

WHERE DO I START?

The When and How to assess your litters

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Convention BOB Winners

To many times I have heard breeders ask the daunting question of when and how should they begin to look through litters, what to look for as far as faults/DQ's and what is the most important when sorting through them. Although there are many different ages and techniques for achieving success, hopefully, I can shed some insight on how to take the mystery out of deciding what to keep for your show string.

When I first started in havanas I was like many new breeders in the fact that I was completely clueless about what age to begin to sort through a litter, what key points was I looking for and most importantly, making sure I didn't weed out the best baby in the litter! After asking numerous members and listening to many judges, I incorporated all the advice I was given and narrowed it all down to a strict set of guidelines to help make this process easier. After practicing these guidelines for 8 years, I have found this method to be about 95% accurate for me and how I determine the right animals to keep.

Now before jumping right into what you're looking for as far as type, let us take a moment to review and understand General body type as stated in the SOP. The SOP (standard of perfection) states: "The body should be rather short and compact, tapering slightly from hindquarters to shoulders. Shoulders and midsection should be well rounded and well filled. Top body line should be a smooth continuous curve starting at the ear base, rising gradually to a high point over the center of the hips, and then falling in a smooth curve downward to the base of the tail. The back, loin, and hindquarters are to be full, smooth, and well rounded,"

Before going through a litter(s), my partner Olivia Myers and I wait until the babies are 8 weeks old. I find this the perfect age to look at them as the babies are not super young and they haven't quite hit the "ugly" stage yet. If you would like, you can begin checking out your litters at about 6-6 ½ weeks old to get an idea about how the litter looks. When looking at them this young, bring a sharpie or finger nail polish and mark an X or a number in the ear of the baby that you really like. Also, I write the babies ear number down in a notebook with a brief description of the baby. This way you can track the development of that particular baby from 6 to 8 weeks of age.

(Due note; not all babies will be ready by 8 weeks to begin looking through. Some lines take longer than 8 weeks to mature. I can't stress enough how important it is to know your line!)

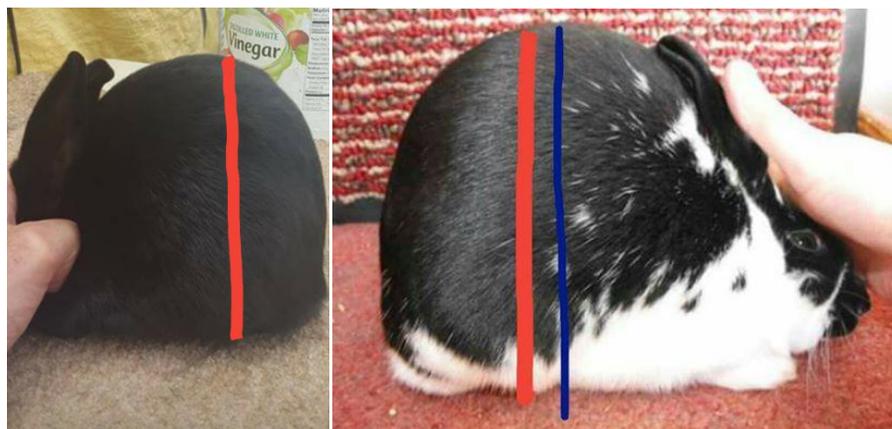
After waiting 2 weeks, your litter(s) is finally 8 weeks old and you head out to sort through them. I first begin going through type faults. I start from the nape of the neck and check to make sure the rabbit(s) doesn't have "long shoulders/low shoulders". To see long shoulders, I try to get down so that the baby I'm looking at is eye level. You want to look right behind the ears where the head connects to the body. You will either see the rise of the body start right behind the head, or there might be a space sometimes 1, 2 or even 3 finger lengths before the rise starts. The more fingers that can be placed between the head and the start of the rise, the longer the shoulder is.



This rabbit pictured above is a great example of how the shoulders should look. Notice shoulders start directly behind the ears and come up out of the shoulders in a gradual rise.

Secondly after checking the shoulders and making sure they are ok, I move to the mid section of the rabbit. Here I am checking for 2 things: length of body, and depth and roundness of the animal.

Keep in mind that havanas are a compact breed so the body should be rather short and compact not long and narrow. I also make sure at this time that I look for animals with lots of depth with the high point over the center of the hips. Usually I find at this age either they have the depth or they don't and if they don't, it's more than likely it will never develop. Let's look at some examples below.



Black (Rabbit A)

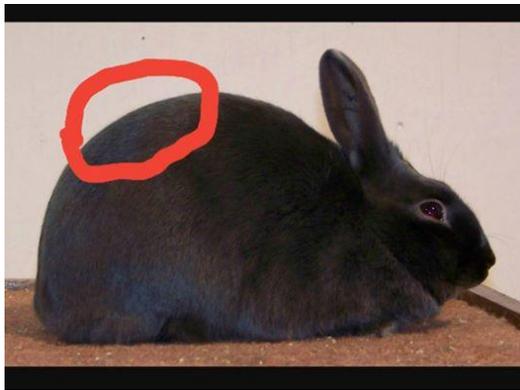
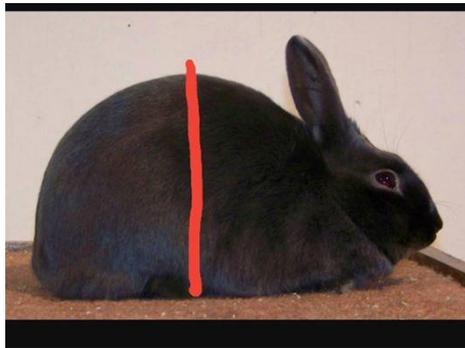
Broken Black (rabbit B)

Let's start off by looking at two very good examples of nicely typed havanas.

Rabbit A: This rabbit shows perfect side profile type! This rabbit is short and compact, has a nice smooth continuous curve starting from the ear base, rising gradually to a high point over the center of the hips (indicated by the red line), then falling to a smooth downward curve to the base of the tail. Definitely the type quality you are aiming to strive for!

Rabbit B: This rabbit also shows nice type, however, does have some slight faults compared to rabbit A. This rabbit is also short and compact, but if you notice, the start of that shoulder has a more immediate start than rabbit A. Still showing a nice smooth continuous curve starting from the ear base, but peaks just a little bit early (black line) than where it should (indicated by the red line) and finishes with a good downward curve to the base of the tail.

Now let's look at some rabbits that have more serve faults in type.



Blue (Rabbit C)



Black (Rabbit D)

Rabbit C: This rabbit starts out with a nice gradual rise out of the base of the ears, however, peaks way too soon about mid body (commonly referred to as a "rainbow rabbit") of the rabbit (indicated by red line). Now, with the high point moved forward, you can see the "flat spot" or "sloped spot" in the second picture circled in red. Without the peak being over the center of the hip, you will generally find these rabbits to be lacking a full, smooth and well rounded loin and hindquarter.

Rabbit D: This rabbit has an immediate rise out of the shoulder with a high point starting just behind the shoulder resulting in a severe "flat spot" over the hindquarter. Although this rabbit does not

represent angularity over the hindquarter, rabbits with this body type tend to be angular as well (flat spot over top of hindquarter, and chopped in the lower hindquarter)

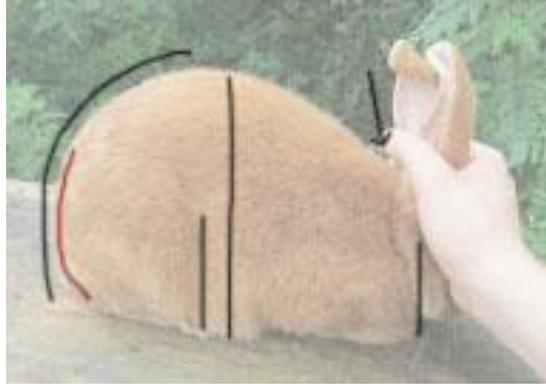
Occasionally I will come across a baby with a slight hollow loin. Usually I will keep it (given it looks like rabbit A or B) and give it the benefit of the doubt as it's still very young. Anything more than a slight hollowness to the loin I will not keep as this usually doesn't fill in as they mature.

Next I check to make sure the rabbit is not pinched or undercut to the bottom of the hindquarter. To see if the animal is pinched, pose the rabbit sitting on the table with the feet under the hip joint and the front feet lined up under the eyes. This way the rabbit is neither tucked up nor stretched out. Look down on the rabbit and look at the shape of the hindquarter. The shape should be nice and round and free of any angles. The rump of the rabbit should resemble a "U". If the rabbit's rump resembles a "V" then the rabbit is pinched. If it should happen to resemble a "box" |_| then this usually means the rabbit is chopped. Keep in mind you have to feel as well as see as there are many different degrees of pinched with the "V" being the most severe. Remember, anything other than round is not desirable. Pictured below are two classic examples of pinched.



Note the rabbit on the left has the "V" shaped hindquarter. Picture in the middle is the rabbit picked up and flipped over (Notice how the feet are in the shape of a "V" too). The picture on the right is an example of a rabbit with correct hindquarters flipped over.

If the rabbit is undercut, this is usually where the muscular structure does not fill in the lower hindquarters of the animal. When running your hand down the rabbit's rump towards the table, it should go straight down and be full at the base of the table from side to side. However, undercut hindquarters do not fall straight to the table. Instead it curves inward underneath the rabbit usually by the back hocks. Example below:



Now, look at the hindquarter where the 2 lines are drawn. The red line follows the shape of the rabbit while the black line is what the rabbit's shape should be. See how the red line tucks in at the bottom? This is an example that shows the rabbit being "undercut" and lacks "fullness" in the hindquarter. You can easily observe this by flipping the rabbit on his back on your lap and examining the natural positioning of the feet. Wide and good: | | Pinched/Narrow: \ / (the feet form a V). If you should happen to find a rabbit that does show pinched or undercut in your litters, this shouldn't be a baby to keep as most of the time the rabbit's never "outgrow" this and almost always get worse as they mature.

Finally, after checking all these different areas out, there is one more area I look at. Pose your rabbit up and look at it from a top view. What you are looking for here is a nice, slight, smooth, continuous taper from the shoulders to the hindquarter. You want this shape to resemble a wedge with the head being the start of the wedge and the hindquarter being the broader base. You do not want the shoulders being the same width as the hindquarters nor do you want an hour glass effect.

Now that all the type faults have been gone over, now is the time to look at your general faults/DQ's. Here you are looking for white spots and excessive scattered white hairs on any solid rabbit. Generally these pop up around the animal's neck, hindquarter above the tail, under the animal's neck, arm pits and back feet. Next, check the rabbit's feet. Here you are looking for white foot pads and or white toe nails (usually if the rabbit has a white toe nail you will most of the time find it on the middle two fingers of the front feet!). Look for any foreign color spots. Example: blue spot on a black or chocolate spot on a black. Finally, check to make sure your rabbit's eye color matches the variety. Blacks have brown eyes, blues have blue-grey eyes, chocolates have brown eyes showing a ruby red pupil in subdued light and lilac having blue grey eyes.

After checking these areas and after finding all your "keepers", I put them in their own cage to further grow. At this point I do not pull them out and type them again till about 4 to 4 ½ months old. Between 10 weeks old to around 3 ½ months old, my havanas go through their "uglies" where they constantly change from one day to the next. Usually after 4 to 4 ½ months old, what you see is generally what you will get and this is when I do my last round of sorting through my keepers. Keep in mind just because they were stunning at 8 weeks of age, doesn't mean they will be the same at 4-4 ½ months old. Occasionally you will have a "keeper" after 8 weeks develop long shoulders, lose depth, or become long in the body. I just simply remove these rabbits from my show string.

I hope this article helps in picking and raising your next best in show winner and best of luck to you in the future.

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