

The Shih Tzu





Chapter 1

What Is a Shih Tzu?



For hundreds of years, Shih Tzu have been bred to be human companions, and their friendly, outgoing personality reflects this fact. In pre-revolutionary China, it was a status symbol to own a dog who had no utilitarian function, such as hunting or guarding. Shih Tzu were highly prized in the imperial court, where they lived lives of luxury.

Because the Shih Tzu has always been intended as a companion, in both show dogs and pet dogs the correct temperament is of the utmost importance. Shih Tzu are alert, arrogant, and affectionate. They love people and other dogs, big and small. Everyone is this breed's friend. It is most unusual and highly undesirable for a Shih Tzu to be nasty, overly aggressive, nervous, or shy.

But people love them for their looks, as well. The Shih Tzu's unique head and expression distinguish the breed from two other related Oriental breeds, the Lhasa Apso and the Pekingese. Although the Shih Tzu is classified by the American Kennel Club (AKC) as a member of the Toy Group, the dog is solid and sturdy. Many consider the Shih Tzu to be a big dog in a little package, in both temperament and substance.

The Shih Tzu breed standard describes the ideal specimen of the breed. Although the perfect dog has never been born, dog show judging is based on how closely each dog entered approaches the ideal described in the breed standard. Reputable breeders *always* try to produce dogs that conform to the AKC breed standard.

The breed standard is definitely worth reading, so you can understand exactly what type of dog the Shih Tzu is meant to be. In this chapter, I will summarize the standard and explain the important points.

What Is a Breed Standard?

A breed standard is a detailed description of the perfect dog of that breed. Breeders use the standard as a guide in their breeding programs, and judges use it to evaluate the dogs in conformation shows. The standard is written by the national breed club, using guidelines established by the registry that recognizes the breed.

The first section of the breed standard gives a brief overview of the breed's history. Then it describes the dog's general appearance and size as an adult. Next is a detailed description of the head and neck, then the back and body, and the front and rear legs. The standard then describes the ideal coat and how the dog should be presented in the show ring. It also lists all acceptable colors, patterns, and markings. Then there's a section on how the dog moves, called *gait*. Finally, there's a general description of the dog's temperament.

Each section also lists characteristics that are considered to be faults or disqualifications in the conformation ring. Superficial faults in appearance are often what distinguish a pet-quality dog from a show- or competition-quality dog. However, some faults affect the way a dog moves or his overall health. And faults in temperament are serious business.

You can read all the AKC breed standards at www.akc.org.

The Shih Tzu Head

Much of the breed standard is devoted to describing the head, because this feature most distinguishes the breed. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether head and expression are correct simply by looking at them because skilled groomers can do up a dog's topknot to make the head appear correct even when it is not.

When you think of the correct head and expression, think round, warm, and soft. The head is large and round when viewed from the front or the side, and the ears appear to blend into the head. The eyes are also large and round, but



The Shih Tzu's head is one of the most important features of the breed. Think "round, warm, soft" and you have the right idea.

they should not protrude. Although a small amount of eye white is acceptable, excessive eye white in the corners of the eye or around the entire eye, or bulging eyes markedly detract from the desired warm, sweet expression, as does a lack of pigmentation on the nose, lips, or eye rims. The eyes should be placed well apart, and the muzzle should be set no lower than the bottom of the eye rims.

The muzzle is short and square and unwrinkled—unlike the longer, narrower muzzle of the Lhasa Apso or the extremely short, wrinkled muzzle of the Pekingese. The muzzle should have good cushioning (fleshy padding), which contributes greatly to the soft expression.

The bite is slightly undershot—that is, the lower jaw is longer than the upper jaw. The teeth should not show when the mouth is closed and the lower lip should not protrude when viewed from the side. The muzzle meets the forehead at a definite angle (called the stop), giving the desired “pushed-in” look.

One of the most serious head problems in a Shih Tzu is what breeders often refer to as the “Andy Gump” look. This means the head is more oval than round, and also has a combination of other faults—a narrow, long muzzle that is set too low; close-set, small eyes; a lack of stop and of cushioning on the muzzle; and a receding underjaw. Even if the jaw is not actually overshot (the upper jaw is longer than the lower jaw), the dog looks as if his muzzle is pointing downward, seems to have a weak chin, and cannot possibly have the correct expression.

A Small but Solid Dog

Good Shih Tzu are solid dogs who are surprisingly heavy for their size. Mature Shih Tzu should be slightly longer from the withers (the top of the shoulder) to the base of tail than they are high at the withers. Most Shih Tzu in today's show rings measure slightly longer than high, although a wealth of hair may make the dogs appear shorter in back than they really are. The chest is broad and deep, the ribs are well curved, and the legs are sturdy and muscular.

The standard calls for a weight range of 9 to 16 pounds. There is therefore no such thing as an officially recognized "imperial" or "tiny teacup" Shih Tzu, and historic evidence suggests that Shih Tzu in the Chinese imperial court were generally about the same size as Shih Tzu today.

Words like "teacup" are used by less reputable breeders to describe undersized Shih Tzu, often in an effort to suggest the smaller dogs are special and are therefore worth a higher price. While an ethical breeder may occasionally have a runt in a litter, this puppy is sold as a companion dog and is not used for breeding. The deliberate downsizing of an already small breed not only creates abnormally small Shih Tzu who may not be shown in the dog show ring, but also produces puppies who may have health problems. This is not indicative of an "imperial gene," but rather of poor breeding practices. If you want a really tiny dog, you should consider another breed.

What's Under All the Hair?

Although a Shih Tzu with long legs and a narrow head and body may appear to be in correct proportion due to the wealth of hair, he is not. Equally incorrect is the short-legged, barrel-chested Shih Tzu who looks dumpy and squatty. These are quite common faults, and some people think a dog who is only a little bit incorrect in many respects is very close to the ideal. But in fact, the dog is a poor specimen of the breed and is genetically more likely to produce puppies who are also poor specimens than will a dog with only one or two faults that are more serious. As an analogy, compare the difficulty of replacing your kitchen cabinets with remodeling your entire house!

The body of the Shih Tzu is compact, with little distance between the last rib and the pelvis. You should never see the kind of tucked-up tummy found in racier breeds such as Greyhounds. In a Shih Tzu with the proper spring of rib and depth of chest, the rib cage should drop to just below the elbow. The chest should never be so wide that it forces the elbows out, nor so narrow that the dog seems to have flat sides.



Under his long coat a Shih Tzu is a sturdy little dog.

Build and Movement

Structural soundness is as important in the Shih Tzu as it is in any dog. A Shih Tzu with incorrect structure cannot possibly have the smooth, flowing, effortless movement that makes the breed so elegant and that the standard calls for.

One of the most common problems in this breed is a poorly put-together front, and that really affects the way the dog moves. The neck should flow smoothly into the shoulders, which should be set at about a 90-degree angle and fit smoothly into the body. Excessive development of muscles on the outside of the shoulder blade or shoulders that lack in the desired angulation or that protrude from the topline (the dog's outline from just behind the withers to the tail) and interrupt the smooth line from the neck to the shoulders to the withers are considered to be undesirable. The shoulder blades should lie flat and point toward the spine.

How does this affect movement? If the front shoulders and legs are too far forward, the weight-bearing muscles and shoulders will not support the head, neck, and ribs as they should and the neck will not blend smoothly into the back. The dog will take short, mincing steps rather than correctly stepping out with good reach in the front. When this incorrect movement is viewed from the

side, the topline will bounce. The stress of inefficient movement will cause the dog to tire easily and have difficulty holding his head up in the correct arrogant carriage.

The front legs should be straight from the elbows to the pasterns (the area between the wrist and the foot) and set well apart to support the broad, deep chest. The elbows should be set close to the body and the feet should point straight ahead. If the front legs are bowed or out at the elbows or the dog is barrel-chested, he will appear to roll like a Pekingese when moving toward you or to swing his legs out to the side and then in, rather than extending them straight ahead. This makes for very inefficient and incorrect movement, as does turning the toes in or out.

The angulation of the shoulders and hips should be in balance for smooth movement, with the front legs reaching out well while the rear legs provide strong drive from the back. If both front and rear lack the correct angulation, the dog will move with a short, mincing stride, bobbing up and down instead of moving forward effortlessly. If the rear is more angulated than the front, the dog will sometimes move with what is called a “hackney gait,” picking up his front legs excessively high to keep them out of the way of the oncoming back feet. A dog whose front and rear angulation are not in balance may also walk with a slight sideways angle (called “crabbing”) rather than straight forward to avoid having his rear legs interfere with his front ones. In general, a dog whose front and rear angulation are insufficient but are in balance will look better when he is moving than one who has poor angulation in just the front or just the rear. However, that does not make him a better dog; lack of angulation at both ends involves two faults rather than just one!

The hind legs, like the front legs, should be sturdy, muscular, and set well apart in line with the front legs. The lower part of the leg (the hock) should be short enough to provide sufficient leverage for the desired strong, driving movement in the rear. In some Shih Tzu, the tendons that hold the hock joints in place may be weak, causing them to buckle forward when gentle pressure is applied to the back of the joint. This is incorrect.

Tops and Tails

When viewed from the side while moving, the Shih Tzu should have a firm, level topline, the head should be carried well up, and the tail curved gently over the back in what is called a “teacup handle.” Overall balance is of the utmost importance. A too-small head atop a too-long neck is as objectionable as a too-large head atop a too-short neck. A too-long or too-short back, a back that curves up, a topline that gets higher toward the rear of the dog, and even an

incorrect tail can upset the desired balance. Incorrect tailset ranges from a tail that is too loose (like a Beagle), too tight (curled like a Pug), or too flat (like a Pekingese), to a tail that is set too low at the base of the spine.

The Shih Tzu's Coat

Certainly, one distinctive feature of the Shih Tzu is the dog's long, flowing double coat, which may be slightly wavy but never curly. The double coat consists of a dense, soft undercoat, and a somewhat harder outercoat. A sparse coat or a single coat (one without the undercoat) is undesirable. Because the coat is so profuse, it requires a great deal of grooming, although a coat of the correct sturdy texture requires much less care than a soft, cottony coat, and is therefore much sought after. The coat is normally parted in the center of the back, and the hair on the top of the head is tied into a topknot.



The long, flowing double coat doesn't stop this dog from jumping for joy. But it does require a lot of grooming.

A Rainbow of Colors

The Shih Tzu comes in a variety of colors and markings, and all colors and markings are equally acceptable according to the breed standard. Among the most common colors and combinations are gold and white, red and white, black and white, silver and white, brindle (a mixture of gold or silver and black) and white, solid gold or silver with a black mask, and solid black.

Less common are liver coats and blue coats. These two coat colors are recessive and are the result of the absence of the color gene for black. These dogs have chocolate brown or gray-blue pigment and may have lighter eyes—correct for those coat colors, although light eyes are a fault in any other color. Black tips at the ends of the hairs on the outercoat and on the ears, and black eye stripes at the outer corners of the eyes on light-colored dogs are common. In a young puppy, it is necessary to look close to the skin to see the color the dog will be when the black tips grow out.

What Is a Breed Club?

Every breed recognized by the AKC has a national breed club, sometimes called the parent club. National clubs are a great source of information about your breed. You can get the name of the current club secretary from the AKC web site (www.akc.org) or the web site of the American Shih Tzu Club (www.shihtzu.org), which provides great information about the breed and contacts for breeder referral, Shih Tzu rescue, and local Shih Tzu breed clubs throughout the United States.

There are also numerous all-breed, individual breed, obedience, sporting, and other special-interest dog clubs across the country. The AKC can provide you with a geographical list of clubs to find ones in your area, and you can get information about dog shows scheduled to be held near you at www.infodog.com.

It is not unusual for Shih Tzu to change color as they mature. Red may fade to gold and gold to cream. Silver may darken to deep charcoal over time. Some judges unfortunately place too much emphasis on flashy markings or colors, but the breed standard clearly states that color and markings are totally irrelevant in terms of quality.

What the Standard Means for You

If you have purchased a pet Shih Tzu, chances are the dog possesses one or more faults based on the breed standard that make him unsuitable for the show ring or for breeding. That doesn't mean he's not a great pet—just that he's not a show dog.

Most breeders are unwilling to sell an excellent show prospect to a home where the dog will not be shown. In many cases, however, the faults your dog has may be obvious only to someone involved in the show world and you will not even notice them. If you later decide you would like to buy a show- or breeding-quality Shih Tzu, you should read every book and watch every video on the breed you can, attend dog shows, and talk to reputable breeders.



Being familiar with the breed standard will help you find a reputable breeder and accurately judge whether your dog is a show prospect or just a super pet.

Meanwhile, a thorough knowledge of the breed standard will enable you to understand why you should spay or neuter your pet rather than allow these faults to be reproduced, and will help you recognize a good example of the breed. And your dog can still compete in all kinds of canine sports, entertain you and your friends, be your best pal, or even be a registered therapy dog and bring the same joy to others that he brings to you.

Whether or not your pet is an excellent representative according to the breed standard, he can still be an ideal companion and house pet. That is, after all, what Shih Tzu were bred for and why you want one. Your dog will—and should—always be Best in Show in your eyes!

Famous Shih Tzu Owners

Yul Brynner
Mariah Carey
Phyllis Diller
Zsa Zsa Gabor
Bill Gates
The Dalai Lama
Greg Maddux