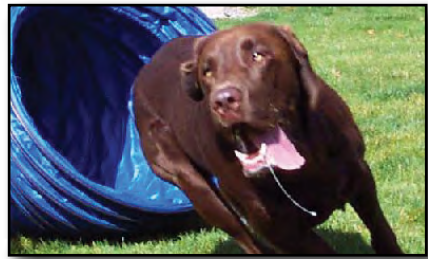
In a perfect world we all want perfectly built dogs for agility or any other sport. However, this is not a perfect world and there are no perfect dogs. We have the dogs we have and, unless our dog is lame or in pain, most of us train and compete with the dog we have. Some dogs are more talented than others, but we do the best we can with what we have and try to educate ourselves, so our next dog will have the structure best suited for our sport of choice.

Good conformation may not only allow dogs to excel in a sport, it also can mean the difference between a long career and a short one. Structure that wins in the show ring doesn't necessarily mean the dog will excel in agility, field trials or any other sport. But it is not just structure that plays a role in longevity in dog sports; it also depends on conditioning, nutrition and training. In order to develop the best agility dog, we need good structure, a great training program and common sense conditioning and feeding.

This book was written to help you make educated choices when it is time for you to pick your next performance dog and to better understand the one you have now. Learning about our dogs' structure is very important to help us understand why they perform the way they do and to have realistic expectations of just how well they will do in competition.

Any sound dog can do agility but we need to be realistic about our goals. If I want to be on the World Team, I probably wouldn't go out and buy a Basset Hound or a large Great Dane. There is no reason these breeds can't do agility but expecting them to beat the top dogs in their jump height is a stretch. I happen to adore standard Poodles. There are some amazing standard Poodles out there in agility but expecting them to beat the very fastest Border Collies (assuming that the Border Collie runs clean and efficiently) is not realistic. We train the breed we love to the best of its ability and enjoy the ride! This book is geared towards agility but you can take the principles and apply to any sport.

This book was written to help you make educated choices when it is time for you to pick your next performance dog and to better understand the one you have now.



Helen Grinnell King

REFERENCE DRAWINGS

We must strive to find where form meets function.

If we are lucky, we will find a mentor who takes the time to teach us and show us the way in our chosen field.

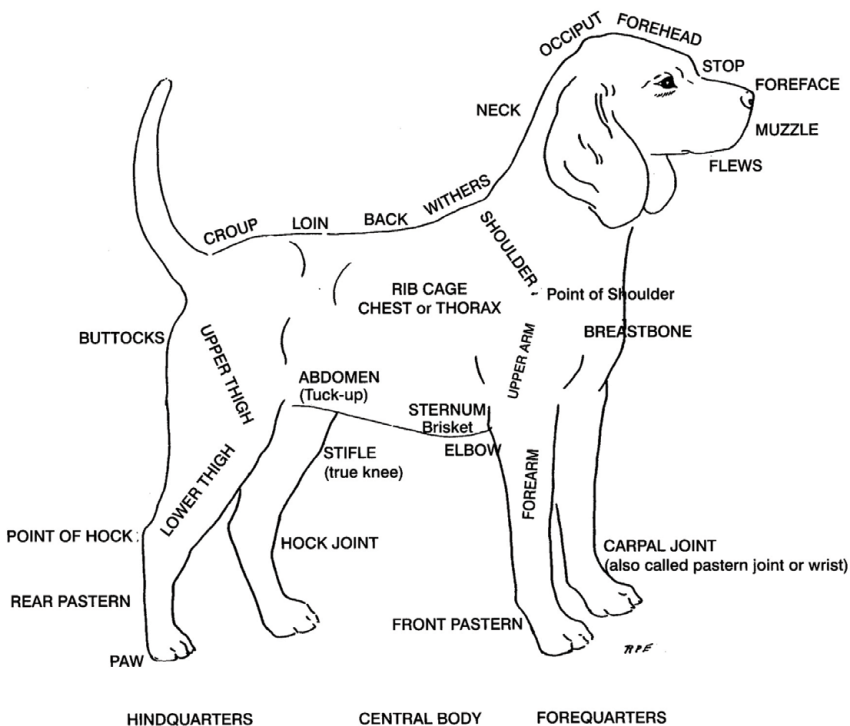
My passion is structure and how it relates to function. Early in my life, I had the incredibly good fortune to meet the late GREAT Rachel Page Elliott. She became a friend and mentor and my respect for her is beyond words.

I miss our many discussions on structure but took away so much from them. Pagey's books and videos were an inspiration to me and the foundation for most of my own searching to find more answers.

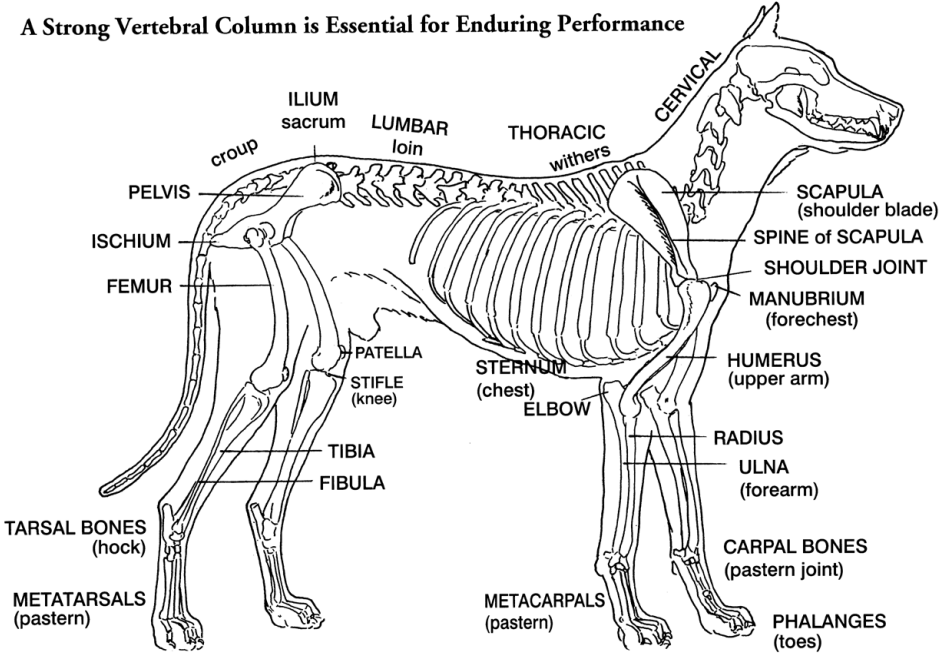
It is worthwhile to read everything you can that was written by her and watch her amazing video Canine Cineradiography.

The following three drawings are reprinted with permission from Rachel Page Elliott and are from her wonderful book "Dog Steps."

Terms Commonly Used in Describing the Dog's Outer Appearance



A Strong Vertebral Column is Essential for Enduring Performance



Major Muscles

It takes many muscles working together to produce sound movement. Here is what some of them do.

Trapezius—Anchors along each side of the scapular ridge and outlines base of the neck. Elevates the limb and draws it forward.

Latissimus—Fans up along side of rib cage. Helps pull trunk forward and rearward. Supports shoulders and draws limbs against trunk.

Longissimus—Extends and straightens the spine. Carries thrust from powerful rear muscles that interconnect along the back bone.

Gluteus—Called the “rump muscle.” Flexes hip joint and extends stifle joint.

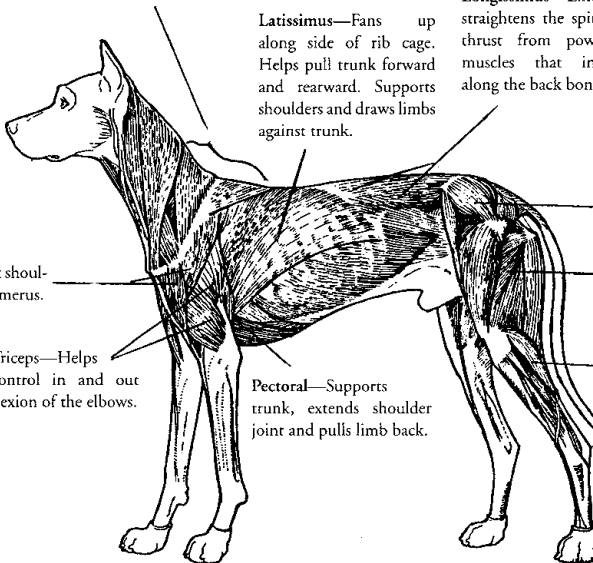
Deltoid—Helps flex shoulder joint and lifts humerus.

Triceps—Helps control in and out flexion of the elbows.

Pectoral—Supports trunk, extends shoulder joint and pulls limb back.

Quadriceps Femoris—Upper thigh. Extends and rotates hip joint.

Gastrocnemius—Lower thigh. Flexes stifle and extends Tarsal joint, the joint that transmits and carries much of the load in the rear quarters. This joint should not be confused with the rear pastern.



STRUCTURE BASICS

There are always tradeoffs in structure. You must know your sport and what it takes to excel in that sport and choose accordingly.

This is not a detailed book on structure. It is about picking a performance prospect. I will give some basic rules of thumb, but you must educate yourself further in the art of structure and how it relates to performance. Hopefully, the following information will be helpful. I am working on a video that will go into more depth but that is a future project.

Once you have done your homework on health and are confident that your breeder will do their best to make sure you have a healthy puppy, you need to think about structure. This book is based on what I would pick for an agility prospect. If you are looking for a breed champion, then you need to study the breed standard and really educate yourself on what is currently winning in the ring. As I have stated elsewhere, it is certainly possible to have a dog that meets the standard AND does well in dog sports but that doesn't mean it will do well in the show ring!

The first thing I look at when I am evaluating a puppy is its pelvis. Without a great pelvis, there will be no power. A beautiful dog with a short pelvis is like putting a scooter engine in a Ferrari. Agility dogs need POWER! The pelvis also needs to have good angle to it. A flat pelvis will not give you turning ability or power to accelerate or jump efficiently. To find the angle of the pelvis, you need to look at the ilium bones and the ischium bones. If you don't know where those parts of the pelvis are, please refer to the reference drawings at the beginning of the book.



Susan Garrett's Border Collies - Encore on the left, Feature on the right

Think of a Quarter Horse used for cutting work and how strong the pelvis is. These horses must be able to sit down to slide to a stop, then pivot on a dime and accelerate in an instant! This is what we need in agility. We also need a good jumper, however, and most cutting Quarter Horses do not make great jumpers so our agility dogs need a slightly different front end than the cutting horse to go along with that powerful rear.

Susan Garrett's Border Collies are shown on the previous page. Encore on the left shows the upper arm angle and lower stance and Feature on the right is straighter in the upper arm. Both are World Champions but Encore tends to hit more bars than Feature.

If you want a good sheep herding dog, then you need a dog that can get low to the ground and still move well (like the cutting horse). This is accomplished with a nicely sloping upper arm (NOT shorter legs!). Many of the top cattle herding Border Collies are straighter in their upper arms than the sheep herding Border Collies. They don't get as low when herding so their upper arms tend to be straighter. PLEASE remember that these are GENERAL statements and not meant to be absolutes!

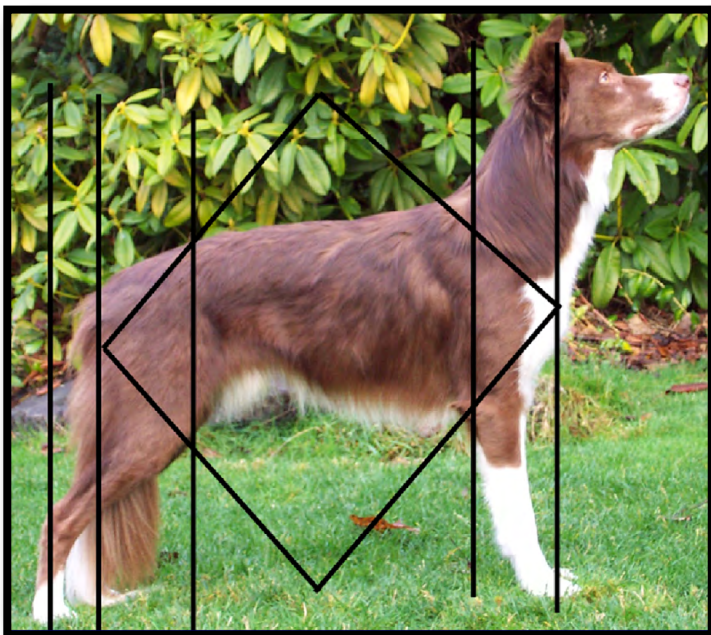
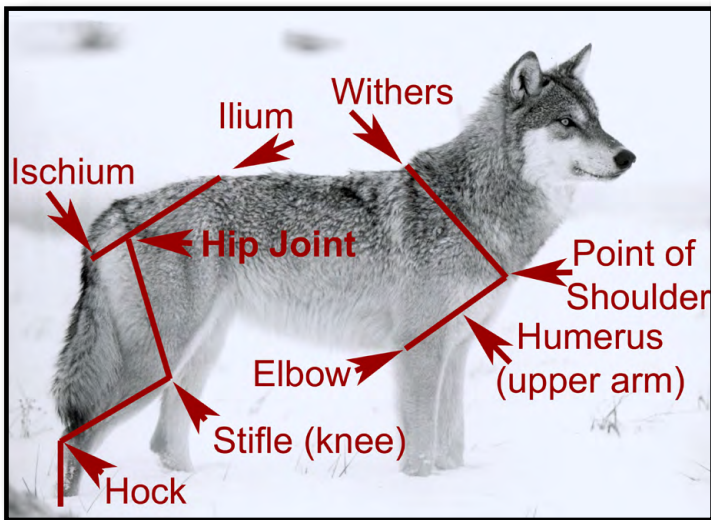
One problem with the well angled upper arm is that it can really put the weight shift of the dog on the front end so their jumping is flatter and more bars MIGHT come down. Most of the better jumping horses are straighter in the upper arm. This allows the front legs to come forward more quickly and snap up while a powerful hind end propels them off the ground. We always want good layback in the shoulder, however, so don't confuse the upper arm with the shoulder blade.

Sighthounds are straighter in front than Border Collies. Sighthounds have a fast turn over when they run, and the lesser upper arm angle allows for a faster turnover. There are always tradeoffs in structure! You must know your sport and what it takes to excel in that sport and choose accordingly.

I like to draw lines on dogs and horses to see where their legs fall in relationship to their bodies. It is a good tool to help you develop your eye. It is important to really feel the animal to find the bones and not to guess where they are.

As you can see in the photos on the next page, drawing lines will really help you to see exactly where those angles are. Obviously, the lines on the wolf are a guess because I didn't put my hands on her to feel those bones but it will give you the idea. Find those points on your dog and either draw imaginary lines or take photos and, once you have identified exactly where those points are, draw the lines in Photoshop or any program that will allow you to do so.

In order to see the shoulder angulation (the highest point of the shoulder blade—which is normally right at the withers—to the point of shoulder) also referred to as “layback” and the rear angulation (also called bend in stifle), these lines can be very helpful.



On the following pages are some photographs of four of our Poodles. Also, read the little story on each and see if you can match the stories to the correct dogs in the photographs.

CAN YOU GUESS THE CORRECT DOG?



On the following pages, match the **numbered dogs** to the **letters**. Comparing each dog will help develop your understanding of structural differences.

Match the letters to the numbered dogs.
Can you match them correctly?

DOG A

Was the top winning agility standard Poodle in the United States for years. She often beat all but the VERY fastest Border Collies and easily qualified for World Team tryouts every year. She could turn as sharply and as quickly as any dog in agility. However, she had little ground speed but made up for it on course with her turning ability. She could accelerate quickly and had a very flat jumping style for a Poodle. If the course was twisty, it was in her favor. If the course was long with lots of running in between obstacles, she was a lot slower due to her lack of ground speed. She is a strong swimmer and retriever. She is still competing at the age of TWELVE!

DOG B

Over jumped by a mile and flung her hind legs over her head when she was in the air. When she is running loose with the other dogs, she is unable to keep up with them or lower her center of gravity at all. She can't turn and has no stamina or ability to accelerate. She is also terribly clumsy. Her hind legs trail way out behind her when she runs, so she has little power. She can't swim to save her life (literally!). She sinks like a stone and, although we have tried everything to help her learn, she just cannot swim. She sometimes paces, waddles when she walks, has a hard time getting her rear end to come underneath her so it is difficult for her to sit and she can barely squat to pee. She also has a LOT of inherited internal health issues.

DOG C

Has MUCH more ground speed than any of the others but has trouble turning and can't lower her center of gravity easily. She is the best jumper and most athletic of the four but not the fastest on the agility course because of her inability to turn sharply. She also goosesteps when she runs and when she navigates the weave poles, which is inefficient. This doesn't slow her foot speed much but it does slow her in the weaves. She is our best and fastest swimmer and loves retrieving in the water. She is extremely light on her front end.

DOG D

Turns well, lowers her center of gravity with the best of them and has good ground speed. She is not the best jumper as she tends to over jump because she has a limiting physical issue you CAN'T see in the photo. She puts up very fast times on course and is nearly as fast as our best agility dog was in her prime. She is a very good swimmer, but the slowest of the swimmers, again, due to her genetic defect. Without her health issue, she could be our best Poodle of all.

“Regardless of the experience of the reader, everyone will come away with more knowledge in areas such as: Structure Basics, Breed type and so much more!”



Helen Grinnell King has spent a lifetime with dogs and horses and studying how their structure relates to performance. In her early years she rode jumpers and to hounds in New England. Now she and her husband compete with their standard Poodles and Border Collie in agility. As an award winning sculptor, Helen has studied structure in depth to enhance her understanding of conformation and how it relates to performance. This book is not just about picking puppies for sports, it will help you to understand conformation and how it relates to performance in your current dogs.

As a participant at one of Helen King's "Structure and Performance" seminars, I found her presentation to be mind blowing. Helen has this great insight allowing her to see how an animal's structure impacts its movement, performance and overall soundness. This lady isn't just about "form" but how form affects the function of the dog. Hers is a unique combination of skills that makes Helen's opinion about performance dog structure incredibly valuable to any of us that want to play a sport with our dogs. Her amazing insight was the reason I called upon Helen when evaluating stud dogs for my bitch "Feature." I will be forever grateful for her input when I ultimately made the decision to keep my current puppy "Swagger."

Never before has the performance dog sport world had a manual like this ebook. "Picking Your Performance Puppy" goes beyond traditional "conformational thinking" about a dog's structure. In my opinion this ebook is a must have resource for anyone selecting a new puppy or considering the impact of playing a sport with their dog.

Susan Garrett
Say Yes Dog Training Inc

25 Time Canadian and US National Agility Champion All Round and
Biathlon Champion at the IFCS Dog Agility World Championships Multiple
FCI and IFCS World Champion Medal winner