

Great Dane Proportion and Balance

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Note: The portions of this article that are enclosed in double quotations are from the Great Dane standard, effective April 28, 1999, available on AKC's web site. The changes voted on in 2010 were not concerned with balance or proportion.

When first studying a breed, one typically learns parts first: a good head, correct colors, good front, rear, and tail. As learning continues, one progresses to seeing the whole dog. 'Whole dog' doesn't mean that breed type is less important. It means that breed type is defined by the entire dog, not just selected pieces.

The balanced whole dog doesn't just have good parts. Those parts are in correct proportion to each other. Our standard describes a Great Dane as "...its general conformation must be so well balanced..." and "It is always a unit-the Apollo of dogs."

The dictionary defines balance as 'being in harmonious or proper proportion.' When evaluating dogs, judges see the whole dog first and determine which dogs have the correct balance for the breed before they see any details. If overall shape and balance are wrong on an entry, that dog will probably not get further consideration.

Proportion is defined as the relation between things (or parts of things) with respect to their comparative quantity, magnitude, or degree, as the relationship of one part to another. It is also the relationship of different components within a part.

Evaluate this dog. Where is he good? What would you change? How is his balance?



His component parts are decent, actually. But they don't fit together.

This photo exaggerates the 'out of balance state.' I assembled this dog from photos of several dogs. He looks like he was put together by a committee.

Unfortunately, too many dogs in the ring today look like they were put together by committee.

Next look at this dog. Can you see the difference in balance and proportion? He is a 'one piece' dog, with balance and unity.



Balance

It takes more than looking at a picture to understand balance, however. There are precise proportions to look for. Some of these will come directly from the Great Dane standard. Some will be derived from the standard. Some will come from my over thirty years of learning about dogs. You are welcome to disagree with me on the last category, but it can start a discussion.

The first sentence of the Great Dane standard says “The Great Dane combines in its regal appearance, dignity, strength and elegance with great size and a powerful, well-formed, smoothly muscled body.” *Strength, power, and muscled* are words that call for a strong substantial dog. Initial balance for a Great Dane is equal amounts of great size and great elegance and great substance. The equal combination of these three are part of what differentiates a Great Dane from other breeds

Great Dane size is the height of the dog. The standard specifies minimum heights of 30” for dogs and 28” for bitches (and preferably more). The minimums apply to six month old puppies when they walk in the ring. The illustrated standard says that the average height for adults is probably 34” for dogs and 32” for bitches. It also says that all else being equal, the larger Dane is preferred. Great size is a virtue, though certainly not the only virtue. If it is a good Great Dane, with breed type, balance, and soundness, it cannot be too tall.

Many characteristics provide elegance in our dogs. Length - of head, neck, legs - is important to elegance. Angles and curves and the “smoothly muscled body” also contribute, as does a “well-defined tuck-up.” Many definitions of elegance include gracefulness which comes from the dog’s smooth continuous clean lines and curves.

Substance, strength, and power are evident in good muscle and bone. Depth and width are a part of substance, as in depth of body and spring of rib. The male is “more massive” than the bitch, but both are massive. Massiveness must be balanced by elegance.

Substance and elegance are both important. The standard says “coarseness or lack of substance are equally undesirable.”



These bitches above illustrate the balance of size and elegance and substance; they have unity.



Males also have elegance as well as size and substance. Note the length in head, neck, and legs.

Square

The standard states that the Great Dane’s proportion of height to length is square, with a somewhat longer body permitted in bitches. It says that the height is measured “at the shoulders.” But no wicket can be placed there, so we measure from the withers above the highest point of the shoulders to the ground. Length is from point of shoulder (the joint between the shoulder and the upper arm) to the ishium.

Because Danes are tall and their withers often high, well above the back, an optical illusion can affect what a judge sees. The eyes are drawn to the backline, the longest horizontal line, as the top of the square. In fact, the top of the square may actually be a couple or more inches above the back. As a result, a dog that looks square may in fact be a vertical rectangle, taller than long. A Great Dane that actually measures square will look off-square, slightly longer than tall. We don’t want a distinct rectangle in either direction.



Which of these Great Danes is square?

The fawn dog is the only square one. The fawn bitch and the brindle dog were both measured taller than long.

In my experience, a Dane's height and angulation can change over his life. He is short and very angulated as a puppy. With the growth spurt, he becomes taller and straighter in adolescence. With maturity, he settles into his angulation and becomes more angulated and as a result a little shorter.

Male versus Female

The standard says "the male should appear more massive throughout than the bitch, with larger frame and heavier bone." One shouldn't have to look at the plumbing to tell the gender. In being more massive, dogs have more bone, deeper and wider bodies, deeper and wider heads, and are taller. Note that it doesn't say bitches are less, but that the dogs are more. If a bitch is tall and substantial with matching elegance and a dog is less, the fault is with the dog, not with the bitch.

Which of these two Danes is the dog and which the bitch?



The brindle is the dog. Which is more incorrect? When we had categorized lists of faults, the bitchy dog was a serious fault, a doggy bitch a minor fault. So the bitch is more correct.



The standard further states that “the masculinity of the male is very pronounced in structural appearance of the head. The bitch’s head is more delicately formed.”

Which of these two Danes is male and which is female?

The head on the left is a bitch; the dog is on the right. The relative proportions in both are about the same. The length of the dog’s head is not much longer than the bitch’s head. The pronounced masculinity is in substance and depth and width of the head. The male head has a deeper skull, deeper muzzle, and more pronounced stop. The more delicately formed bitch head is noticeably less deep and wide.

Head

The standard is precise in describing the head proportion and balance, specifically and by inference. It is “rectangular, long,” its planes are “straight and parallel,” and “angular from all sides.” The length of the muzzle equals the length of the skull to the rear of the occiput.

The head is described as rectangular. Rectangles are defined as being longer than wide (or tall) and have the same height at both ends. The rectangular Dane head should therefore have the same depth of skull as depth of muzzle.

The length of the muzzle is the same as the top skull and the depth of the skull and muzzle are the same. Therefore, when a good Great Dane head in profile is divided vertically at the stop, neither the skull or muzzle portion should appear bigger than the other. Some Dane muzzles are too short and shallow when compared to their skulls, making the head unbalanced.

The rectangular appearance should be seen from the front also. This is supported by the skull having “parallel sides,” “the bridge of the nose should be as broad as possible,” and “high set” ears.

The standard describes the stop as “strongly pronounced” “seen from the side.” The *pronounced* stop is the result of the brows rather than a deep indentation between the eyes. As part of the masculinity of the male, the dog’s stop is more pronounced, deeper appearing than the bitch’s stop. I think that the depth of stop in a breed needs to be correct for the head to be correct. In my opinion, the correct depth of a Great Dane’s stop in profile is about twenty percent of the depth of the skull. The top of the muzzle is about twenty percent lower than the top of the skull. For balance, the upper lip drops down about the same amount - twenty percent - below the skull jaw line to maintain the rectangular shape.



This bitch’s head is rectangular - the depth of skull and depth of muzzle are the same. It is long, and the muzzle length equals the skull length. Remember that the ears are on the head, so the rear of the occiput is past the ears when comparing length of muzzle to skull.

The other heads are also correctly proportioned and in balance.



Heads are rectangular from the front as well.

Neck

The neck is long. A balanced dog has a neck about the same length as the head. To my eye, the average width of the neck is about the same as the depth of the skull. The neck should “flow smoothly into the withers” and back. The correct neck contributes significantly to the elegance of the Great Dane.



This dog has many good qualities. But the short neck takes away the elegance and makes him look coarse and unbalanced.



This bitch also has quality. With a longer neck smoothly transitioning into her withers and back, she has elegance.

How is the head balanced with the neck? The neck is nicely long. The head might be longer and bigger over all, and with a longer, deeper muzzle. These changes would improve her balance.



This dog's head and neck are better balanced with each other. The length of each is approximately the same. The depth of the skull and the width of the neck about half way between the occiput and withers are about equal.

This dog also illustrates good proportion of leg length to body depth to the head and neck. These contribute to the balance of great size with great substance and great elegance.



A quality bitch with head and neck in balance.

Note the smooth transition of neck to withers to back and the smooth lines overall. A drop of water placed on the occiput would flow uninterrupted down her croup and tail.

Forequarters

The standard says a great deal about the forequarters. “The shoulder blade ... forming, as near as possible, a right angle ... with the upper arm.” The angle that the upper arm “returns” should be the same as the angle of layback of shoulder.

The concept of a right angle front assembly was born from the work of Rachel Paige Elliot and her book, the original *Dog Steps*. Years later, Dr. Quentin LaHam challenged that degree of angulation on dogs with normally proportioned leg lengths, and he persuaded Miss Elliot that the angle was somewhat more open than ninety degrees. The current FCI standard for Great Danes calls for 100 degrees.

“A line from the upper tip of the shoulder to the back of the elbow joint should be perpendicular” (to the ground). “The shoulder blade and the upper arm should be the same length.” Find the top of the shoulder blades. A plumb line dropped from that point vertically to the ground should hit the back of the elbow and also high back pad near the foot. When a dog is posting, usually because of poor handling, his front assembly looks unbalanced.

The angulation of the shoulder blade and upper arm should place the front legs under the dog’s center of gravity, the heaviest part of the dog, for the best support. The front legs should not come down under a dog’s neck which happens with poor angulation or forward set fronts. When the front legs are under the neck, there is insufficient support for the body, and the topline will not be strong and level.

Note the term “forequarters.” It basically says that the front part of the dog, from the line of the tip of the shoulders to elbows forward, is a quarter of the length of the dog. Hindquarters - the rear is another quarter. And between the two is half the length of the dog in profile. Correct Great Dane balance includes these proportions.

The standard says “The elbow should be one-half the distance from the withers to the ground.” I am with the majority in the recent ballot (though not a two-thirds majority) who believes that the elbow to ground should be slightly more than half, maybe an inch or so, depending on the height of the dog. Elegance comes from length, including a bit more leg length. Prior to 1990, the GDCA standard didn’t call for the 50-50 proportion; the FCI standard doesn’t call for it today.



This good dog has a well laid back shoulder and good return of upper arm. The upper arm appears to be the same length as the shoulder blade. The elbow is underneath the tip of the shoulder blade, and a line dropped from those points hit the high pad above the foot.

The elbow is at midpoint of the height at the withers. I believe that a bit more length of leg would give him more elegance and also have him look closer to square.



The shoulder is laid back and the upper arm returns at about the same angle so that the elbow is under the uppermost tip of the shoulder. The front legs are under the body, not under the neck.

Front legs are slightly longer than depth of body.



The front assembly is placed well on the body.

Elbow under point of shoulder.

You cannot see the right upper arm because it returns under the dog behind the forechest



The shoulders lay back, but the upper arm doesn't return at the same angle.

The lack of return puts the front legs under the neck and so doesn't provide support for the heaviest part of the dog.

Note how this affects the underline; it is much longer from elbow to hindquarters on the bottom two Danes compared to the top two.



Another breed, interesting front. The shoulder is well laid back, but the upper arm doesn't return, putting the front legs under the neck.

Balance within the front involves the length and placement of the shoulder and the upper arm and the length of foreleg. The front assembly contributes to the balance of the whole dog by its shape and its placement on the body. A good front that is forward set on the dog also negatively affects balance.

Body

The body between the forequarters and hindquarters is about half the length of the dog . The standard calls for a “short level back,” a “broad loin,” a “broad, deep” chest.” “The brisket extends to the elbow, with well sprung ribs.” The “body underline...(has)... a well-defined tuck-up.”

The broad loin, broad deep chest, brisket to elbow, and well-sprung ribs contribute to substance and strength. The well-define tuck-up is part of elegance.



The short level back, broad deep chest, brisket to elbow support the almost-square appearing balance.

While this Dane is well tucked-up, she has a skirt (a piece of skin) below the loin area which hides some of the tuck. The skirt is a scent hound characteristic, appropriate since the Great Dane functioned as a large game hunter. If the skirt is too deep, making the underline look straight, the dog can look coarse - too much substance, too little elegance with the tuck-up hidden.



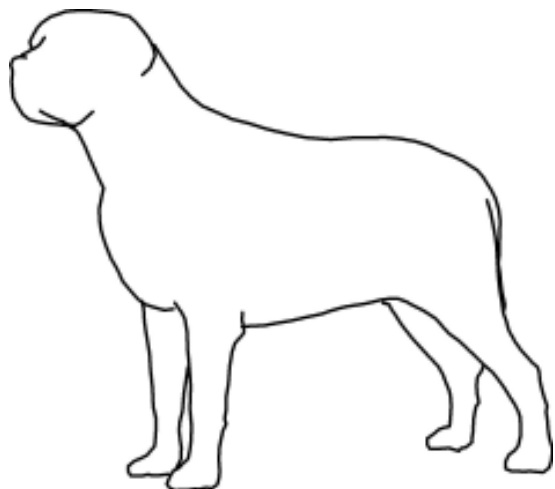
The middle part of the body, between the forequarters and hind quarters is half the length of the dog.

See the difference in the length of the overall dog compared to the length of the underline from elbow to hindquarter.



How is her balance? Her head and neck are balanced. Her shoulder is laid back, though the upper arm could return more. How much does her length of body detract from her balance? The length is in the rib cage, not the loin. The length shows up in the underline as well as the overall length of body.

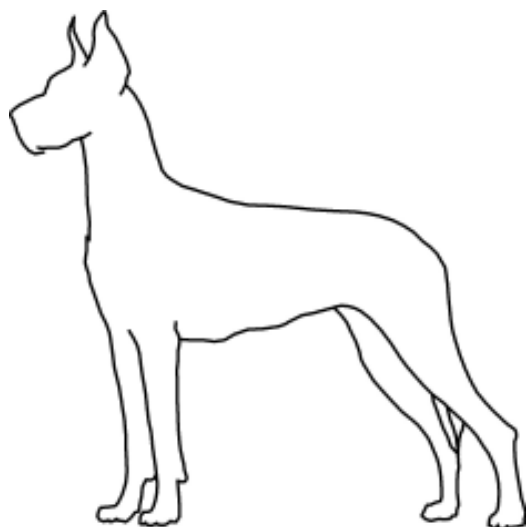
The Impact of Underline on Balance



Coarse
Substance with no elegance
Straight underline



Refined
Elegance with no substance
Extremely tucked-up underline



Great Dane
Combination of substance and elegance
Well tucked-up

Hindquarters

Hind “quarters” - a quarter of the dog is from the beginning of the croup to the end of the ishium. The width of the front and rear end of the dog are about equal in a balanced Dane.

The croup is “broad” - from side and rear view and “very slightly sloping.” The broad (long and wide) croup allows for a broad and muscular upper thigh.

The upper thigh and lower (second) thigh are the same length.

The rear should be well-angulated, matching the front. The hocks are relatively short (“well let down”).



Brindle bitch (left):

The length of croup affects the width of upper thigh. Wider, more muscular is better.

The upper thigh is the same length as the second thigh. The second thigh has good width.



Brindle dog (right):
Well angulated front and rear
The hocks are relatively short.



Fawn dog (left)

A wide croup allows for strong thigh musculature from the rear as well.

Balance Moving

The overall shape and balance of the dog should remain the same when the dog is moving.

The standard calls for the following when describing Great Dane movement at a trot:

- * “Long, easy strides”
- * “Head is carried forward”
- * “Backline...level and parallel to the ground”
- * “Long reach...” the front foot “strikes the ground below the nose”
- * The “rear drive ... balanced to the reach.”



The neck extended on about a 45 degree angle.
The front foot hits the ground below the nose.
The front extension and rear drive approximately equal.
Both feet stay equally low to the ground.
The back foot landing in the place just vacated by the front foot.
The back is level, not sloping up or down.
Upper arm and hock extended.



Backline level - dog moves as a unit.
Good foot timing underneath
Front and rear extended.
While this movement is better than most, note that the front leg is extended higher than the rear leg , higher than the front leg on the upper picture. The front extension in the first photo includes the upper arm to a greater degree and is more efficient movement.



Back level, head and neck extended.
Reach and extension equivalent.
Foot timing underneath correct.
Upper arm and hock extended
Moving as a unit.



Notice the symmetry of front to rear, the extension and flexion of the elbow, stifle, and pastern joints. The backline stays level. She is a “one piece” package.



The front extension doesn't match the rear drive. The topline is “running downhill.” The front foot doesn't land under the nose.

Other Standards

Other standards describe proportions that may be useful and applicable to Great Danes.

The Samoyed standard says that the length of hock is “approximately 30 percent of hip height.”



The Dane standard calls for “well let down” - short - hocks. Thirty percent of the hip height results in that proportion.

The Giant Schnauzer standard describes the breed as “nearly square.” It further says “The total length of the head is about one-half the length of the back (withers to set-on of tail).”



Does that proportion apply to a Great Dane as well? It may depend on if one measures from the beginning or end of the withers. If the bitch’s head is 12” long, twice would be 24” - would that be reasonable from base of withers to set-on of tail?

The Rottweiler standard calls for the elbow to be at the half way point in the height of the dog.



For the Rottweiler and fawn Great Dane dog, the distance from elbow to ground is half the height of the dog to the withers.

The length of the brindle bitch's leg from elbow to ground is about one inch more than half of her height.

Long legs are part of what makes a Great Dane an elegant breed.



Our standard says the head is “long,” but it doesn’t say how long. The Bloodhound standard does say how long their heads are: 12” for dogs, 11” for bitches. Great Danes are bigger than Bloodhound; it is reasonable to expect the Great Dane head to be longer.

Look At The Whole Dog

Look at the outline of a dog to see proportion and balance. See the dog moving to insure that you are seeing the actual dog rather than the presentation and to see moving balance. Practice evaluating your own dogs and other dogs in the ring.

Some things to look at that are part of balance:

- * The overall size, substance, and elegance
- * The height and length of the dog
- * The length of head, length of neck, length of legs
- * Head proportions: rectangular shape, length and depth of muzzle and skull
- * Topline and underline
- * Length of whole dog compared to length of underline
- * Substance and bone
- * Front angulation and proportions within the front
- * Rear angulation and proportions within the rear
- * The front angulation and width compared to the rear angulation and width
- * The proportion of the body to the fore and rear quarters
- * The overall outline

Are the parts correct? Do they fit together? Do they flow smoothly and transition cleanly from one part to the next?



Look at the following dogs? What is in balance? What would you change?

Substance vs elegance

Shape of head, muzzle compared to skull

Neck length and width and transition to withers and back acceptable.

Front assembly: length of shoulder compared to upper arm, angulation

Hindquarters: croup, width, length and width of upper and lower thigh



Evaluate each Great Dane for balance:

- Size, substance, elegance
- Shape and length of head, balance of muzzle to skull
- Length of neck, neck set
- Forequarters - angulation, width, placement
- Hindquarters - angulation, width, strength
- Balance of body length to height and length of leg
- Depth of body; underline
- Overall smooth and correct outline
- Unity



Puppy dog





Evaluate these Great Danes for balance, proportion, and shape. Use criteria from the previous page.



It is not enough that a Great Dane have good parts. The good parts must be in proper proportion to each other. The whole dog must have balance appropriate to the breed. The balance must be evident in the dog standing on his own and moving. Only with balance can a Great Dane have excellent breed type.

There is no perfect Dane, so you won't find a Dane with perfect balance. There are a couple of ways to decide which balance faults are more serious.

Many standards say to penalize faults to the degree of the deviation. That can apply to balance as well. Small deviations in balance are less serious than larger ones.

Another consideration would be to more highly value those balances that uniquely define the breed. From the first sentence in the standard, "The Great Dane combines ... strength and elegance with great size..." The balance of these gets priority. Heads in each breed are unique, so the Great Dane head, too, must be considered important, not just by itself, but balanced within itself and to the rest of the dog. I would add the importance of neck to balance, for I think that a long neck is important for elegance.

When you look at Great Danes, include the balance of the overall dog in your evaluation. If we don't select for it, we won't have it.