

A Historical Tail

One of the primary roles of a parent club is to preserve the integrity of their breed in both form and function. Historically, the Australian Terrier functioned in many different capacities, however, common to all breed standards whether or not that standard currently allows for a docked or undocked tail, is a description stating in one form or another that the Australian Terrier is “Essentially a working terrier”.

In fact, all components of the Australian Terrier Standard can be traced back to the essential function of the Australian Terrier’s ability to do a full day’s work outdoors. The ability for such a small dog to cover vast areas of the outback and yet be quick and nimble is reflected in its skeletal structure and musculature. A long, strong head, muzzle length and good sized teeth enabled the breed to control rodents and snakes. The harsh outer coat and soft under coat provided protection from temperature and the elements, the ruff was developed for snake encounters. It is safe to say that breed standards worldwide have maintained all of these characteristics essential to this breed because our predecessors were thoughtful in establishing what form was required for the Australian Terrier to be able to perform its function.

The standard for the Australian Terrier in the United States describes the correct tail to be “docked in balance with the overall dog leaving slightly less than one half, a good hand hold when mature.” The breed standard in Australia going back to the time that the breed was recognized by the AKC states that, “About two-fifths (2/5ths) should be left on when docking a puppy’s tail, this affords a safe grip when handling a working terrier.” Current standards in countries where docking is no longer permitted state that the tail was “Previously customarily docked” or that the tail was “Traditionally docked”, thus preserving a historical record of a description of the tail.

The care and consideration taken in establishing the Australian Terrier standard is not under question when addressing factors such as front/rear structure or tooth size. Nor is it under question regarding more superficial elements such as coat texture or coat length or eye color, yet the length of the tail is questioned. The “hand hold” length of tail was apparently a needed attribute for this working terrier as any depiction of the breed through history has shown us. The argument that these dogs may no longer be working dogs does not take away from the fact that breeders continue to breed, without question, to a long list of characteristics that were established long ago to maintain the function of the breed which may or may not be practical today.

It is the role of this parent club to continue to maintain the integrity of our breed as closely as possible to the dog’s original purpose and role. We should not pick and choose which characteristics are currently fashionable or not and should preserve our breed standard to reflect the origins of the breed. The thinking behind the original breed standard has not failed us over the course of the past 200 years and continues to serve those Australian Terriers that continue to work through AKC events and by patrolling the homes and back yards of America.

This article was written by Guest Columnist Kim Occhiuti, a long time breeder of Australian Terriers under the kennel name Aka Inu.

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