

Head Qualities and Expression of the Pyrenean Shepherd (Berger des Pyrénées)



What I am going to tell you is nothing new; others have already made the same comments. However, we have to ask ourselves whether head qualities and herding expression are really taken into account in judging our breed.

The Head

This is the basic characteristic of any breed; it is what determines type. If breeders start neglecting this aspect, they might end up producing dogs without breed type... Before doing a detailed examination, a judge must be able to tell at a glance whether it is a Pyrenean Shepherd or not. What good is it for a dog to have good structure if it has a barely acceptable head or even one that does

not reflect type? Let's look at some essential components of the breed standard:

The Skull

The skull is moderately developed (but still relatively broad) and flat (the flattest of all the herding breeds), with a slight central furrow. The sides are harmoniously rounded. The occipital bone is very slightly pronounced. The front of the skull slopes gently to the muzzle, and the stop is therefore barely discernable. The head is triangular shaped. The lengthwise ratio of skull to muzzle is usually said to be two-thirds to one-third.

The Muzzle

The muzzle is straight and shorter than the skull, ending in a wedge. The nose is black. The mucous membranes of the lips and palate are black or strongly marked in black. Be careful to avoid muzzles that are either too short or too long.

The Eyes

The eyes are expressive and slightly almond-shaped. They should not be round or light-colored. They should be dark brown, and not too closely set. Blue or partially blue eyes are allowed in merle dogs. The eyelids have a black border, whatever the coat color. This characteristic, which used to be described as charcoal-marked, seems to be on the decline (it was said that the Pyrenean Shepherd wore mascara).



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The Coat

The hair over the head and muzzle should look blown back (windblown). It must be distributed harmoniously on the head and muzzle sweeping from front to back. On the tip of the muzzle, there are very little furnishings and very little beard. The hair becomes gradually longer and well spread over the muzzle going towards the head. It goes up from the muzzle to the skull along the sides of the skull and above the eyes over the back of the skull. ***The hair should not hide the eyes.*** The coat should not be soft or fall forward to obscure the eyes or expression of the dog. Correct coat on the head should give the impression that the head gets wider from the tip of the nose to the top of the skull. Beware of an over abundance of coat over the head, the appearance of too much moustache, or poor quality of coat which would produce coarse and heavy heads of the Nizinny type.



INCORRECT Nizinny Type



The Ears

They are moderately wide at the base, placed relatively high on the skull. They should not be set too close or too wide laterally. They are relatively short. The upper third or half of the ear tips over the lower part. They must be mobile and the lower part stand off the head. They must fall symmetrically to the front or sides of the skull.

This is where it gets complicated... The ears used to be cropped, and apart from the functional and hygienic reasons for this, the cropping emphasized the qualities of the head by making it look wider (see chapter on hair quality) when the cropping was done on a slant.

There is no recipe for good ears, but this is what I have observed: Puppies with good ears at two months of age often tend to have a narrower skull. Beware of this. Moreover, if the ears are too light, they might turn out to be prick ears after 12 months. Inversely, with a well-

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proportioned skull, the ears are often implanted more to the side and lower on the skull. Beware, as this can also be an indication of a slightly rounder skull.

In both cases, the solution can be glue and tape, with various outcomes following the growth pattern, calcium intake and teething. Breeders should experiment to find what works best for them. There is no magical remedy; the only solution I can offer is a consistent observation of successive litters and a close study of all types of ears (thicker, lighter, short, moderately short, positions on the skull, shape, skull to muzzle ratio, etc.), as well as experimentation to find good breedings and good lines, which to me is the basic purview of the breeder, in any case.

One final comment: narrow skulls often reflect a loss of bone over several generations. The Pyrenean Shepherd is a light dog, but not a shrimp by any means. In addition, narrow skulls can lead to missing teeth (incisors). Beware of too much inbreeding.



The Expression

Originally, this was a working dog, which constantly performed the job of a mountain sheepdog in difficult conditions (the nature of the work itself, difficult terrain and weather conditions, long distances to travel, etc.). It was the working tool of the farmer and was often required to take the initiative and use its intelligence. For a long time, the remoteness of the valleys with scarce means of communication with the outside world would have meant a rough and lonely life in small hamlets and towns. This remoteness would have led to wariness when faced with the unknown. Any unusual event would have seemed extraordinary. The Pyrenean Shepherd has certainly inherited this trait. This highly contained way of life has definitely had an effect on the character (wariness of strangers) and genetics (inbreeding). This trait has been strengthened by the lack of outside stimuli over the generations and become ingrained in the breed.

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Everything new puts the dog on alert, which explains its tendency to bark and have an ever-watchful attitude. The dog never stays still; it is constantly in movement, always watchful, always curious. This nervous energy and sense of duty translates into a dog that tenses up, becomes rigid, with its head held high in watchfulness. Its eyes sparkle with liveliness and its whole face takes on a look of defiance, intelligence and cunning. The dog seems to be trembling with impatience even though it stays in one spot, yet its eyes see everything going on around him. It takes in its surroundings with a look that is all at once inquisitive, mocking, proud, sure of itself, facetious, curious and clever. This is often accompanied by barely audible whimpers and a series of looks that reflect its intelligence in an expression that is in turn somewhat rebellious, haughty, proud and humorous. Such is the expression of the Pyrenean Shepherd.

You can imagine it watching over the herd or the farm, on the lookout for any unusual movement. This timeless look and expressions will always be part of the breed. You can define it however you want, but what matters is to recognize this magic when it happens.

Of course, the world has changed and like mankind the Pyrenean Shepherd has adapted. This does not mean breeders should be producing unsociable dogs. The Pyrenean Shepherd has become a sociable animal, but it still retains some wariness in its makeup. Even if it were to lose



this trait, it would not be the end of the world. What is most important is to continue raising and training these dogs to pique their all-encompassing curiosity. That is all their natural intelligence needs to manifest itself.

The typical expression of the Pyrenean Shepherd will always be there, but it is important to remember that it will become meaningful only if the structure of the head conforms to the breed standard. I would encourage those who still find this concept a bit too abstract to observe a maximum number of dogs in all possible contexts. Then, one day when you are not necessarily expecting it, you will see the light and really get a feel for what it all means. Beyond the standard and its rational interpretation, there remains a part of romanticism that words can never fully describe...

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Written by Olivier Matz (France) - Translated into English by Michele Cousineau, Canada
(Photos added)