

Obedience Jump Heights

Note from the Editor: *In this issue, we present two opposing views regarding a proposed request to change the Obedience Jump Heights for PBGVs competing at AKC Obedience Trials. The authors, Megan Esherick and Jeffrey Pepper, invite PBGVCA members to submit opinions on this topic in a letter to the Saber Tails Editor, Elizabeth Regan, via email at pbgvs@hotmail.com or by mail to P.O. Box 205, Dennis, MA 02638. Letters to the Editor received by May 10, 2007 will appear in the Summer issue of Saber Tails.*

Megan Esherick

Currently, most breeds, including PBGVs, are required to jump the nearest multiple of two inches of to their shoulder height in the Open and Utility at AKC Obedience Trials. Twenty-one breeds, including four hound breeds, are permitted to jump the nearest multiple of two inches to $\frac{3}{4}$ of their shoulder height. The determination to add a breed to this list is made by the breed parent club. Recently, the PBGVCA board has been asked by some obedience competitors to add the PBGV to this list. The Companion Events committee and the Obedience subcommittee support this request. I would like to take this opportunity to explain to the membership why this would be beneficial to our breed.

The AKC Obedience Regulations describe the purpose of the sport as “To recognize dogs that have been trained to behave in the home, in public places, and in the presence of other dogs in a manner that will reflect credit on the sport of obedience at all times and under all conditions.” Obedience competition is a venue to show a dog’s willingness to do what a handler asks, not a test of athletic ability.

While PBGVs are an active breed, a correctly proportioned PBGV does carry considerably more weight than other breeds of the same height. The endomorphic body type of the PBGV means that activities that require quick movement or sudden turns are more of a physical challenge for them. In my own dog household, my male PBGVs are slightly heavier than my female Australian Shepherds, despite being about five inches shorter at the shoulder.

The jumping exercises in the Open and Utility offer challenges that are unique to the sport of obedience and are actually a very artificial test of a dog’s willingness to jump. Of the five jumps that are part of the advanced classes, four require that the dog make a turn immediately after landing. The retrieve over the high jump exercise requires the dog to jump while carrying an object, which means that the dog must focus his attention on both the object in his mouth, and the jump that he must take. It should also be noted that the obedience high jump is a solid, non-displaceable jump. If a dog should fail to clear this jump there is a significant potential for injury. Obedience also requires that the dog rapidly collect his body to sit perfectly straight in front of the handler immediately after jumping. The challenge of doing this is increased by the limited space frequently available in obedience rings and the jumping surface, which is often very thin matting over concrete. The most difficult, and potentially hazardous, jump surface I have ever encountered with my dogs in the plastic sheeting used at PBGVCA specialties.

In comparison to obedience, the jumps required in other dog sports are much more natural for the dog. Agility jumps do occasionally require the dog to turn right after the jump, but they are always displaceable to prevent injury and agility training and competition is almost always held on grass, dirt, artificial turf, or similar material with adequate traction and padding. Flyball jumping is done in a straight line. When hunting dogs encounter obstacles in the field, they typically scale the object, i.e. scramble over, rather than jump over it.

Under these conditions the dog also makes the choice himself as to how to clear the object, he is not being told to do so by a handler. Climbing onto furniture or other household objects is not comparable in any way to obedience jumping because the dog is climbing on to an object, not over it, and is doing so by choice.

When a dog completes a jump, the rear is used to propel the dog over the jump, but the front end of the dog absorbs the shock of the landing. Dogs have only tendons and muscles holding their front legs to their chest and spinal column in their shoulder area. There are no ligaments that really bind the bones on the front legs to other bones. Also, dogs do not have a clavicle, nor does the humerus fit solidly into the scapula like it does in humans. Men or women often dislocate shoulders or break arm bones when they fall at no more height than PBGVs jump. Dogs can get severe tendonitis in their shoulder area from landing after regularly jumping over things or jumping down off of things that are too high. At least one of the Obedience Committee has talked to his Veterinarian about landings on front legs and found that she commonly treats dogs for tendonitis in their shoulders and has had to send one of her dogs to a specialist for tendon repair in the shoulder area. Wrist (carpal) injuries are also very common in dogs involved in sports involving regular jumping.

As you may realize, PBGVs are not a popular breed for competition obedience. In fact in 2005, only two PBGVs earned advanced obedience titles. Because PBGVs can take longer to learn reliable attention than other breeds, it is not unusual for them to be slightly older than the average dog in the Open and Utility classes. Since 2002, the average age of the dogs entered in Open and Utility classes at the PBGVCA National Specialty has been six years and ten months, just two months away from being eligible for the veterans class. In fact, ten of the twenty-four entrants in these classes would have been eligible to compete in the veterans class on the day of the show. Having the option of a lower jump height may make the difference in whether these older PBGVs are able to finish the titles that they have trained for several years towards.

At the present time, AKC obedience is the only major dog sport activity in this US to require PBGVs to jump their full shoulder height to compete. United Kennel Club obedience includes PBGVs on the list of breeds where the handler can opt for a lower jump height. Rally obedience jump heights are considerably lower than shoulder height for PBGVs. AKC and USDAA agility give handlers the option of entered a preferred division with a lower jump height if desired, while NADAC agility rules give PBGVs an exception which allows them to compete in the 12" jump height regardless of shoulder height. At the three PBGVCA National Specialty Agility trials since the preferred classes began, more than 25% of the agility entries have been in these classes. It should also

be noted that all of the PBGVs invited to the 2006 Agility Invitational, as well as those who have qualified for the AKC National Agility Championship, did so while competing in the twelve inch jump height division. Competitive flyball teams rarely jump higher than 10 inches, which is well below shoulder height for a PBGV.

One of the concerns raised about approving this proposal was that approving it would encourage breeders to select for dogs who are less capable of athletic activities. I can't imagine anyone actually breeding PBGVs for obedience, since there just aren't that many performance homes interested in the breed and realistically this isn't likely to change. However, if someone was to breed just for obedience, requiring higher jump heights would likely mean selecting for finer boned, less substantial dogs, rather than "Strong bone with substance in proportion to the overall dogs," as called for in the breed standard. You only need to look at agility bred Border Collies or field trial Golden and Labrador Retrievers to see this happening in other breeds. Responsible breeders should use the Breed Standard as their guide in making breeding choices. This request is not about allowing PBGVs to win in obedience, but allowing them to safely compete at all. Please keep in mind that most of our obedience dogs were primarily purchased as pets and that breeders are not likely to let their most conformationally correct puppy go to an owner who only plans to compete in obedience. Does this mean that these dogs are not fit to be "Trained to behave in the home, in public places, and in the presence of other dogs," as the Obedience Rules call for?

While many PBGVCA members reading this article are not directly involved in competitive obedience, I would encourage you to contact the PBGVCA Board of Directors if you feel that this issue deserves their consideration. Those members who are actively working toward obedience degrees are also serving as ambassadors for the breed while building a stronger relationship with their dog. Allowing them the option of jumping their dogs at a lowered height will allow these dog and handler teams to train and compete for a longer time with a reduced risk of injury to the dog. Thanks to Karen Brion, George Jensen, and Teressa Keenan for their input on this article.

Sources:

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Obedience Jump Heights

By Jeffrey Pepper

A suggestion has been received from Megan Esherick, representing the Companion Events Committee's Obedience Subcommittee, that the club consider requesting AKC to approve a change in the required jump heights for our breed in Obedience competition. A separate article gives Megan's and the subcommittee's reasoning for requesting the changes. My task here is to present reasons in opposition to the changes.

First, we are an AKC club and therefore bound by AKC rules. The jumps heights for all breeds are set by AKC's Board of Directors. Requests for lowered jump heights of an individual breed must be submitted to and approved by AKC. The exemption on jump heights is meant to protect breeds whose standard requires massiveness, such as Bulldogs, Neapolitan Mastiffs, Clumber and Sussex Spaniels for example; or unusually short legs – the Basset Hound, Dachshunds and the Corgi's for example. It is not intended to make it easier for some breeds to compete than others. In making application to the AKC Board for the lowered jump heights, a Parent Club, such as PBGVCA, must submit documents providing detailed specific reasons that the height should be lowered to protect the breed from excessive injury. This would need to include the specific requirements of the breed standard that make jumping at the standard level more dangerous for the PBGV than for other breeds. To gain approval for a change, PBGVCA would need to provide a well reasoned report proving with certainty that because of the required correct construction of the breed called for in the standard, jumping at the standard height is harmful to PBGVs. It would have to request relief, in the form of a lowered height requirement, as the only way to avoid harm to the dogs. Concrete evidence of harm would be required. Certainly reference to the requirements set by other organizations that sponsor obedience competition is not germane from AKC's point of view. I'm not at all sure that the subcommittee's reasoning fits AKC's requirements or that a reduction in jump heights is warranted.

The PBGV's intended function is to hunt rabbits and, occasionally other small game, through difficult cover, including underbrush, briar and bramble. Rabbits do not go in straight lines when chased, but will zigzag in an attempt to loose the animal chasing them. Our standard describes the PBGV as a "...scent hound developed first and foremost to hunt small game over the rough and difficult terrain of the Vendéen region." Therefore, the PBGV standard requires a dog that is "compact, rough and robust in construction." The standard repeatedly refers to the breed as "strong and muscular" and "ag-

ile". Hunting PBGVs have to be able to both go under and over obstacles in their path with equal ease – they need to be able to jump over things as well as duck under them. They have to be able to quickly twist and turn as they follow the scent trail. None of this indicates a breed that needs special dispensation when it comes to jumping as a result of its required form and function.

At home, our dogs willingly and easily jump on the couch, into crates stacked up on top of each other, onto chairs and beds. Many of these are at a height that is at least the equivalent of the height required in the obedience ring. Dogs run around madly in the yard, chasing scents or each other with little apparent difficulty. Handlers concerned about the footing in some obedience venues have a choice, they can choose not to enter if they feel that the venue places their dog in jeopardy. And lowering jump heights will not lessen the PBGVs innate independence, a trait that has been bred into the breed since its foundation. Remember, PBGVs hunt independent of the hunter's directions. The dog alone decides where the scent leads, hunting for PBGVs does not require specific or frequent instruction from their handler so long as they follow the scent. We do not want to change the basic temperament of our breed.

Perhaps most seriously and very importantly, if we indicate to AKC that our breed should be more massive than most breeds, or less agile than most breeds, we are, in effect, changing the requirements of our standard to meet the needs of a specific area of competition. This can easily lead to a split in the breed not dissimilar to the very unfortunate split between conformation and working dog in many other breeds. Field Labradors and Field Irish Setters look nothing like their conformation breed mates. Greyhounds, and most of the Sporting breeds have a definite variation in looks between the "field" or "racing" dogs and the requirements of their breed's standard. In some cases they almost look like different breeds. Nothing is worse for a breed. Some popular breeds, Golden Retrievers for example, have breeders of field dogs breeding for atypical traits to compete with the Labradors at field trials, agility people breeding for Border Collie type traits for Agility dogs and Obedience people breeding for Sheltie and Border Collie type temperament to better compete in their venue. I have often heard "field" breeders state that they don't care about the requirements of their breed's standard so long as their dog wins. This is a horrible situation that can lead to the downfall of a breed. We certainly don't want to set up that kind of situation in our breed.