

Judging the Pyrenean Sheepdog (Long Haired)

In writing an article for this feature on judging the breed I have consciously set out to not make it just a trawl through the breed standard. It goes without saying however that if you are going to judge any breed then doing your research and education, which includes a thorough knowledge of the breed standard, is critical. However, the Pyrenean Sheepdog, as a rare breed really needs you to go further and understand the nuances and breed specific features if the best exhibits, true to type, are to be rewarded.

The first thing to appreciate are the working origins of the breed. It is so important not to treat all sheep dog breeds in the same way. Why does the breed exist? What was it valued for? What has shaped the creation of the breed (terrain, type of sheep, type of farming)? How does it work? How does all this relate to the construction, working gait and character of the breed? If you can't answer these questions then I would argue that you are unlikely to appreciate the uniqueness of the rare breed in front of you.

Secondly the first thing I look for is that first impression I get when the dogs enter the ring. I don't wait until they are all in place I want to see them as they come in, reacting to what's going on (other exhibitors, stewards, things outside the ring that may have caught their attention). I am looking for that energy, wariness, alertness and complete focus on everything going on around them. Pyrenean Sheepdogs are rarely static exhibits, they are always on guard with a certain amount of distrust of anything strange or different along with a liveliness that gives this little dog a character like no other. In the presence of their handler, they are at their best when showing themselves off, attention and focus always on the outside, frequently repositioning themselves when something new takes their attention. Beware the downbeat, inward focused, low energy exhibits.

Thirdly, there are a number of important proportions in the breed standard that really define the profile and envelope within which the rest of the breed description sits. These are:

1. *Length of body is greater than the height at the withers.* Whilst the standard does not indicate any specific ratio it is definitely rectangular in shape, never getting close to square or "cobby". This length effectively comes from length of rib with short loin. The lung capacity of the Pyrenean is obtained principally from length of rib with moderate depth/ width of rib.
2. *Skull is as long as it is wide*
3. *Muzzle is shorter than skull in a ratio of 2:3 (historically defined as 1/3rd : 2/3rd).* The skull dimensions along with the skull to muzzle ratio define the triangular shape of the head when viewed from above and which with the other head features is said to give the head a look of a "brown bear".
4. *Distance from elbow to ground is greater than half the height at the withers.* Again whilst no specific ratio is defined, the length of foreleg is fairly long. This foreleg length is critical to the unique "ground shaving" movement and exceptional reach of the breed when in full flow.

So outside of this backdrop what are the main breed specific features that I recommend you focus on when looking for excellent breed typical exhibits?

Primarily, the head features are critical. Heads are important for most breeds but with approximately 20 separate statements within the breed standard to describe the PSD head features then serious study of the head is a must. Interestingly, French judging systems for the breed back in the 1950's were based on points scoring with more than 40% of the points available allocated to the head features. I don't want to list all the head features in this short article but to me the following are key. As a minimum you need to find the correct head shape (Triangular) and skull to muzzle ratio's. Ears should accentuate the width of the triangular head shape and are placed on top of the head, not too close. They should never be heavy or low set to the sides. Ears should be mobile and alert with the top third/half folding over to the front or side (never prick ears). Must have black pigmentation on eye lids and rims, lips, nose and inside mouths irrespective of coat colour. Expressive dark brown almond shaped eyes (wall eye OK in a merle)

Secondly, the focus needs to be on gait and movement. The PSD still retains all it's working qualities and it's natural working gait is the trot. The trot itself can be a gentle slow pace (normally used when the flock are moving along requiring limited intervention) and a high tempo vigorous trot that shows full extension when really driving the flock often over long distances. When you see the typical movement of the Pyrenean in the ring you will never forget it. It is a "ground skimming" action that is characterised by a strong rear drive with exceptional front reach that comes from the harmony of the shoulder and rear angulations plus the balance between the longer foreleg and the angulation and matching length of the rear stifle bone (second thigh).

Thirdly you need to focus on coat. The coat originated on this little breed to stay out all day and night in the mountains and to withstand all weathers. It is dense, repellent and never thin. The coat is a double coat and is a mixture of harsher "goat" type hair with a thick soft "sheep's wool" type of undercoat, typically distributed in the rear half to one third of the dog and always over the rump and thighs. The combination of "goat" and "sheep's wool" combine naturally as the dog matures to form layers of natural felted cords /dreadlocks called 'Cadenettes in France. Cadenettes can form on the front legs up to the elbow but for the most part the coat over the head and forequarters is a single coat of the harsher "goats" hair type. It is not clear why this differentiation in coat exists but the little sheepdog has to work in really harsh rocky terrain and the most plausible explanation is that the coat evolved that way as the dog was required to remain agile and unrestricted in its work in jumping and navigating the rocks and crags. The natural felts can be groomed out by removing the thick "sheeps wool" undercoat but over-grooming does soften the coat. Even in a groomed dog the coat should have an unkept natural look with layers and texture in the coat. Beware the over groomed look.

There is also a semi-long version of the coat that has shorter hair all round and is in the main a single coat with only lighter fringing on the legs. The texture is the "goats hair" type and it is a dense and a harsh working coat that requires little maintenance and is distinctly different from the full long hair coat. Beware of exhibits with short coats that are soft, wispy or thin as these should not be confused as semi-longs. They are more likely to be just poor coated or over groomed long coats.

In conclusion, the essence of judging the breed is to have an eye for correct breed type.

Whilst there is much more included in the breed standard, for me the points I have set out in this article focus on the things that are important in getting at the very essence of 'breed Type. The correct head structure when combined with the unique, distrustful but ever vigilant character traits of the Pyrenean generate an expression that is like no other and together form the foundation for typical breed type. The ground shaving working movement and the unique working coat when combined with the correct head and expression, finish for my eye, the complete the picture.

Hopefully this short overview has stimulated your interest in the breed and for those wanting to explore more I have included an article by top French breeder Olivier Matz on understanding "Head, Expression and Breed Type". Olivier is a passionate writer on the breed and his article which he has kindly given his permission to be included, I think, really gets under the skin of the breed. Hope you enjoy reading it

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