

THE SIZE OF THE SAINT BERNARD

BY: DR. ANTONIO MORSIANI / ITALY FROM THE ST. BERNARD

Some of the comments I have heard when a true Saint Bernard with size, type and balance with a strong gait comes into the show ring are: "This is not a dog, but a lion!" "He is marvelous, fantastic...." Almost any good dog of this breed draws attention from ringsiders. But, let a beautiful Saint Bernard of great size enter the ring and he is greeted with cheers, comments of approval and great enthusiasm. To the point, that I am quite certain the Saint Bernard would lose his popularity if the breed should be brought by his breeder to become a medium-sized dog. For a true Saint fancier, there is nothing worse than to watch the awards go to a Saint Bernard of small or medium size.

Since pre-World War II, I have been attending dog shows. After all of these years of studying the breed and breeding, of talking with men in our breed such as GIAVANI and researching records at the Hospice, breeding records of other famous breeders who shall be mentioned herein, and--as I cite below--taking measurements of the bones of past dogs, I shall record some of my findings. May I advise the reader that a complete essay would need more space and time than an "article" could cover. However, THE SAINT BERNARD IN EUROPE, which I am writing with Mrs. Raulston, will be complete as regards size, balance and movement.

I can state with some conviction that it is clear there is a preference among breeders to breed a maximum height, as long as there is a retention of type, balance and movement. It is true that some breeders wish to breed a big dog but not a giant because, they say the exaggeration of size makes it difficult to combine type, symmetry, and balance of all the parts. I must state, however, that I have seen many very small Saint Bernards that are crippled, poor heads with no balance. The breeder's job is never an easy one, if one is aiming toward great dogs and not just average, easy-to-sell animals. I state with conviction that I am a supporter of the maximum size in Saint Bernards, However, I have to point out that size must never be prejudicial to other ethnical features of our breed. On the contrary, size must match and embellish the other features.

After many, many years of intensive study of dogs and breeders around the world, it seem true that the action of commercial breeding is lowering the height of the "King of the Alps." Small dogs seem to develop and mature faster, but so do Boxers. Those who wish to own and breed small dogs have an enormous range of breeds to choose from. It might be suggested that those who wish small dogs should turn to a small breed instead of downbreeding size on the traditionally and historically "giant dogs" ---the Saint Bernard. It has come to the point where it is very difficult to find strains of the Saint that still carries size genetically. From 1920 to 1940 one could find such strains that carried great size and who were capable of producing size on a consistent basis. From 1920 to 1940 has come to be known as the "Golden Age of the Saint Bernard."

In my 30 years as an exhibitor and a breeder of Saints, I have often had the good luck to own or to breed some dogs who had exceptional size. And, as the years went on and I saw commercial breeders losing size, I devoted myself more and more to perpetuating size in our breed. It was a great joy to own the magnificent Int. Ch. and Seiger ANTON V. HOFLLI, who was between 34" and 35" at the withers and around 220 pounds at top condition. His son, Ch. LORENZ V. LIEBIWIL, was 36 1/2" tall. Both recently died, but fortunately they left me with some specimens worthy of continuing their greatness.

When people came to my kennels and saw there two great dogs who had movement (x-rayed normal), head type, overall anatomical balance and asked me these questions.

1. What is my opinion concerning the right size for a Saint Bernard?
2. What, in my opinion, was the maximum size the breed could reach without deterioration of the hindquarters? It should be said that large or small, the hindquarters of the Saint Bernard is the "Achilles heel" of the breed.
3. How does one obtain large yet correct Saint Bernards?

Again time and space limitations prevent complete answers to these questions and, while it is dangerous to generalize on such important questions, some genetic scientific jargon should be used---let me try.

THE ORIGINAL SPECIMENS

The studies of Keller, Kraemer and Heim proved that the Saint Bernard dog came down to us directly from the largest dog of ancient times: the Roman heavy Mollossus left by the Romans in the Helvetic territory for their garrisons in the Alpine passes after their conquests of the Gaelic lands.

This heavy, big-bellied and huge mastiff who was capable of fighting the lions in the arena was the original specimen which the monks of the Great Saint Bernard Pass started to breed from and employ as a rescue dog around the year 1100.

Precise selection took place through the centuries in order to develop a keener intelligence and scenting capability. This caused some anatomical changes and modification of the skull. In fact, the skull was changed until the "stop" became almost convex with the enlarged sinus, causing the skull to protrude from the midline. We now call this sculpturing "chiseling" of the skull. This came as the area of the sinus for more size so the air could enter in larger quantities and condense in the larger passages which enhanced keener scenting capabilities. Also the larger brain pan developed as a keener intelligence was striven toward. Thus; the broad, square muzzle came into being.

By studying the available Roman bas reliefs and particularly a precious Assyrian-Babylonian terra cotta work some 4000 years old (which is now preserved in the British Museum in London) we can easily recognise (hear apart) that the giant like specimen portrayed is the ancestor of the Saint Bernard.

Some years ago during some research I was carrying out in Aosta's Valley (Italy) and in Vallese (Switzerland), I studied and measured some bone findings of the Saint Bernard: mandible (jaws, teeth), tibia and femur, etc. These dogs lived in past centuries. I found that the primitive specimen of the rescue dog "Barryhound" (as the Saint Bernard was called until the beginning of the 19th century) was indeed known for its massiveness, height, thickness of body and limb, and placed for strength at the top of the canine species.

"Barry", the very famous Saint Bernard of the Hospice, was embalmed for posterity and placed into the Museum of Natural History in Berne, Switzerland. He wasn't a show dog as we define them today, but his height was remarkable. I measured him --many thanks to the museum director-- and found that his height was a full 30 inches. Lion lived during the same time as Barry. He was more massive and taller than Barry. Lion was between 31" and 32" tall. He was imported from the Hospice by the famous painter Landseer, who portrayed Lion in his famous picture. Around 1800 Jupiter lived at the Hospice and was regarded as a colossal Saint Bernard.

PAGE 4 / THE SIZE OF THE SAINT BERNARD

BY: DR. ANTONIO MORSIANI

Some of the dogs from the Hospice who were regarded as "giants" and on whom such breeders as Schumacher (regarded as the pioneer of the correct breeding of the Holy Breed) and Carl Steiner grounded their own strains were Pluto Weichmann and Pluto V Arth.

I invite the attention of the reader to the fact that when Barry lived at the beginning of the 19th century, there was a sixty-to-seventy year period when Saints were selected only because they had those qualities which made them workable. Markings, for instance, were considered totally unimportant. They were athletes of tall height, leg under them for agility, massiveness for strength--but not draft-built or square and short-backed like Terriers. They were selected for work, not for showing. It is to be remembered that their work was struggling through the deep snow to try and spot human beings buried by an avalanche. For this, they needed agility and enormous strength, coupled with intelligence, good nose, and gentleness with humans. It was the work of the dog to find the humans, disengage them from the snow by digging and occasionally, to literally drag them back to the first aid station. This was a task for a giant dog with powerful jaws, neck, strong rear-ends and fronts, huge lung capacity, long legs under him to provide speed and agility, not too short-coupled to prevent strength and speed, and not too short-backed like a draft animal at times in the villages and valleys, but he was bred for agility and strength, much built (but more massive overall) as the Great Dane.

Saint Bernards at the Hospice nowadays that are trained as rescue dogs go in packs to track, free humans from the snow when it is necessary---but human rescuers provide the transportation of the human to the first-aid stations. The dogs no longer need to have the immense size and strength they did centuries ago. It is apparent that smaller Saints can be used, as well as other smaller dogs. However, in the glorious day of the Saint as a rescue dog, they acted individually and/or in pairs and they did everything by themselves.

It is likely that after the foundation of the Hospice dogs was established, the clever monks employed different species for rescue purposes. It is likely that the ancestors of the Swiss Cowdog (the light Mastiff) were incorporated. These lighter Mastiffs appeared in the Helvetic territories centuries earlier than the heavy Mollossus. However, the monks came to the decision that for their work, their powerful Roman dogs were more usable.

From the above comments we point out the following: The anatomical findings (actual measurements of past, famous specimen's bones, etc.) and the function of the Saint Bernard dog at the Hospice as the Barryhound, which was a giant-like dog.

Being objective, one has to comment that while the Swiss have remained jealous custodians of the classical type of the Saint Bernard, the English were the first to advertise it all over the world. The English understood the "importance" of the legendary Barryhound as a show dog some 110 years ago.

In fact, the first Saint Bernard show held in Birmingham in 1862 exhibited only imported Swiss Saint Bernards. The immense size of the dogs caused almost stunned wonderment. The show was a great success. It was the starting point from which the English breeders started out to empower and develop correct features so joined together in their giants that it caused cynological students as well as ordinary onlookers to cheer and applaud enthusiastically at the sight of such enormous dogs. By 1880 to 1890 the English breeders had gained clamorous results and had begun to exploit the big specimens (34", 35", 36" and over). Unfortunately, it began the beginning of a boom for tall Saint Bernards all over the world to such an extent that breeders placed height above all and the tallest dog brought the highest dollar, regardless of type, movement or balance. Keen competition caused by the ever increasing demand for taller and taller Saint Bernards brought about an era called "The Battle for Size." The peak was reached by Lord Bute, the famous Saint male, the tallest Saint Bernard that ever lived. He was recorded as being over 40" at the withers and weighed some 250 pounds. Other dogs of famous size were Plinlimmon, Sir Herevard, Sir Bedivere, Prince Florence, and lived just before or at the same time as Lord Bute. They were all giant dogs with magnificent coats, but they failed in other important features. It was not the breed that failed, but the fault of the breeders for neglecting type and movement because they became obsessed with the commercial aspects of size. So, it can work either way----too small or only tall.

It is interesting and important to remember that during that time in England the sole characteristic needed to bring the breeders money was height and enormous weight. Perhaps the only real gain made from this commercialism in England was that it stirred the Continental Europe into multiplying new breeders because of the keen interest in the breed the English had caused.

Here it should be stressed that England's paramount accomplishment in starting the "Battle of Size" was that it pushed more interest in the Continental breeders (the Swiss mostly) to guard the size they had, but as well, they maintained under strict control the typical features of the breed.

As we have seen through research and study, the giant feature of the breed was prominent in the ancient Barryhound dog. This feature was necessary for the dog due to his working duties in the mountains. He had to find, disinter, life and drag human bodies.

If there has been a mistake made by the first English breeders, it was not trying to breed for size, it was for neglecting to bring type, harmony strength, balance and good movement into their large specimens. Every good breeder of Saint Bernards must keep all features in mind or he will soon see the results of his neglect or ignorance.

Maj. Fritz Bloesch, one of the most important breeders at the end of the last century in Switzerland, should be remembered at this point. He bred into his Swiss stock the Saint King of Ashford, son of the English Saint Bernard Plinlimmon. With this outcrossing, he obtained some sound, typical and phenomenally tall subjects.

In 1887 the breeders of Continental Europe with the Swiss first in line, laid down the International Standard which is still in force. The English didn't adopt the Standard because they disagreed on type (the shape of the head) as it was defined in the Standard.

The writers of the International Standard set the minimum height for the Saint Bernard male at 27.56 inches; any for bitches at 25.59 inches, but with NO limitations on height WHATSOEVER. It is right indeed, that they should have done this. It is highly improbable that the drafters of the original Standard imagined any breeder would be satisfied with the minimum, but in all probability felt that a minimum had to be set and that a few very fine specimens of small size might occur and should not be penalized or disqualified. However, such breeders seem to be pushing the letter of the law instead of studying the spirit behind setting the minimum.

The English issued a Standard of their own in 1887. They also did not set any limitation on height, nor did they set a minimum. Instead, they stated as follows: "The taller the better, provided symmetry is maintained thoroughly. Well proportioned and of great substance."

As Fanciers of the classical Swiss Saint Bernard dog, and even if we oppose the English interpretation of the real Saint Bernard type (head), we should try to have our present size statement replaced by the English statement above.

PAGE 7 / THE SIZE OF THE SAINT BERNARD
BY: DR. ANTONIO MORSIANI

Since the beginning of the 20th century, every breeder of Continental Europe has agreed (though it was enhanced by the English push) that the Saint Bernard should be a very large dog. Many have supported the view that the Saint Bernard dog should be the largest of all dogs. We are merely supporters of this original view.

One must recognize the finest merits of the first continental breeders: The Swiss embellished the original specimen which was exclusively the working Saint Bernard who was an athlete, not a draft dog. These breeders stressed the majesty, nobility, harmony and symmetry which are typical features of this breed. The Swiss did not try to modify the typical features of type (evolution of correct head structure to enable the dog to do the work).

For me, the Saint Bernard must look like an architectural masterpiece of nature whose lines were originated from his peculiar function as a working dog. Fads and fashion have nothing to do with the correct Saint Bernard. Our present day Saint Bernard should be agile and athletic as his ancestral Barryhound. A dog who is capable, if duly trained, to perform the same tasks as did his famous ancestor in the mountains.

The time from 1900 to 1920 in Contintal Europe, the time when breeding Saint Bernards for the show ring became popular, showed much progress in the breed and prepared the Holy Breed for the "Golden Years" from 1920 to 1940.

The finest Saint Bernard that ever lived were bred during that time, 1920 to 1940. If we study the specifications of these dogs, we learn that most of them were huge dogs. All of were well over minimum figures set by the Standard. Some of the dogs were:

Nelson V Falkenstien	34" tall	Apollo Rougang	36"
Bonifacius de la Solitude	32"	Gerd Belmont	36 1/2"

These dogs expressed the Standard and proved that the best breeding was that which concentrated not only on size, but on all of the animal in every single part at once.

Our finest specialist judges have always indicated in their awards that where there were two Saint Bernard dogs who were of overall value in type, balance and movement, the first award must go to the dog who is the taller. As we have already said, the massiveness and size of the dog should remain what it was when it used as the mountain rescue breed.

STRAINS

It is disappointing to see the reduction of size in the Saint Bernard. Perhaps it is because breeders are not using good strains or are producing small strains themselves. Commerical breeders are in the majority for ignoring size. They want quantity and too often settle for the mediocre and average.

PAGE 8 / THE SIZE OF THE SAINT BERNARD
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The typical Saint Bernard is the large Saint Bernard as concerns size. That is the ideal of the breed where the correct ratios of tall size and massiveness and weight are observed. And there is a precise ratio between the above-mentioned elements. We cannot obtain size at the expense of the substance and symmetry and type (head). A good breeder must breed in the muscle to support height.

As to "How to obtain size," the answer is to obtain dogs carrying strains manifesting great size. If one obtains a 33" dog using 30" parents, it often happens that the dogs are atypical and not very sound, narrow with bad hindquarters. However, if one uses a dog from a strain of giant dogs whose average for males is 34", then one can obtain many dogs whose size is elevated, but who are typical, balanced and have correct movement. It is more likely that a 34" son of a 36" dog will have correct hindquarters than the 33" son of a 30" dog. Muscle ratio partially explains this phenomena. Nature's law is that the most perfect dog is the one who represents the media or central value of his own strain, "in medio stat virtus." One must maintain the huge dogs as the foundation, however. Some strains have over 36" as their maximum. Others have 30" as their maximum. One must find the strains which carry the large strain and use then on bitches which offset faults, bring muscle, type and balance to the breeding. We have a chance of getting dogs closer to perfection in the media of their strain...BUT, we must use the strains with the highest potential of the maximum size.

Many times I am convinced that the detractors of the large and therefore correct Saint Bernard are those who never succeeded as Saint breeders to breed large dogs. Though they may have tried in this direction, they could not succeed. They would certainly change their convictions if they were helped to realize the genetic truth contained herein and were helped---or would allow themselves to be helped---to find strains carrying maximum size, type, balance and learned how to make good use of these pure strains.

Too often we hear remarks such as: 1--Judges who like size are willing to pass over any defect of conformation just to put up large Saint Bernards. 2--Judges who like movement are willing to forfeit type and size completely. BOTH WAYS OF JUDGING ARE DEADLY TO THE BREED.

Let me end this article with the reminder that the minimum size as set by the International Standard must be adequately increased as it seems to have led to misunderstanding among many breeders. The lowest measurement for males should be 30" at the withers. The lowest measurement for females should be 28" at the withers.

After so many years of study, measuring ancient relics of Saint Bernards, talks with the now past "founders" of our breed, discussions with many considered "experts" in our breed, studies of ancient breeding records, we are of the opinion that the Saint Bernard dog truly fit for showing should be the maximum size as is the Great Dane and the Irish Wolfhound. The Saint should be, of course, endowed with far more muscular development and more massiveness of bone structure, with a longer trunk and stronger movement than many breeds. The best measurements for a Saint Bernard would be between 34" and 36" at the withers for a male.

If one goes about a very careful breeding program using strains of tall dogs who also have type and balance, one can occasionally obtain dogs who are also taller than the above-cited heights and who have correct type (head), balance and movement. Such attempts to reverse poor breeding take time, admittedly. However, it is always true that a beautiful, hand-crafted object takes more time to produce than a mass-produced, lesser quality product.

For those who think the Saint was small at the beginning and we are trying to raise the size artificially now, let me cite some of the pre-World War II dogs who were of great importance in European breeding programs:

CH. TYRAS V HANIALTHAUS	36"	BRUNO V LEBERBERG	33 1/2"
SANDO V BISMARKTUM	36"	CASTRO V BEBERBERG	34"
ANTON V HOFLI (postwar)	34 1/2"	DONAL V LINKSMAEDER	35"

There are others that date back even further, but we must search hard for even a few today. One dog belonging to the strain of Anton V Hofli, whose name was ASTOR V HOFLI, was 38" tall at the withers.

After much research to find dogs in America we had not only size but head type and balance, we have have found these:

MIDAS VON BASKO ZWINGO	36"	TOR-OENZ VON MIDAS	34"
ENCORE VON MIDAS	36"	BIG MACK FIRAN V MIDAS	36"
CAESAR MIDAS OENZ V TOR	35"	MAGIC VON MIDAS (bitch)	31"
LAZY R CINDY SUE (bitch)	32"	LAZY R MAVERICK	32"
CH SAL'S SAMANTHA (bitch)	32"		

The great dog, MIDAS VON BASCO ZWINGO came to our attention approximately five years ago. He had a very pure size gene. It would be wise for breeders to search out his progeny and make proper use of them---the purer the better.