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The Evolution of the Breed Standard¹²

The standard of any breed is a document that indicates the “Idea” of the breed in the eyes of the dominant school at a certain time. Following the changes in the standard through the years gives us some indication about the changing idea of the breed through time.

This paper follow the evolution of the Rhodesian Ridgeback breed standard used by the FCI (the International Federation of Cynology, which is the governing cynology body in Europe, Asia, South America and many other countries) and in Africa. It does not deal with the American standard, which has its own historical progression.

The creation of the Rhodesian Ridgeback as a breed started when the role of the Lion Dog was almost over³. At the beginning of the 20th Century, when the big-game expeditions were waning, a group of enthusiastic people made a bunch of different dogs a “breed.” The Rhodesian Ridgeback came to life when the Lion Dog of southern Africa was about to die.

There are two well-known documents describing the early “Ridgeback.” One is veterinarian Dr. Charles Edmonds’ 1923 article from the Farmer's Weekly,⁴ one of the first known descriptions of the breed, written under the pseudonym of “Farmer George.” The other is the original standard, written by Frances Barnes. It became the official breed standard in 1926, but was most probably written before, around the time of that famous meeting in Bulawayo in 1922.

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² I would like to devote this article to my dear friend the late Mr. Stig (Nalle) Carlson, a true lover of the breed and a great ambassador for it who contributed so much to international cooperation between Ridgeback people around the world.

³ This debate over the breed's name – should it be called a Lion Dog or a Ridgeback? – has involved many researchers and authors. It is not only a question about linguistics, but identity: Which is the breed's most important characteristic, its lion-hunting function or the ridge?

⁴ Edmonds, C. – The Farmer's Weekly, Feb. 7, 1923, "Rhodesian Lion Dog."

I prefer to start with Edmonds, since his aim was not to create a new standard for a “breed,” but to describe what already existed. “Lions are rapidly decreasing in Rhodesia, and with them, the lion hunters. It would be a great pity if this grand breed of dogs were allowed to become extinct,”⁵ he wrote.

So let's start from the days “before,” when the Ridgeback was still a working Lion Dog of the farmers and hunters in the south of Africa. We must remember that Edmonds had 30 years of experience in the farms and bush. He knew the working Ridgebacks as they were: “Nor were there ever condition under which the law of survival of the fittest had greater play,”⁶ he said of the creation of these dogs.

In his description of the dog, Edmonds emphasized⁷:

1. Good speed
2. Good senses of sight and smell
3. Good feet (“They must have the best of feet with pads that will stand any amount of wear, as they have to work day after day, often in the roughest of country that is very hard on the pads”)
4. Good breathing apparatus – i.e., a good, deep chest
5. Intelligence/instinct, standoffish, independent

As we see, good speed and good senses are of major importance, much more than any other feature. The pads get a very detailed description, while there is no mention of things like angulation or top line.

And Edmond offers a scale of points⁸:

Height – 24 inches (61 cm)

Weight – 60 pounds (27.2 kg)

Color – tawny, fawn, brindle

Tail – longish, thick, free from feather, carried low Considerable difficulty is experienced in the tail, as at times varying length of tail occur in the same litter. Some being only 6-7 inches long like a docked dog, other with a kink like a Bulldog...

Head – rather broad, cheek muscles well developed, in shape resemble the old style of Bull Terrier.

Muzzle – somewhat pointed

Ears – low set

Eyes – yellow, intelligent, with bold, somewhat savage expression.

The distinctive feature of the breed – the mane, razor-back, fiddle-back or whorl – is a ridge of hair up to 2 inches in height.

Now we can go to the first standard, which was recognized by SAKU⁹ (later known as KUSA) in 1926. We already mentioned that actually this standard was driven from the original work of Barnes in 1922.

Interesting points I want to emphasize are:

⁵ Murray, J.N. – The Rhodesian Ridgeback Indaba, 1989, Australia page 29

⁶ Murray, J.N. – The Rhodesian Ridgeback Indaba, 1989, Australia, page 29

⁷ Murray, J.N. – The Rhodesian Ridgeback Indaba, 1989, Australia, page 46

⁸ Helgesen, D.H. – The Definitive Rhodesian ridgeback, 1991, Canada , page 86

⁹ Clarification – SAKU, KUSA, KU – all refer to the South African Cynological governing body; FCI refers to the International Federation of Cynology, and KC is the British organization.

1. The ridge is in the opening paragraph.
2. Ridge description doesn't include crowns.
3. Shape of the ridge described as a fiddle.
4. A dog without a clearly defined ridge is not recognized as belonging to this breed.
5. Bite is not mentioned; the only demand is strong developed teeth and canines.
6. The nose should be black, but a lighter color is admissible if it is in keeping with the color of the dog. A spotted nose is incorrect, but is not a disqualification.
7. Colors – brindle, sables, homogeneous or mixed with white.
8. Size up to 28 inches (71 cm) for both males and females, with no minimum height requirement.
9. Weight up to 80 pounds (36.28 kg) for males and females, no minimum requirement.

The 1931 standard saw some important changes¹⁰:

1. Omission of “shape of the ridge resembles a fiddle.”
2. Color – wheaten and fawn preferable, whole colors or white points.
3. Size – up to 26 inches (66 cm) and 70 pounds (31.75 kg) for males, up to 25 inches (63.5) and 60 pounds (27.2 kg) for females. (There is some indication that in this year, 1931, the Parent Club published a new booklet, saying “the ideal Ridgeback is an animal from 24 to 26 inches and around 60 lbs in weight.”)¹¹

In 1936, the color description is getting closer to what we know today¹²:

Color – Wheaten preferred, fawn permissible, white points permitted

In 1944, the size changed for the first time to what we know today:

Males, 25-27 inches (63-69cm) and up to 75 pounds (34 kg); and females, 24-26 inches (61-66 cm) and up to 65 pounds (29.48kg).

The 1948 standard is rephrased. A major change is made in the “Characteristics” paragraph, brings us close to today's standard:

1. Ridge – The whole description phrased in the way we know it today, much more detailed.
 - a. For the first time, the standard asks that the ridge be symmetrical.
 - b. The crowns are mentioned for the first time: “Should contain two identical crowns opposite each other.”
 - c. The lower edge of crowns shouldn't extend further down the ridge than 1/3 the length of the ridge.
 - d. There is a N.B.: “We do not at this stage propose standardizing the width of the ridge, but feel that up to 2 inches is a good average.”
2. Nose color – Should be black or brown, no other colored nose is permissible.
3. Color – Light wheaten to red wheaten. Head, body, legs and tail should be of a uniform color. A little white on the chest is permissible, but excessive white hair here, on belly or above pads should be penalized; white toes are undesirable.

Around 1949, the Ridgeback category was removed from the Gundog group and relocated to the Hound group.

¹⁰ For 1931-1952 standards, I also used the details in Murray's "The Rhodesian Ridgeback Indaba"

¹¹ Ms. Janet Murray, "The world-wide problem of deviation in type in the Rhodesian Ridgeback," World Congress 1984. page T3 quoting Major Mundy letter from 1946.

¹² In today's standard, I refer to the FCI standard no. 146, 10.12.1996

1952 sees more changes in the standard:

1. Head – Deletion of the words “as required in a Bull Terrier.”
2. Color – A little white on chest and toes permissible, but excessive white here and on the belly and above paws is undesirable.

On April 5, 1963, the FCI adopts the KUSA standard and numbers it as FCI standard no. 146.

In 1978, the KUSA standard changes the weight: 80 pounds (36.28 kg) for dogs, 70 pounds (31.75 kg) for bitches, with a permissible variation of 5 pounds (2.26 kg) above or below.

On Jan. 1, 1980, the FCI moves from recognizing the South African breed standard to recognizing the British standard. (“Country of origin: South Africa, standard from: England”),¹³ which led to a change in the structure of the standard and the vocabulary, to fit the British formula. The actual change was minimal.

1. The most significant change is that for the first time we find in the standard reference to a black muzzle and ears. “Dark muzzle and ears are permissible.”
2. The scale of points is omitted, not to be found again in our breed standard.
3. In the General Appearance paragraph, we find “movement should be similar to the Foxhound’s gait.””

In 1982, KUSA switches from inches and pounds to kilograms and centimeters, and changes a word or two in its breed standard, but there is no real change in terms of what is contained in the FCI standard.

In 1986, the British Kennel Club revises all its standards under one uniform formula. At this stage, many breed standards go through some changes, some of them not just cosmetic. The changes in the Ridgeback breed standard are relatively minor:

1. Ridge – Adding “must contain two identical crowns only.”
2. Temperament – A new paragraph, required by the new formula. For the first time the standard is talking about the character of the breed as “dignified, intelligent, aloof with strangers but showing no aggression or shyness.”
3. Mouth – For the first time, the standard mentions the “bite” specifically: “Perfect, regular and complete scissor bite.”
4. Hindquarters – For the first time, there is a reference to angulations: “good turn of stifle.”
5. Gait/Movement – For the first time, there is a designated paragraph for the movement: “straight forward, free and active.”
6. Weight – A very significant change is the deletion of the weight, perhaps the most significant change in the standard.
7. Faults – A new article, also required by the new formula, but which says only the obvious.

¹³ F.C.I. Breed standard 146b, effective date 1.1.1980

This newly framed standard is very shortly adopted not only by the FCI (August 1989, then revised with a correction to a translation fault of the measurements, in December 1989), but also by KUSA (probably November 1987).

It is interesting that now instead of “Country of origin: South Africa,” the breed’s origin is recognized as “Southern Africa,” a nod to the Zimbabwe Kennel Club. But still the standard is British.

The last change in the standard is in 1996. On Oct. 12, 1996, the FCI publishes the breed’s most recent standard, prompted by the registry’s decision to reform all its breed standards under one formula. Now the Origin is “Southern Africa” and “the standard supplied by the Kennel Union of Southern Africa and the Zimbabwe Kennel Club.” **Finally, the standard returns back home to Africa.**

1. According to the new formula, the standard must contain a Utilization chapter. “The Rhodesian Ridgeback is still used to hunt game in many parts of the world, but is especially prized as watch-dog and family pet.”
2. The addition of “A Brief Historical Summary” that mentions the work of the breed as a Lion Dog and the original standard.
3. The “General Appearance” paragraph goes through quite a big change, but it is mainly only wording. Some changes of more interest are the insertion, for the first time, of the term “agile,” the use of “well balanced” in addition to “symmetrical in outline.” Important is “the emphasis is on agility, elegance and soundness with no tendency toward massiveness.”
4. Cranial region – For the first time, the standard says specifically what is commonly accepted: That the triple proportion between width of head, occiput to stop and stop to nose are 1:1:1.
5. Chest – For the first time, the standard adds a new demand: “Forechest should be visible when viewed from the side.”
6. Forequarters – For the first time, “when viewed from the side, the forelegs should be wider than viewed from the front.”
7. Pastern – Mentioned for the first time: “Should be strong with light spring.”
8. Color – For the first time, the standard says specifically that “excessive black hairs throughout the coat are highly undesirable.”
9. Weight – The weight comes back. It is 36.5 kg (80 pounds) for males and 32 kg (70 pounds) for females.

Comparative Study

Looking at the development of the standard, we can see that the foundation years of the breed were between the 1920s and '40s.

I want to emphasize few points:

Ridge

The ridge was a main issue at the time of the foundation of the breed and getting the recognition for its name. But when that was done, we see that the only demand is that the ridge will start immediately behind the shoulders and continue up to or over the loins.

It is interesting that the shape of the ridge described as a "fiddle," especially since today this term refers to an incorrect ridge of four crowns.

Only in 1948, long after the recognition of the breed, does the standard refer for the first time to the crowns or ask for a symmetrical ridge. I think that gives us a lot to think about, when we consider our strict attitude about ridge faults, not only in the show ring but also in breeding. How many dogs are disqualified at the ring or even for breeding just because of asymmetry or one extra small crown? Was it really so important in the past? Were two identical crowns or a box not bigger than one-third of the length of the ridge features really valued by van Rooyen, Barnes and their followers? For a hint about a possible answer to those questions, consult Linda Costa's new book for a look at some of the old dogs, such as Ch. Virginia of Avondale¹⁴.

We have also all seen the famous picture of Eskdale Connie, appearing in so many text books and showing a ridge with hair that stood up at both ends. Now with the publishing of the new Linda Costa book, we see many more dogs with that pattern¹⁵. It likely also has to do with the quality of the coat¹⁶. Anyway, that corresponds with what Edmond wrote about the ridge being up to 2 inches in height. Where can we find any indication of that in our modern standards?

Size and Weight

For me, this is the most important discussion. The height and weight indicate more the anything else the "type" of the breed. No wonder most of the more bitter conflicts among the breeders during the foundation years were over this subject.

Going back, we see that Edmonds talks about a dog of 24 inches (61 cm) and 60 pounds (27.2kg), which is smaller than what we recognize today as the minimum for a

¹⁴ Costa Linda, Rhodesian Ridgeback Pioneers, 2004, page 84, and also other dogs at pages 70, 75, 105 etc.

¹⁵ Costa Linda, Rhodesian Ridgeback Pioneers, 2004, pages : 21,70, 96, 127 and some more

¹⁶ This likely had to do with the Steekbaards, a type of dog common in that part of the world in the old days. Translated, the name means "sticky beard," and is a reference to coat type. It is discussed in greater depth in both Hawley's book and in the presentation of Dr. Steph Potgieter, "The Early History of the Registered Rhodesian Ridgeback," at the first World Congress in 1984.

female. It is important to remember that Edmonds was not trying to establish a standard for his ideal Ridgeback, but rather to describe what existed as working dog on the farms. (Also it is important to note that Edmond never registered a Ridgeback, so he had no hidden agenda.)

So how does this relate to the Ridgeback of today?

The first standard, the one that was recognized in 1926 but was probably written around 1923, is a totally different story. It speaks of a size up to 28 inches (71 cm), compared to the maximum official size for a big male today, which is 69 cm). There was no minimum height and it doesn't mention weight limits at all. This is the broadest range ever described for the breed.

Vernon Brisley (Viking Kennels) tried to explain that in a letter he wrote to the Kennel Union Gazette in November 1945¹⁷. "When the club was first formed they naturally had to include all sizes and colours until such time that they had got a uniform type."

A letter from Major Mundy to the SAKU Gazette tries to elaborate the development that followed¹⁸: "The headquarters of the Club was later moved to Salisbury and from that date – July 1931 – a more determined effort to standardize the breed was made."

So from what those two gentlemen told us, we understand that at first (1922-1931) the club wanted to include as many dogs as possible, in order not to lose the remaining stock of Lion Dogs. A few years later, in 1931, the club decided focus on uniformity. At this stage, the 1931 standard asks for up to 26 inches (66 cm) and 70 pounds (31.75 kg) for males, and up to 25 inches (63.5 cm) and 60 pounds (27.2kg) for females.

The 1926 standard offered the largest diversity for size and weight any Ridgeback standard ever offered, and the 1931 standard offered the lowest size ever offered by official Ridgeback standard.

The 1930s were characterized by a bitter debate about the size of the breed, which was discussed a lot in Ridgeback literature. Some of the main figures were Vernon Brisley (president of the parent club at the time), who was in favor of lighter Ridgeback, because he feared increasing the size "would spoil the hunting qualities by having a larger dog ... it was thought that the dog must be active and therefore not too big."¹⁹

Opposing him was Major Mundy (vice president of the parent club), who was a great advocate for the bigger Ridgeback, which was more impressive and fit also for

¹⁷ Ms. Janet Murray, "the world-wide problem of deviation in type in the Rhodesian Ridgeback." World Congress 1984. page T4

¹⁸ Ms. Janet Murray, "the world-wide problem of deviation in type in the Rhodesian Ridgeback", World Congress 1984. page T3

¹⁹ Brisley letter to the KU Gazette Nov. 1945, at Ms. Janet Murray, "the world-wide problem of deviation in type in the Rhodesian Ridgeback", World Congress 1984. page T4

guarding. He criticized the effect of the standard offered at Brisley's time and said²⁰ "during that period that these directions in respect of size were current, it became quite apparent that the Ridgebacks exhibited on Rhodesian shows and gaining the premier awards were losing size and tending to the 21 inch dog." Mundy and his "group" managed to get the size criteria added to the standard for the first time.

Even though the size of dogs in the 1940s is similar to the size called for today, the weight is still somewhat different and more resembles the description of the first days (talking only about maximum and that is 75 lbs (34 kg) for a male and 65 lbs (29.5 kg) for a female - about 2.5 less kg then today, on the same size).

There was a silence at this field for a long time. In 1980, as we mentioned, the FCI moved to the Kennel Club standard and that one offered the same size but a heavier weight of 80 pounds (36.5 kg) for a male and 70 pounds (32 kg) for a female.

In 1986, the Kennel Club omitted the weight, and a battle ensued to restore it to the standard. This was mainly led by the Parent Club, which felt that the absence of a weight limit would lead to a heavier Ridgeback.

In 1996, the FCI accepted the standard written by the South African and Zimbabwean kennel clubs, and the weight returned to the standard. It is back to the same weight limits of 1980 – though still a heavier weight than any previous standard mentioned.

Discussion

If we look at what Edmond described in the early 1920s, we see a dog with good speed, good senses of sight and smell, good paws, good breathing apparatus, intelligent, standoffish and independent, with a ridge on his back. He was quite small at 61 cm and 27kg, and the colors varied: tawny, fawn, brindle, homogeneous or mixed with white. The eyes were yellow, the nose sometimes brown or spotted, the bite could be of any type, and the tail was some times of varied length and with kinks. He had to have a ridge of fair length, but there were no rules about crowns, box, symmetry, width or anything else, and sometimes the hair on this ridge stood up at both ends.

Now look at today's standard – how detailed the demands are for the ridge, the bite, the color of the eyes, nose and coat, and the tail. But are we overvaluing those compared to characteristics as stamina, speed, good senses, ample lung room and temperament? It is something to think about.

²⁰ Mundy's letter to SAKU Gazette Feb 1946, quoted at Ms. Janet Murray, "the world-wide problem of deviation in type in the Rhodesian Ridgeback", World Congress 1984. page T3

Appendix

Changing of weight and size in the breed standard along the years

	Height		Weight	
1923	24 inch (61cm)		60 pound (27.2 kg)	
1926	28 inch (71 cm)		80 pound (36.28 kg)	
1931	26 inch (66 cm)	25 inch (63.5cm)	70 pound (31.75 kg)	60 pound (27.2 kg)
1944	25- 27 inch (63- 69 cm)	24- 26 inch (61 66 cm)	75 pound (34 kg)	65 pound (29.48 kg)
1978			80 pound (36.28 kg) <i>variation</i> 5 (2.26kg)	70 pound (31.75 kg) <i>variation</i> 5 (2.26kg)
1986			Omitted	
1996			80 pound (36.5kg)	70 pound (32 kg)

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