

# ***The Basenji: Africa's Breed***

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This article is reprinted here with the permission of the author (1997.) This article as written at the request of the African Basenjis Club for use in its Judges' Education Program and it uses the FCI standard for the breed. U.S. Fanciers will note the weight differences for bitches and the absence of the references to the brindle color patter. MCK

The Basenji is an athlete. Fit, strong and agile, he is a powerhouse in a small package. He has heart, determination and boundless enthusiasm for the hunt and must have a body to match. This is a natural breed, shaped over time and ruthlessly culled by the demands of the hunt and the challenges of daily survival in his harsh and unforgiving homeland. There is nothing frail or feeble about the correct Basenji. His well-developed body has long, smooth muscles which allow well-coordinated effortless action; he does not have short, bunch muscles which tend to load and tighten with use. The correct Basenji fills the eye with his perfect balance and proportion. He is the picture of health, eyes gleaming, and his whole being eager, vibrant and alert. He can run like the wind and turn on a dime.

His movement at the trot is effortless, with a long, smooth, flowing stride. His hindquarters show no exaggeration and he is able to extend them fully and equally to the rear and forward under his body. There is a brief moment of suspension at full extension. He fairly skims the ground, does not kick up in the rear and there is smooth coordination with the rear. His front reach is equal to that of his rear and his footfall timing is superb. He does NOT take short mincing steps, flail his legs in all directions or prance like a fancy pony. The correct Basenji takes your breath away precisely because his movement is so easy; you can miss him altogether if you do not know what you are looking for. He will not even catch your eye if you are looking for a dog with high action and exaggerated moves. His silky, flowing gait is extremely efficient and conserves energy for the long haul. In the ring, he can easily keep up with the flashy movers, who often take twice as many steps to go the same distance and, as the appearance of speed is deceptive, he is more than capable of leaving them behind on the go around. This I not to suggest that the judge allow a mad race around the ring; the clever handler is able to disguise many faults when the dog's legs are but a blur!

His proportions are square but he appears to be high on the leg. He should not be rectangular nor should he actually be taller than he is long. His angles are smooth and sloping, never abrupt nor upright. This is a moderate breed; extremes of any sort are wasteful and not to be encouraged. The dog stands 43 cm (17") at the shoulder; the bitch should be 40 cm (16"). A few centimeters either way does not present a problem as long as his proportions are retained. A short and squatty look is just as incorrect as a tall and attenuated appearance. Height to weight ratio is important and the 43 cm dog should weigh a full 11 kg (24 lbs.), the 40 cm bitch should weight in at 9.5 g (21 lbs.)

His distinctive head has a marked look of quality as all elements are in proportion. His backskull is broad and he has a well-developed crushing jaw. There is fill and chiseling under his eyes; he most definitely does not have a tight-skinned skully look. His foreface is shorter than his backskull by a ratio of two to three, there is a moderate stop and a well-cushioned muzzle with a pleasing underjaw. He has a scissors bite and his muzzle is never snippy or pointy. Wrinkles are fine and profuse and most visible on the red and white dogs, particularly the puppies. Tricolors and black and whites do have wrinkles but they may be harder to see because of distracting markings and lack of contrast. His nose is black but may show a seasonal fading; this should not be heavily penalized. Light or incompletely pigmented eye rims, however, should not be tolerated as they ruin expression. His ears are small, pointed, flexible and mobile, set high with the tips at a slightly outward angle; they do not stand straight up on the top of his head. From the side, they are hooded and set well forward. Large ears set on the side of the head are unsightly and incorrect. He has dark, squinty, almond-shaped eyes that can look right through you, spot a tiny crumb on the floor or watch a small bird on a branch at the top of a tall tree. His expression varies from inscrutable to sweet and pleading, depending on his mood and the incentives available. Food is a prime motivator.

His neck is strong, functional, well-crested and neither too long nor too short. It fits smoothly into his shoulders as a well-proportioned part of the whole. His shoulders and upper arm are well-set and of equal length. His chest is medium in width and with a forechest and fill in front. His ribcage is long, deep and oval, neither barreled nor shelly, with plenty of room for his heart and lungs. As a consequence, his loin is short with no weakness. His topline is level and does not dip; his supporting muscles are firm, not flabby. His pelvis is long and a distinct shelf extends back past the root of his tail for maximum muscle attachment. His second thigh is long and broad, there is a definite curve to his stifles and his hocks are well let down. From the rear, his quarters are meaty with balanced musculature. They cannot be thin, scrawny and lacking in muscles, particularly on the inside of his upper thigh.

The tail should be set high and lie closely on either hip. It should not appear to be in any dangers of falling off the end of his back. The set is more important than the degree of curl; a well-set single curl is sufficient but a tight double or triple curl is certainly attractive. It is not necessary to uncurl their tails. It is painful to some and does not reveal any secrets in this short-coated breed.

His bone is fine, oval, bladed and very strong. Heavy, round bone or ultrafine, brittle bone are equally incorrect. His feet are compact, have well-arched toes and thick pads. They are hunter's feet; capable of carrying him for great distances over rough terrain. His skin is fine and loose. He has wiggle-room in times of danger and can squirm through heavy brush

without getting hung up and tearing his gleaming hide. His coat is short and sleek; there may be an undercoat during the colder months. It is not an open coat which would make him susceptible to sunburn.

Wariness in new situations was a survival skill in his native land and he may be aloof with strangers. His reflexes are razor sharp and he does not take kindly to an unexpected swooping approach, particularly from the rear. Generations of defensive behaviour vital to survival in the wilds make this a truly risky move. When you approach a Basenji, greet him pleasantly and confidently and let him sniff your hand. This simple maneuver will pay large dividends with this breed. The correct Basenji exhibits a delightful and good-natured disposition once he is satisfied that your intentions are honourable.

Puppies, in particular, must be handled gently and with consideration. They have excellent memories and will never forget rough treatment at the hands of a judge. The judge has a definite responsibility to make a Basenji puppy's early ring experiences positive ones, both for the puppy's sake and for that of other judges who may encounter the dog in the ring in future years.

Basenjies are busy little dogs with a lot on their minds. They are quick-witted and have a marvellous sense of humor so expect the unexpected when judging or handling this breed. This dog is no slouch and is a master at seizing the slightest opportunity to run your mental lapse to his advantage. Living with this breed is exciting and can be a real challenge as his curiosity and creativity are legendary. You may penalize a dull or sullen Basenji in the ring as this is not typical of the breed. Be careful not to confuse dullness with boredom as many Basenjies tire quickly of the show ring routine and become ring-wise, much to the dismay of their handlers. Do not penalize a dog who becomes alert only when something interesting is going on.

The Basenji is a study in contrasts. He is a tough, competitive dog, capable of great bursts of energy and extreme athleticism but no breed appreciates creature comforts such as a good meal and his master's soft, warm bed more than the Basenji. He is adept at manipulating those who love him but returns that love, in his own way, with all his heart. The secret of living happily with a Basenji is to convince him that it is in his own best interests to do what you want him to do. He seldom acts merely to please his owner. The Basenji is a thinking dog and looks to his own advantage with good effect. This is truly a unique breed and should be treasured as "Nature's Masterpiece."