



Wait For The Weight

The dog world seems to be obsessed with size. Toy breeds are under pressure to produce ever tinier pups: If “teacup” is not small enough, what is next, “thimble”? On the other end of the spectrum are the large breeds and the never-ending push for bigger dogs. Although not originally intended to be super-sized, in recent times the Tibetan Mastiff (TM) has become known as the behemoth of the dog world. TMs are big, no question about that, but how big is big?

The very first line of the AKC Tibetan Mastiff Breed Standard states: “**Noble and impressive: a large, but not a giant breed.** (1)” If you take nothing else away from this article, let that opening line stick with you. The Standard further defines a preferred height range of 24-27 inches for females and 26-29 inches for males. Think about that for a minute: A 24” dog is not a giant! The average weight for a female is 85-95 lbs; for males, 125-135 lbs. Although it can happen, it is an exceedingly rare TM that tops out at more than 175 lbs. So, where did the popular perception of a gargantuan Tibetan Mastiff come from?

Unfortunately, size sells, and exaggerated size and weight is almost inherent in the breed. There are many ways that a breeder, owner, or seller can misrepresent the size of their dogs: Staged camera perspective and fluffed up coat are the most common. By camera perspective, I mean controlling the angle and depth perception of photos. An object on the horizon may look tiny, but the closer you are to the object, the larger it seems. A dog strategically placed slightly in front of a person or object creates the illusion that the dog is larger simply because it is closer to the camera. If you watched the Hobbit movies, Director Peter Jackson used distance perspective along with other well-known camera tricks to make the Hobbits appear smaller than their actual size (2). A good photographer (or breeder experienced with dog photography) can employ this trick to make their dogs look larger than life, literally.

Photoshopping is another trick that many use to exaggerate the size of their dogs. Whether strategically placing a smaller photo of a person or object in the picture as a staged size comparison or actually enhancing the size of the dog with programs such as Paint, Corel, or Adobe, some are so adept at the process that even a trained eye has trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Even without photoshop, using a small person or child for size comparison can also play tricks on the eye and make a dog appear larger. Perspective is everything when working from a photo!

Full winter coat or a spay coat can also create the illusion of a larger dog. Our smallest TMs are a brother/sister pair who are also our heaviest coated, and both are spayed/neutered, which changes the texture of the coat to make them look fluffier. Their weight ranges from about 90 lbs for the female to 110 for the male. Yet, a good bath with a volumizing shampoo and a high speed blow out of their winter coats can easily make them appear to be twice their size! I have had visitors look at this male, and in all seriousness, ask “What does he weigh? About 200?”

Last, but not least, is the confusion created by the introduction of the Chinese mastiff type dogs being sold as Tibetan Mastiffs. Mixed with Newfoundlands, St. Bernards, Spanish Mastiffs, and other large or giant breed dogs, their excessive size, head, bone, and coat are not characteristic of the breed. These traits impact speed, agility, and weather tolerance, and would impair the dogs’ ability to do the job Tibetan Mastiffs have been bred to do for centuries. Unfortunately, with just a cursory search of the internet, this is the image that many people have of the Tibetan Mastiff, and start out with unrealistic expectations of size.

With an understanding that things aren't always what they seem, especially from pictures, let's look at how this has impacted the breed and influenced the perception of how fast a puppy should grow and what it should weigh.

New puppy owners are always proud to boast about their puppy's size and weight. The same is true with human babies as well. We have been conditioned to believe that babies, human or otherwise, should be round and chubby. This leads to the inevitable obsession with how much to feed a puppy and how much the puppy weighs. With visions of monstrous TMs in their heads and not understanding that size is so often exaggerated, owners expect their pup to be 200 lbs by the time it is a year old. To achieve this, they often over feed and are always looking for ways to pack on more weight. Some owners develop anxiety over whether their slender adolescent pup is healthy or they are doing something wrong with feeding. At least once a week I get a question of "What/how much should I feed my TM puppy?"

One factor that comes into play with TMs is their slow path to maturity. Some breeds are almost born looking like a miniature version of the adult. Not so with the Tibetan Mastiff. They grow and change constantly over the first 2-3 years at a minimum, and the males don't reach full maturity until at least 4. They are not expected to carry their adult weight at a year old, or even two years old, and for health reasons, should not. It is a breed that demands patience!

TMs go through an adolescent phase from about 5 months to a year old that I compare to a 14-15 yr old adolescent boy: Tall, thin, and gangly. They are perfectly healthy and full of energy. Trying to add pounds at this age will only result in health problems in the future. No one would expect a middle school child to weigh 200 lbs, but they do exactly that for their TM puppy.

According to recent statistics provided by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 56% of dogs in the U.S. are overweight or obese, putting them at risk for a host of health problems, including degenerative joint and disk disease, arthritis, kidney disease, liver disease, hypothyroidism, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart failure, and cancer (3). Of particular concern for Tibetan Mastiffs, added weight puts stress on developing joints and can result in orthopedic issues that may plague them for the rest of their lives, including hip dysplasia, which is the most common health issue found in large breed dogs. Controlled research studies from as much as 50 years ago show a clearly defined link between excess caloric intake and the development and severity of hip dysplasia. Kasstrom noted "It was found that hip dysplasia was more frequent, occurred earlier, and became more severe in the dogs with a rapid weight gain caused by increased caloric intake than in the dogs which a low weight gain because of restricted (weight controlled) feeding. The final diagnosis was closer correlated with feeding and weight gain than with tightness or laxity of the hip joints before 12 weeks of age" (4). Kealy and associates followed 8-week-old Labrador puppies for 2 years and concluded "Independent of age at which the radiography was done, there was less subluxation of the femoral heads in the limit-fed dogs" (5). Smith et al, 2006, concurred: "Restricted-fed dogs had lower prevalence and later onset of hip joint osteoarthritis" (6). A review of the literature by King in 2017 revealed "Caloric intake when growing has a significant effect on phenotypic expression. Initial joint laxity progresses to osteoarthritis due to subluxation and abnormal wearing" (7). Summing it up, Beuchat states "obesity could well be the single most significant environmental factor affecting the development of hip dysplasia and osteoarthritis" (8).

With science practically screaming at us that excessive weight gain is the leading contributor to the most significant health issue affecting our large breed puppies, why aren't we listening? Rather than worry about having the biggest puppy in the breed, aim for the healthiest! Keep your TM puppy slim, trim, and fit, and avoid the pitfalls associated with rapid weight gain. Be patient, and wait for the weight!

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