

# Tattletales

## The Tail... TELLS ALL!

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REGULARLY OVERLOOKED AND MISUNDERSTOOD, A DOG'S TAIL, IN FACT, HAS A CONSIDERABLE IMPACT ON MANY OF OUR BREEDS, AND COMMUNICATES A GREAT DEAL, BUT IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Mainly, as an appendage, the tail aids in the maintenance and recovery of equilibrium, it supports locomotion and also helps round off physical balance. Moreover, concerning dog body language, besides posture, the tail is a communication device ensuing in the maxim, "A dog thinks with his tail." Under any circumstances, it is a temperament and/or mood barometer with carriage and action indicating mental attitude. A wagging tail usually is a sign of happiness and confidence with the limp, tucked tail denoting an uncertain, shy and possibly fearful dog.

All dog breeds have tails. These can be long, short, docked and undocked, and when left natural they may have twists, curves, and curls. The anatomy of tails is elementary for most knowledgeable dog breeders. Nevertheless, here is a hasty but adequate introduction, like a "Tail Fundamentals: 101," that will be very useful for new exhibitors and fanciers.

The tail is the final portion of the spine and is composed of approximately 20 small, triangular-shaped bones called vertebrae. What connects these multiple tail vertebrae to the backbone is the sacrum of the pelvic girdle. The sacrum is precisely three fused or united vertebrae nestled between the two hip-

bones. For this reason, the first four to five vertebrae of the tail cannot be seen as they are hidden in the girdle. However, we know that these vertebrae beginning shape are broad and long, and as the series of small bones continue forming the tail, they eventually reduce in size and decrease in width until the middle of the tail. Depending on the breed of dog, this location usually is around the 8th to 10th vertebrae. After this mid-point, the tail vertebrae become longer, thinner and smaller right to the tip of the tail. Excellent, now we know what a tail is made up of but how does it move?

The answer is simple. The tail's vertebrae are mostly enclosed in tendons and muscles reaching to the last vertebrae bone. These various muscles run both topside and underneath the tail, and along with pelvic muscles, cause motion activated by the peripheral nervous system's (PNS) spinal nerves. The nerves signal the muscles that are responsible for the flexor (tightening, bending and lateral movements) and levator (raising, extending) motions of the tail. These are the basic principles of what constitutes a dog's tail. Still, how this relates to the Poodle breed is indeed more important because a Poodle tail set and how he carries his tail is paramount to the breed standard. An elegance in



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shape and carriage can be spoiled by a flawed tail and is considered a major fault in a competition. The dog's tail carriage is determined by his pelvic girdle construction, which is a slightly more complicated topic but well worth learning.

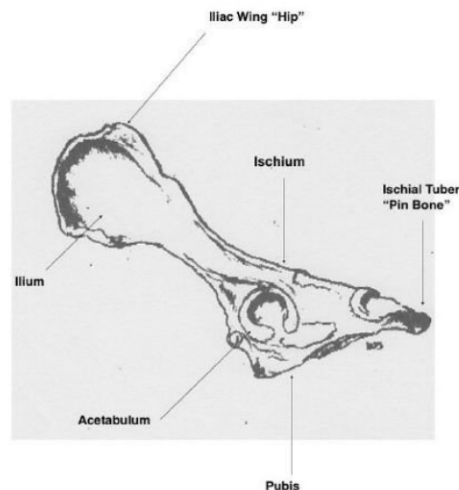
The nuts and bolts of a dog's pelvic girdle and its effect on the tail are straightforward when you have the accompanying visual aids.

The inner workings of the pelvic girdle are fashioned of three primary, symmetrical bone pairs. On each side are the ilium, ischium, and the pubis bones. These pelvic bones are joined directly to the three fused sacrum vertebrae by the sacroiliac joint. The angle in which these pairs of bones are attached to the sacrum is called the pelvic girdle slope. Now, this angle can and does vary from dog to dog, even in the same breed, as all specimens are not built exactly alike. The most significant point to remember is that the slope of the pelvic girdle can directly affect the progression and ability of the hindquarters forward-drive and thrust, otherwise known as propulsion.

However, more precisely, a dog's tail set is determined by the angle of his croup. Incidentally, the term croup is the age-old name for the rump of a horse that has since included any four-footed mammal. The croup or rump is the sacrum area along with the first four to five hidden tail vertebrae and includes the muscle mass over the rump. The croup angle is affected by the slope of the pelvis's ilium wing and regulates the set-on of your dog's tail, whether it be high or low. See Figure A for a detailed example of the Iliac wing.

Now that you are aware of what bones produce a tail set, it is also important to understand their relevance to the Poodle's elegant outline. First, we must discuss the ideal angle of these bones to create a preferred poodle tail set and carriage. We also need to learn about and be able to recognize other, incorrect slopes. Let's look at these now using the accompanying illustrations that demonstrate various pelvis slopes — identified by the dotted lines — and the slope of the ilium wing defining the croup angle and subsequent set-on of the tail.

The preferred poodle tail is created



**Figure A: Side View of Pelvic Girdle**

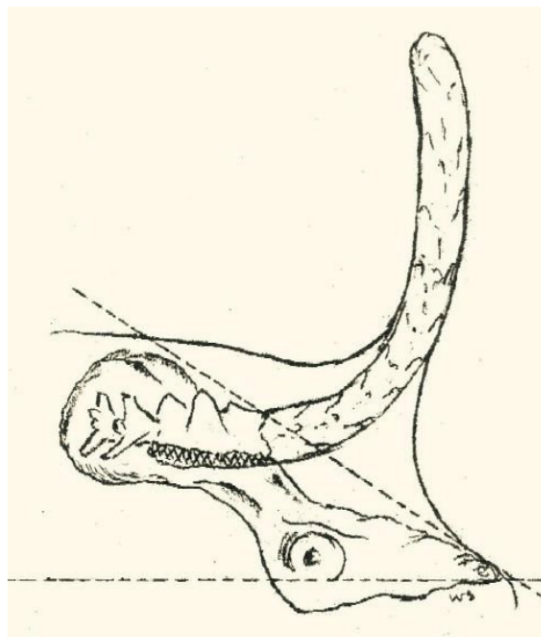
by a 30-degree croup angle as shown in Figure B. Here the tail is straight, set-on high and carried up. Now, compare the ideal with the faulty, low tail set insertion as seen in Figure C on the next page. It clearly shows the tail insertion is under the backline, and the croup angle is greater, such as 35-degrees. The low tail set is the most common pelvic girdle construction fault observed on poodles today. Figure D (next page) illustrates yet another incorrect tail. The set-on is much too high as the tail appears to come straight up and out of the back. This is the result of an insufficient 20-degree croup angle, commonly referred to as a flat croup. The outcome is a tail curling over, though not touching the back.

Finally, a steep croup angling an estimated 40-degrees will have a tail bending sharply forward, even touching the back, similar to that of a squirrel. As a result, we have the name "squirreled tail" that is easily identified in Figure E on the next page. This steeply-built pelvis usually will restrict rear locomotion. An interesting side note to this conversation is that muscling also plays a role in the carriage of the tail. Curled, sickle-shaped or squirreled tails have a loss of muscle tension running underneath as opposed to the tails' upper muscles being tauter and drawing the tail upwards into an incorrect position.

It is helpful to go back in time to experience the whys and

wherefores on this particular feature of the breed. Early archives of the 19th century reveal that corded, large, black Poodles debuted in the show ring in 1877 and dominated such until 1898. During these decades, members and fanciers of the Poodle Club had various descriptions and opinions on the set-on of the tail, its carriage, and length. Eventually, in 1886, a committee of breeders and members of The Standard Poodle Club envisaged the first standard called, "The Perfect Black Poodle."

With the newly established criterion, the tail, not the croup, was described as being carried at a 45-degree angle, heavily coated with long, corded ringlets that hung down and were "stretched straight." The tail set-on was rather high, and the tail was carried at a slight angle away from the body, neither curled down or held over the back. The accompanying photo in Figure F on the next page de-



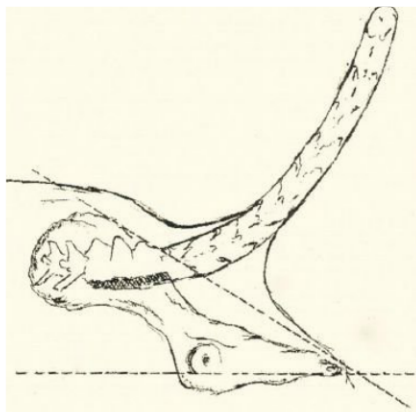
**Figure B: Preferred 30-degree croup  
Tail straight, set-on high**

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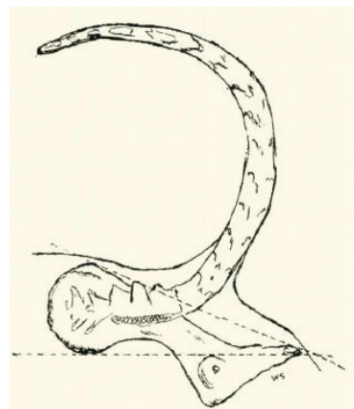


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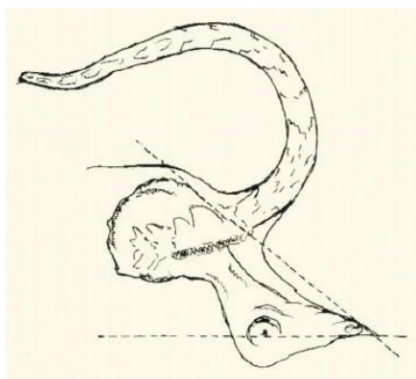
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**Figure C: Low tail set, 35-degree croup**



**Figure D: Flat croup with 20-degree slope, Tail curled**



**Figure E: Squirreled Tail with Steep 40-degree croup**

picts an example of these early models.

To prevent the long cords from trailing on the ground, they would be tied up with leather cords or ribbon with great care taken in conditioning the corded poodle. Of course, this required lots of valet service and lengthy grooming sessions with the immediate concern being the cleanliness and health of the dog having such enormous cords. As time evolved, the sense that docking the densely long coated tail would relieve the dog of excess weight from the corded ringlets that affected the cleanliness of his toilet.

Alternatively, if left undocked, the tail was shaved leaving only a tuft at the end. Fast-forwarding to modern times, ultimately, the American Poodle Standard copied the English Poodle Club Standard declaring that the tail is straight, set-on high and carried up. It should be docked of sufficient length to ensure a balanced outline and lists the major faults of the tail as being set low, curled or carried over the back. These shortcomings create undesirable trends that are contrary to the ideal Poodle silhouette and should affect the dog's competitiveness.

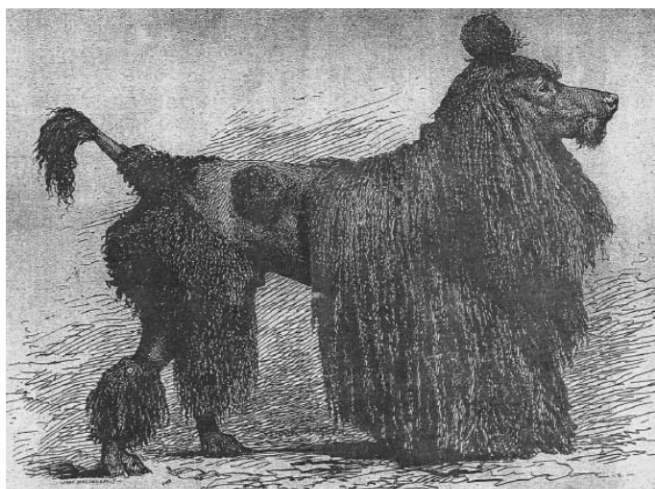
Over the years, the Poodle has become larger in size and height and the corresponding tails as well. Consistent with the lengthening of the tail, there is nearly an excess amount of hair that cov-

ers the length, shape, and curve. Moreover, so too we find the traditional, rounded pompon as out of fashion, for now it is commonly reshaped, becoming even larger and more plush. How to recognize a faulty tail and carriage? Easy, a quick hands-on examination can identify a correct stern. One only has to wrap the hand around the base of the tail where you should feel a high, strong set-on with just a slight curve that fits naturally into the palm of your hand. From here gradually slide the hand up the tail feeling for straightness, having no kinks, twists, nor bends. Just note that although a faulty tail carriage can be identified during the profile gait, this is not always an accurate assessment and should be followed up with a hands-on examination.

In conclusion, for students of the breed, the visual aids explain why the tail is held at various positions owing to anatomy and muscling. Consider these as learning tools that enable the student or seasoned fancier to quickly recognize varying tail sets and tail bearings. Breeders can apply this knowledge to current and future breeding decisions to improve their progeny on what are arguably two of the most noticeable features of the Poodle breed: its tail and bearing. For the tail, along with his head carried high, is integral to creating an air of distinction and dignity peculiar to himself.

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**Figure F: Early 18th century black corded poodle, Ch. Vladimir**