

## The Head Qualities and Expression of the Berger Des Pyrenees

What I'm about to tell you is nothing new, others have described this in their own way. However, we have to ask ourselves whether head qualities and herding expression are really understood and taken into account when judging our breed.

### The head

This is the cornerstone of any breed, it is a key determinant of type. To begin to neglect this element is to expose ourselves to the production of just any other dog; We run the risk of losing the breed type ... Before judging and examining a Berger in great detail, we must be able to tell at first glance whether it is Pyrenean 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? We would have a long-haired dog, but what breed? Let's remind ourselves of some essential components of the breed standard:

**The skull** is moderately developed (but still relatively broad) and flat (the flattest of all the herding breeds), with a slightly marked central furrow. It rounds out harmoniously on the sides. The occipital bone is not very pronounced. The front part of the skull connects gently to the muzzle and there is therefore a just perceptible stop. The head is triangular shaped when viewed from above. The lengthwise ratio of skull to muzzle is usually said to be two-thirds to one-third.

**The muzzle** is straight and shorter than the skull, ending in a wedge. The nose is black, the mucous membranes of the lips and the palate are black or strongly marked with black. Watch out for muzzles that are too short or too long.

**The eyes** are expressive, slightly almond shaped. Watch out for round, clear eyes. Their colour is dark brown and they should not be too close together. Blue or partially blue eyes are allowed in Merle or slate grey coats. This characteristic, which used to be described as charcoal-marked, seems to be on the decline (historically it was said that the Pyrenean Sheepdog wore mascara).

**The hair** over the head and muzzle should look blown back (windswept). 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 Niziny type.

**The ears** 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 folds 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, 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-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. For my taste we see a little too many ears worn "Sheltie Style", for me it is a mistake.

People focus on this style of ears without reason. This is a fashion that has taken the eye since cropping has stopped but by focusing only on this very "seductive" aspect, we expose ourselves to no longer, taking into account the skull / muzzle proportions and in particular the width of the skull. In my opinion if the ears are well carried forward and the skull is large enough, you should not have this phenomenon of the last third worn too high. Besides, how many breeders have had the unpleasant experience of ending up with straight "prick" ears as they grow. Beware of this "hyper type"!

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 role of the breeder, in any case. One final comment: narrow skulls often reflect a general 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

Imagine a dog with almost all the above head characteristics. You will have a technically perfect head (although I do not believe perfection actually exists) but you would have a beautiful head. In the standard it is also written: "a dog denoting a maximum of nervous energy for a minimum of weight and size". This explicit sentence clearly shows a dog with an energy and liveliness that when coupled with the correct head features gives it a look like no other. Originally, it was a working dog that endured the profession of the mountain shepherd relentlessly, despite difficult conditions (nature of the work, terrain, weather, distances to be covered, etc.) He is the peasant's working tool and he is often asked to take the initiative, to make his intelligence "speak". For a long time, the isolation of the valleys where the means of communication hardly existed, suggests that life in general was marked by harshness, loneliness in these hamlets and villages cut off from everything. This character trait brought and hindered the fear of "the unknown." It made any event extraordinary. The little shepherd certainly inherited it. This life in isolation has certainly influenced character (basic distrust) as well as genetics (inbreeding). This character trait reinforced by the isolation and little external stimuli, left its mark on the successive generations of descendants.

So, everything that is foreign is an alert; Hence this natural barker's natural state is to be permanently "living on the edge". 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 a neck that carries its head like a watchtower. 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 Sheepdog. 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.

Obviously, the world has evolved and the Pyrenean Sheepdog, like men has adapted. There is therefore no question of encouraging the breeding of unsociable dogs but even if he has become more sociable, he will still likely retain the underlying trait of mistrust that is set deep in his character. If he doesn't have it, it doesn't matter. The important thing is always to continue to raise and educate him by arousing his curiosity to everything around him. His natural intelligence is waiting for that to express itself.

The typical expression of the Pyrenean Sheepdog will always be there, but it is important to remember that it will become meaningful only if the morphology of the head conforms to the breed standard as well. 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, the veil will lift from your eyes and you will feel it deep within yourself. Beyond the standard and its rational interpretation, there remains a part of romanticism that words can never fully describe...

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