

SAINT BERNARD SIZE

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I have read articles on the size of the Saint Bernard, written by self-styled experts who invariably addressed themselves to the fairy-tale aspects of the breed - great huge, life-saving animals resembling species other than canine. It is a pity these people have strayed so far from the original purpose of the breed, the true ideal which the first makers of the Standard went to such pains to describe.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Saint Bernard was meant to be a very big dog. The argument arises only on the question of How Big? It is a well known fact that while the Great Dane and the Irish Wolfhound are quite a bit taller than the Saint Bernard, they cannot match his over-all massiveness. The Saint Bernard stands alone as the heaviest breed of dog.

It is incumbent upon any breeder of purebred dogs to adhere strictly to the Breed Standard in the ultimate goal of breed improvement. Interpretation of a Standard may vary somewhat from breeder to breeder, but when a truly good specimen appears on the horizon, every breeder, at least in his secret heart, must stand back and admire.

Our Standard leaves little room for misinterpretation when it comes to minimum size requirements -except that we have no disqualifications, and so a dog that is inches below the minimum in height, can, conceivably, attain championship status. Basically, what the Standard does by setting a minimum is tell you that nothing shorter than this should be considered adequate! With the minimum height set at 27 1/2 and 25 1/2 inches for dogs and bitches respectively, and considering the modern trend toward 36 inches, this may be quite a shock to anyone who hasn't taken this into account.

Right about here, I feel I should make a point of saying the I like big Saint Bernards. Whenever a person speaks out against a fad of any kind, especially when it is in full swing, that person must take care not to turn people in exactly the opposite direction without meaning to. Two wrongs don't make a right.

WHAT IS THE IDEAL? Setting a minimum requirement does not tell us what is considered "ideal", but there are several ways in which we may determine that "ideal". First, I would ask you what figures you think the writers of the Standard had in mind as "ideal" when they set 27 1/2 and 25 1/2 inches as below as the minimums.

From a common sense standpoint, I don't think the minimums could have been set more than three to four inches below what they considered perfect. Even three to four inches is a lot, but nevertheless, it is conceivable to say the the ideal is eight or nine inches more than the minimum is hard to believe.

Assuming that the minimum actually is three to four inches below ideal, that would make 30 1/2 to 31 1/2 inches the height of the ideal Saint Bernard male, with 28 1/2 to 29 1/2 inches the height of the female - a far cry from the 34 to 36 inches some would tell us is correct.

Admittedly, no one can know what was in the minds of the men who drew up the Standard. We can only assume that they were possessed of a healthy smattering of common sense, and that they employed it constantly while wording the Standard.

REQUIREMENTS IN STANDARD - At the time our Standard was established the Saint Bernard was still a "working" dog in the true sense of the word. They were used in the mountains as "search and rescue" dogs, and in the valleys to pull cheese carts. Would a cumbersome and ungainly animal be able to traverse the mountain slopes in all kinds of weather, or fit comfortable in the shafts of the carts. In the first paragraph of the Standard under the heading "General," we find the words "powerful", and "muscular" used over and over again, but there is not another reference made to height except to state the minimums. Excessive height does not of itself create power, or even a powerful appearance for that matter. In fact, it may have quite the opposite effect.

Keep in mind the fact that our dog must always be in proportion, height to length to breadth, and also keeping in mind that the Standard asks that the back of the dog be very broad, try to picture how broad the back of a 36 inch dog would have to be in order to be in proportion to his height. That's a lot of broadness! And more than any of us have ever seen, I'll bet.

Two, have you ever considered how much this hypothetical 36 inch, well balanced dog would weigh? If a 32 inch dog, well-muscled and of balanced proportions, weighs 180 I personally wouldn't want to guess what the added height, length and breadth would add to the scale.

At this point, some mention should be made of the many disillusioned owners and spectators who guess at dog's weight and then actually put him on the scale. It's not uncommon for the guess to be forty or so pounds more than the animals actual weight! A dog carrying a heavy coat, but little muscle, will not weigh nearly so much as his outward appearance would have you think.

This same guessing game problem is evident when a yardstick is produced. How many 34 inchers suddenly shrink to an embarrassing 31 inches when the rule is applied? However, some leeway should be allowed here, as it can be extremely difficult to measure height accurately even with the proper equipment.

When it comes to the subject of Saint Bernard size, we might all do well to go back and review our Standard; there lies our "ideal", the perfect SAINT BERNARD.