

# The Kerry Blue From a Judge's Perspective

Similar to, but just different enough from, the other long-legged terriers is a handy verbal yardstick for judges of Ireland's most elegant terrier. Features seen in many other terriers are present in the Kerry Blue — the rectangular head, the button ears, the small, dark eyes, the level topline, and the docked tail set on right at the corner of the dog.



Ah, but there are also several important differences to be aware of when considering the Kerry. Without these features I call the Components of Type, a Kerry must be considered lacking in the true essence of the breed.

What are these features that they are so essential to the makeup of the breed? Basically, there are four key features making the Kerry what it is, and this is how I believe judges should respond to them:

**Size** — Every judge should familiarize him or herself with the upper and lower height and weight parameters given in the standard. Judges should fix correct size in their eye. Too much, rather than not enough, is a serious issue at the present time. While a height disqualification does not exist, many times we see Kerries whose height patently exceeds the 20 inches the standard tells us precludes a dog from winning a prize. It doesn't stop some dogs from winning those prizes, and it surely does not stop some judges from awarding them with impunity. Pity.

The Kerry is meant to be a medium-sized terrier; it can certainly go to ground but is far more versatile. Standing midway in size between the Airedale and the Wire Fox, the Kerry walks a fine line in the matter of identifying hallmarks. Too large and a Kerry can become coarse; too small and the dog is overly refined.

Remember, this was originally a farm dog, a dog of all work. The Irish farmer could ill afford to keep a guard dog for guarding, a herding dog for herding, and a terrier for ridding the home place of vermin. More than a century ago, the silver-haired terriers of the south showed how capable they were at doing everything expected of an Irish farm dog. Correct size took on particular importance because, while a dog had to be large enough and strong enough to work, it could not be so large as to constitute a strain on a household's resources. So, size is more than a mere caprice. There is a real reason that the Kerry evolved as a medium-sized terrier. Judges should remember it, honor it and seek correct, medium-sized

specimens every time they put on a badge.

**Coat** — The standard describes the Kerry Blue's coat as soft, dense and wavy. These are but few words to describe a feature of such surpassing beauty and individuality in the breed. This is a single coat; there is no undercoat and the coat is trimmed with scissors and clippers. So here you have a distinct departure from the coats of most other terriers. Judges should make sure to feel the coat under their hands and between their fingers. They should also recall that the correct coat of a fully mature specimen is going to feel different from the coat of a younger animal. Repeated trimming will increase a coat's density without making it faulty. There is a difference.

**Color** — The color is in the name and, accordingly a Kerry Blue must be blue! While all Kerries are born black and clear over time to their proper mature color, solid black is never acceptable in the show ring and is, in fact, a disqualification. The standard allows a dog until 18

months to “clear,” with any question in dogs less than 18 months to be resolved in the favor of the dog. The parameters of allowable color range from midnight blue to silver. Often, a dog’s color will not have cleared by age 18 months, and many are led into the ring by impatient owners, eager to show them off. Most times they will bow to dogs on the strength of their color. Kerries go from the black of the whelping box through several stages of color, ranging from rust to gray to their final blue. It can be trying to keep a dog clearing color under wraps, but the wise owner will do so. As a judge must judge dogs on the day, it can be vexing to determine the correct course. Incidentally, when a judge has some question about a dog’s color in relation to its age, the age is determined by asking the steward to check the date of birth in the catalog. Under no circumstances should the judge request this information from the exhibitor.

With the foregoing as a background, let’s get some Kerries in the ring and do some judging. This imaginary class will be open dogs; what is the first thing we notice about the dogs? They should all be brimming with supreme self-confidence. Up on their toes every one and keenly aware of everything going on around them. These dogs’ ears are alert for any sound.

In observing a Kerry’s ear placement, judges should remember that the ears are to break slightly above the level of the skull. The manner in which a Kerry’s ears break is almost always affected by human manipulation. High-breaking ears, typical of a Wire Fox Terrier, are indisputably attractive, but all wrong for a Kerry. Sadly this breach has gotten too many dogs into too many winners’ circles for a very long time. Judges should re-

member this shading of difference and evaluate the dogs accordingly.

In competition, Kerries should be gaited at a brisk walk. A run or a lope is wrong in that it does not demonstrate correct movement to advantage. Of course, if one of the dogs we are observing is not blessed with correct movement, the clever handler may be able to cover gait faults by moving a dog too fast. The gait should be fluid and powerful, demonstrating no wasted motion. That first walk around the ring will alert the judge as to the best movers and the worst. Many truths are unearthed in the individual examination. The first is temperament. A Kerry is a friendly dog and should be at perfect ease at the approach of the judge. Any time a Kerry shows any tendency toward shyness, fearfulness or hostility, its temperament must be faulted. The hands confirm the visual impression. In determining head qualities, this is the time to check for breadth and depth of skull and correct ear placement and thickness. This is when I like to compare length of backskull to foreface; both should be approximately equal. The cleanness of the top of topskull and the sides of head should be smooth, with no prominences in the jawbones. Very important is to determine size, placement, shape and color of eyes. Often a judge will be surprised by large, light, round eyes, not apparent during group side gaiting.

It only takes a couple of seconds to determine the presence or lack of excess skin at the throat. It merits a mention only in that it takes away from the overall elegance of the dog. Leaving the head, one moves the hands down the neck, which should be long and elegant, rising cleanly from flat, long, well-laid shoulder blades. Standing at the front of the dog, the forelegs

are a continuation of the shoulders, and terminating in strong, compact feet. And the legs should be of sufficient length to preclude any suggestion of cloddiness. In the opening paragraph, the Kerry standard specifically tells us that a low-slung Kerry is not typical. Accordingly, such specimens should be heavily penalized as they represent a significant departure from breed type.

As the hands-on examination continues, the judge must follow the dictates of the standard in all respects regarding the body, hind-quarters, tail and tail-set, tuck up and all the rest of it. Coat and color have already been discussed, but it is worth mentioning that these features are unique in the Kerry and should be rewarded when encountered.

The unforgettable Edwin “Pop” Sayres, a formidable Kerry handler during the first half of the 20th century is said to have observed, “Give me a Kerry with a good head and a good coat and I will carve you a great one.” It remains just as true today that much can be done by a talented scissor hand, but the judge should be equal to all manner of trimming enhancement. That’s why the hands-on is so important. With the Kerry’s long, heavily barbered coat, what you see is not always what you get. You need to see it with your hands and your eyes.

Touching on the hands-on evaluation, judges less familiar with the breed must understand that Kerries are excellent people dogs. Questions like a timorous “Is he alright?” tells the exhibitor that the breed intimidates the judge. Go ahead judges, get your hands on those dogs; you’ll enjoy the experience.

Before continuing, we need to touch

on the second disqualification in the Kerry standard — dewclaws on the hind legs. I cannot speak for other judges, but I never feel sillier than when checking for hind dewclaws in a ring full of champions. Notwithstanding, the disqualification is part of the standard and so must be factored into the examination of every dog.

In competition, every dog must be moved, and the standard does a good job of describing correct Kerry movement. It is well to remember that the phrase full freedom of action will be encountered in the movement section of the standard. This is a working terrier that had to get where it was going with no problems. Full freedom of action then is an idea that works.

In the normal course of show ring events, many judges will call for two or more dogs to be brought to

the middle of the ring for a spar. The Kerry is definitely a sparring breed, and this should be part of any serious comparison of dogs. But it is important for a judge to know how to orchestrate this. There are few sights more impressive than Kerries in a spar. What then is the proper way to spar Kerries?

The first thing to remember is never to spar more than three dogs at once. You lose the effect and your ring runs the risk of becoming the scene of chaos. Bring them out close enough to look at each other, close enough to get those ears and that tail where they belong. All the dogs in a spar should stand on their toes on the fine edge of anticipation, but none should open hostilities. The second thing to remember is never to spar dogs and bitches together; that's a recipe for...Well, just don't ever do it, okay?

The Kerry Blue standard is as sophisticated as the breed it describes is majestic. I have relished the privilege of knowing Kerries for over a half century. It was my first breed and the breed that caused me to fall in love with the conformation dog sport. Even though Kerries do not share my living space, the breed never left my heart and never will. I have been approved for Kerries for more than twenty years and have been honored to pass on some of the breed's best. I hope the experiences, perceptions, and opinions I have put forward about these phenomenal dogs will help you better appreciate the Kerry. If you are currently approved for the breed, or are considering applying for it, I hope some of what you have just read will help you when you take the center of the ring.

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