

# The Structure of a Labrador Retriever

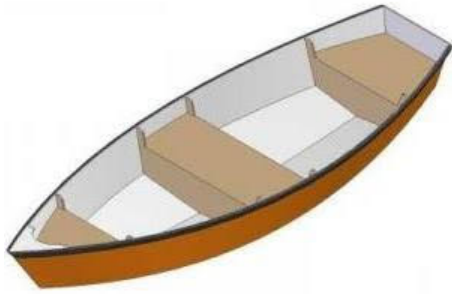
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Since we talked about the standard, let's talk about why the Labrador is built like he is built. Labradors are different from the other sporting dogs. They do not look like them nor do they move like them. They do not fly around the ring with tremendous reach and drive. They do not have flowing hair trailing after them nor heads held high in the air. When they stand, their toplines are not sloping down gracefully to a beautifully held banner of a tail. Even the other sporting dogs with short coats, move and stand with their heads high in the air like the others, but not the Labrador. The Labrador moves powerfully and with purpose. There is no wasted motion. His head is held proudly, but it is more out in front of him than high in the air. His tail, if you can catch it, comes right off his croup. It is not a flag to be waved. It is more like a tool to be used. He is a slightly off-square solid dog with a level topline. He is a workman.

Do you know why he is built differently from the other sporting dogs? It is because the lab was originally bred as a **water dog**, not a land dog. He did not spend his days flying over the countryside looking for birds. His original purpose was to retrieve fish that had escaped the net, to retrieve items that had fallen off boats, to help pull in nets or take things from one boat to another. All of his work was in the water, so he had to be built differently than the land dogs.

The cod fishermen needed a medium-sized dog that would not take up too much space in the boat. The fishermen wanted as much room on the boat as possible for the fish. They wanted a dog with a short water-shedding coat so that when the dog returned to the boat from the sea he brought as little water as possible with him. This coat also had to protect the dog from the cold waters of the far north seas. They needed a biddable dog that would do what they asked of it and one that could work all day. If the fish were running, the fishermen were fishing. The dog also had to have a soft mouth. A fish that was torn up did not sell.

As a water dog, he needs to be built something like a boat. A boat 1) floats, 2) is fairly stable in the water, 3) it moves through the water, and 4) if it is built correctly, it does not take too much energy to get it moving. I think that a Labrador is much like a rowboat. He is definitely not like a barge. A barge with its big flat front may fill the first three requirements, but certainly not the last. It takes lots of energy to get it to move and to keep it moving.



How can you compare a Labrador to the picture? His sternum can be likened to the prow of the boat. Both cut through the water. His chest and shoulders would be the area behind the prow and his ribs would be the widest part of the boat. His rear is the back or stern of the boat. A boat that is fairly wide relative to its length will be very stable and one with a squared-off stern will have less drag. Notice that the stern of the boat is as wide as or wider than the front of the boat. This also cuts down on drag and helps the water flow around the boat better.

Now that we have the shape of our Labrador, we need to talk about balance. Most dogs have their center of gravity in their shoulder area with their front carrying most of their weight. If you put most of the weight in the front of a boat, your boat would take a nose dive to the deep. The same holds true for the Labrador. A boat should have the weight evenly distributed over the boat with the most weight being toward the middle. In his book, "The Dog In Action," McDowell Lyon says we need to move the center of gravity for a swimming dog toward the center of the dog. This is even more important when the dog is carrying a heavy weight like a fish or a bird in his mouth.

The placement of a dog's center of gravity depends on many things including leg length, body height and length and weight of the head and neck. Thus we can move the center of gravity back by several means - 1) making the head smaller; 2) shortening the neck; 3) making the rear end heavier than the front, and 4) the presence of a mass in the loin area. The lab uses all of these things. He does not have a heavy head like a Mastiff or a Rottweiler. That would throw the balance off and down goes the boat. His head is of medium size and shape without sharp angles nor exaggerations. It is clean.



The head has parallel plains with a moderate stop and chiseling under the eyes that makes for a rather aerodynamic head. This type of head I can see cutting through a wave in the northern seas. The lack of cheekiness also makes the head more aerodynamic. When the dog is swimming water passes on either side of his muzzle. If

he has fleshy cheeks, the water would build up in front of the cheeks and go up into the dog's eyes making it harder to see. A shorter muzzle would not be a good thing either as it makes it harder to pick up large objects and the dog would have to put more pressure on the object to hold it. More pressure could lead to damaging the object. Lastly the ears - they are set not on top of the head which would adversely affect the aerodynamics of the head, but rather slightly above the eye level. At this level, they should be above the water and safe from most water intrusion and cause less drag. The neck must also be in balance with the whole dog. If the neck is too short or too long, it brings the center of gravity forward where a swimming dog does not want it. It also makes it harder for the dog to pick things up off the ground. If a dog has the proper medium length of neck, he can make the retrieve on the run without ever having to stop. He just scoops it up off the ground and is on the way back. A dog without the proper length of neck and straight shoulders has to stop to pick up the bird or he will take a tumble.

## SPRING OF RIB



CORRECT



barrel or round



narrow

The Labrador's body brings us back to the rowboat. The body should be short-coupled with a good spring of ribs, level topline and little or no tuck-up. Good spring of ribs not only gives room for the heart and lungs, but it also helps with buoyancy and stability. The ribs should be more of an egg shape than a barrel shape. A barrel would be very hard to guide in any particular direction and it would have a tendency to want to roll over all the time.

### *From the Cairn Terrier Breed Presentation*

McDowell Lyon also stated that as a water dog, the Labrador needed a strong core. A strong core requires a short loin and little or no tuck-up. The lack of tuck-up is the fourth way to move the center of gravity toward the rear of the dog. It also helps not only in

reducing drag, but it helps with buoyancy, mobility, and the dog would expend less energy while swimming.

The water dog's legs and feet are the oars of the boat. They supply the power and they should be under the body - not in front of it nor behind it. Not only does moving the legs forward or backward change many angles in the body, but think how hard it would be to row a boat if you were not sitting in the boat.

A water dog does not need flash and speed on the ground. He needs balance, bone, and muscle to propel him through the water. Tremendous reach and drive would be wasted motion in the water. It would waste energy and actually probably slow him down. So a water dog on land moves with purpose and power, not flash and showmanship. He does not waste energy. Maybe he moves something like our Labradors?