

# SWIMMING THROUGH TIME THE PORTUGUESE WATER DOG

## LOOKING BACK: PORTUGAL, UNITED STATES, AND CANADA

For centuries the Portuguese Water Dog (Cão de Agua) was a familiar site along the coast of Portugal, working alongside the fishermen as a valued crew member. These dogs were essential to the fishermen's work, retrieving gear that fell overboard, herding schools of fish into the nets, carrying messages from boat to boat and from boat to shore, setting nets and buoys, and guarding the boats.

But, with the development of modern technology in both fishing and telecommunications, the need for these dogs was slowly eliminated. As a "poor man's dog" without a job to perform, the PWD became increasingly rare, until it was mostly found in the Algarve region of Portugal.

The PWD met its first "saviour" at the 1934 Lisbon International Dog Show where the "new" breed captured the attention of Sr Vasco Bensaude, a wealthy shipping magnate and confirmed dog man. After researching the breed, Bensaude acquired a few dogs and began breeding the Cão de Agua. He acquired a particularly outstanding dog named

'Leão', from an Algarve fisherman who, although reluctant to part with him, was ultimately persuaded. A magnificent working Cão de Agua, Leão became the model for the first Portuguese Water Dog Breed Standard written in 1938 by Bensaude's friends, Dr. Manuel Fernandes Marques and Dr. Frederico Pinto Soares. Despite the work Bensaude did with the breed, after his death in 1967, and the Portuguese Revolution in 1974, the breed was once again in jeopardy.

The first Portuguese Water Dog was imported to the United States in 1968, by the "First Lady of the Breed" Deyanne Farell Miller (who, interestingly, was a Canadian). This marked the beginning of a new era for the breed. Several years later, in 1972, sixteen fanciers formed the Portuguese Water Dog Club of America (PWDCA), and in 1984, after only 3 years in the Miscellaneous class, the breed received AKC recognition and was placed in the Working Group. Mrs. Miller mentored many early PWD breeders, and in North America the breed owes its survival and popularity to her tireless efforts. In Canada, the PWD received CKC recognition in 1992. One year later, Barbara Floch and Diane Castellan co-founded The Portuguese Water Dog Club of Canada (PWDC). Many early imports from the United States were the foundation stock for Canadian breeders, and in the ensuing years the popularity of the breed grew tremendously. There are now breeders and club members throughout Canada.

**"IT BEARS REPEATING; THE PORTUGUESE WATER DOG IS, FIRST AND FOREMOST, A WORKING DOG!"**

## FORM AND FUNCTION – VERSATILE AND ATHLETIC

Historically, Portuguese fisherman held their dogs in such high regard that they were considered crew members who earned equal portions of the day's catch. Many descriptions of the dogs' working abilities are found in the second edition of Kathryn Braund's book, *The Complete Portuguese Water Dog*. Today, breeding decisions often include assessment of the working abilities of the dogs, and dogs with titles on both ends of their names are highly valued. To preserve and test for these working abilities, the PWDCA formalized Water Trials. The PWDC is the only internationally sanctioned club to hold these trials. Each August, in Ontario, dogs compete for Junior, Apprentice, Working, Courier, and Versatility titles. During these trials the dogs work in the water, both from shore and from boats 50 feet from shore, performing tasks that test



their skills – skills reminiscent of their work on the Portuguese fishing boats

## THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS THAT DEFINE BREED TYPE ARE:

**HEADPIECE:** This is the most important breed feature. The first line of the CKC breed standard requires the head be "Well proportioned and massive..." Other key elements of the head include the stop, which must be well defined; the muzzle,

which is shorter than the length of the skull when seen in profile, and should feel substantial, narrower at the nose than at the base; a jaw that is strong, with

well-developed canines; and face fill under the eyes should be apparent. The ear leathers have a particular heart-shape with the front edge held nicely against the head.



## “EVEN SEASONED SHOW DOGS CAN SUDDENLY DECIDE TO JUMP IN THE AIR...”

**GENERAL APPEARANCE:** The PWD should not be exaggerated in any way – angles should be moderate, neither absent, nor overly angled. The PWD is best described as a “big medium-sized dog.” Although this sounds contradictory, the body has to fit with the headpiece, a substantial body within the size limit (males 19.5 – 22.5”, females 16.5-20.5”). Size relates to function; dogs had to be small enough to fit in and to be pulled into the open fishing boats, and big enough to work a full day, or save a fisherman’s life. The PWD is first and foremost a working dog. They should have breadth and strength; put “broad” before each of the following: head, topkull, muzzle to a thick arched neck, back, tail base, deep chest, well-muscled thighs-hindquarters.



All in a medium sized body! Coat: There are two types of coat, curly and wavy. The coat must be profuse, covering the whole body evenly, with no undercoat. The colors are black, white, and various tones of brown combined with white markings. Coat texture, although not mentioned in any standard, is important. If the coat is too woolly it will absorb too

much water, adding weight while swimming. It will also take an overly long time to dry. If it is too coarse, the coat will break easily.



The PWD can inherit a shedding “improper coat” with an undercoat. This condition is a disqualification from Conformation; however, these dogs can still participate in performance events.

**TAIL:** With its distinctive flag, the tail is held in a ring over the dog’s back while gaing. It should not touch the dog’s back or reach beyond the line of the kidneys. Used as a rudder while swimming, flag also indicated the position of the dog.

**GAIT:** The PWD is moved at a moderate gait, preferably with a loose lead. Neither flashy, nor with exaggerated movement, the gait should be effortless, with balanced, strong reach and drive, a level topline, and true front and back, neither too wide or too narrow. The PWD should give the impression that it could go all day long with a smooth, flowing and easy side gait.



**TEMPERAMENT:** These dogs have personality! Even seasoned show dogs can suddenly decide to jump in the air or bow before moving. Portuguese Water Dogs want to work, they want to please their masters, but most of all they want to stay busy; they need mental and physical stimulation to stay balanced. The standard makes reference to “spirited disposition... self-willed... does his job with facility and obvious pleasure.” A PWD who is not challenged will make his own work – or mischief.



Want to learn more?  
*The New Complete Portuguese Water Dog,*  
by Kathryn Braund  
*The Portuguese Water Dog,* by Carla Molinari

## JUDGING THE PWD

The Portuguese Water Dog presents some challenges for conformation judges. With such a short history of recognition, and often with small entries, many judges have had only limited exposure to the range of possible correct presentations. With possible permutations in coat texture, colour, and clip, along with a range of correct size, a typical class could include:

- a solid black curly, in retriever trim
- a solid black wavy, in lion clip
- a black and white curly, in lion clip
- a black and white wavy, in lion clip
- a solid brown curly, in retriever trim
- a dilute brown (café au lait) wavy, in retriever trim
- and many other combinations are also possible...

Such variety requires going beyond the visual presentation to discover the quality of each exhibit. A hands-on evaluation is essential and may alter the initial impression.

## CHALLENGES AHEAD

The popularity of the breed is a mixed blessing. The non-shedding coat is tolerated by many people with allergies, and combined with a 35-60 lb. size, the PWD is attractive to many people. Unfortunately though, some people have little or no understanding of the PWD’s exuberant character and the work required to make the dog a responsible canine citizen. The PWD is not an easy dog for the first time dog owner. It bears repeating; the Portuguese Water Dog is, first and foremost, a working dog! As with many other breeds, health is a serious issue. The PWD was resurrected from a limited gene pool, not all that long ago. The PWDCA and dedicated breeders have supported health research to develop DNA tests for Storage Disease, Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRCD) and a DNA linked marker test for Juvenile Cardiomyopathy. Hip and elbow evaluation and a yearly CERF test are also recommended. Other concerns are Follicular Displaysia, Addison’s disease, IBD, and cancer. While not the dog for everyone, the Portuguese Water Dog with its intelligence, unbridled joy, boundless enthusiasm for work, and its love for just being with its family, is certainly hard to resist.

*Canine Review requested a breed article from the PWDCC and it was published in their November 2008 issue.*

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## LION OR RETRIEVER CLIP?

**What is appropriate?**

**How did two acceptable trims develop?**

The original trim was the Lion clip, (shaved from the middle part of the back over the hindquarters) to facilitate movement in the water. The muzzle is shaved to make retrievals easier. In fact, the Portuguese also extended the shaving to the middle of the skull, so that the coat would not interfere with the dog’s vision. The rest of the coat on the body and front legs was left untrimmed to protect the dog from the elements. The Retriever clip or “working trim” was created in the United States by Deyanne Farrell Miller. There was resistance to the Lion clip among pet owners and providing the “Retriever” option made it easier to promote the breed. While developing the AKC standard, heated debates arose among fanciers, each championing their preferred trim, resulting in a compromise of two acceptable clips (only in Canada and the US). No discrimination should be made against either trim while judging. The risk of having dogs overly groomed is high and does not complement the noble working heritage of this breed. A nice clean trim respecting the bodylines is more suitable than one exaggerating any element or making the dog look too sophisticated.



The same dog in both the Lion (top) and Retriever clips, curly coat.