

Description in Detail

Veronica Tudor-Williams

Chapter 4 from "*Basenjis the Barkless Dogs of Central Africa*" (1976)
Reprinted in "*The Basenji*" September 1979, page 5

Discussion based on the 1965 British Standard

I feel very strongly about the preservation of Basenji type. I was lucky enough to be friends with the pioneers of Basenjis in the late 1930s – Lady Kitty Ritson, Lady Helen Nutting, Mrs. O. Burn, Captain George Richards, Mr. K. B. Smith and others – all of whom knew the Basenji in its native land, not just as dog, but as a breed with very definite characteristics. They took endless trouble to explain the various points to me and for examples we used the dogs of those days – Bongo, Bokoto, Bereke, Bashele, Nyanabiem, and a number of my own dogs, Kwango, Kasui, Senji, Kavirondo and Amatangazig – which covered most of the original stock.

Before that time I was quite lost over type, so their talks and demonstrations were a complete eye-opener to me, and I wondered afterwards how I could have thought that all Basenjis were of the same type. They were literally divided into the right and the wrong type. The right ones were the small elegant dogs, with long legs and fine bone, delicate heads, and ears set right on top. The wrong ones were the larger, heavier dogs, with shorter legs, coarse bone and clumsy movement, and the big ears wrongly set towards the side of a too wide head. As Captain Richards said, "The correct Basenji is a finely pointed aristocratic animal." I only wish I could take all readers back to that day and then I think they would see the difference as clearly as I saw it.

When the war came in 1939 we still had only a handful of Basenjis in England. The pioneers who, earlier that same year, had founded the first Basenji club in the world – the Basenji Club of Great Britain – were soon scattered all over the globe, and most did not return to further the cause of the ideal Basenji. But I think and hope they felt they had handed the torch to me and that I would uphold the Basenji type which they had explained to me so carefully all those years before.

General Appearance

The Basenji is a small, lightly built, short-backed dog, being high on the leg compared to its length. The wrinkled head must be proudly carried, and the whole demeanour should be alert and interested. The tail must be high-set, and curled tightly over to one side of the back. The legs must be long, fine and dainty, giving the appearance of gazelle-like grace, and the feet should be oval, neat and compact.

Size is a controversial subject in most breeds, but it is generally accepted that the smaller and daintier a Basenji is, within the Standard, the greater its appeal. It must be remembered that practically all the imported native dogs have had a height range of 14 ½ – 16 ½ inches (36.9 – 41.8 cm) and have weighed 14 – 20 pounds (6.4 – 9.1 kg), so the native ideal is definitely on the side of the smaller dog. The first Standard was 16 inches (40.6 cm) for dogs and 15 inches (38 cm) for bitches, but this reluctantly had to be raised for the second Standard, as it was found the dogs grew bigger with the change of diet and climate. The standard now purposely states **approximately** 17 inches (43.2 cm) for dogs, 16 inches (40.6 cm) for bitches; also approximately 24 pounds (10.9 kg) for dogs, 21 pounds (9.5 kg) for bitches, so as to allow latitude either way with the bias in favour of the smaller native type – one of the aims of Basenji clubs being to preserve native type. Equally important is that the dog should be properly balanced. The correct proportion for this is that measurement from the ground to the top of the shoulder should be the same as, or slightly greater than, the measurement from the front of the chest to the furthest point of the hindquarters. (The measurements being taken in profile.) It is better to have a dog which is slightly too tall – providing it is in no way coarse nor lacking in depth of brisket, and which possesses the correct length of leg, especially in the forearm – than to have a small heavy dog, giving a corgi-like appearance, totally out of keeping with the desired resemblance to a gazelle.

Head and Skull

The skull is flat and of medium width, not domed or peaked. The muzzle should taper finely to the nose, and on no account should it be broad, heavy or even slightly roman-nosed. It gives an untypical appearance if the muzzle is longer than the skull. In 1939 Mr. K. B. Smith stated that the proportions were that the distance from stop to nose should not be more than one-third of the measurement from nose to occiput (top of head.) In the first Standard 'the groove' is mentioned, but not in later ones, which is a pity. The groove is the channel between the eyes and down the nose, and it should be slightly chiseled out, helping to give the chiseled appearance of the head; it helps the stop and also prevents any roman-nosed look. A very, very slight dish-faced is far more in character than any convex look about the muzzle. All the bones of the head should be well modeled, showing clearly through the skin. The special characteristic of the Basenji is its wrinkle, which must be fine and profuse. A faint tracing of wrinkles always shows upon the brow, but this is greatly accentuated when the dog is alert and the ears are fully pricked. The wrinkle should not be coarse or heavy as this would hide the fine chiseling of the skull. Side wrinkles are most attractive at the outside edge of the eye, but they must not be exaggerated into dewlap.

Mouth

The mouth must be a scissors bite, with the upper incisors slightly overlapping and fitting closely in front of the lower incisors. There should be no appreciable space between the incisors when the mouth is closed. Undershot mouths used to be a very common fault in the breed, but overshot mouths have always been extremely rare. Dogs with bad mouths should not be shown nor bred from as it is an inherited fault. The lips are very neat and are held closely to the teeth with practically no 'pouch' at the side. Only a small amount of chin should show below the top lips too much lower jaw gives a square undershot look, sometimes called a hammer-jaw, but too little under jaw gives a snipey appearance.

A black nose is greatly desired. The second Standard inserted the sentence 'a pink tinge should not penalise an otherwise first-class specimen,' and this should still be borne in mind.

Ears

These should be in proportion, looking neither large nor small in comparison with the head, though it is doubtful if a Basenji has yet appeared whose ears are too small or too high set. Most important of all is the way the ears are placed, the great necessity being to get the slightly hooded, **very** slightly forward-point, well pricked ear set on top of the head; this is typical of the Basenji and helps to give the breed its smart and unusual appearance, whilst the smaller the space between the ears the better the ear carriage will be. If the ears are large and low-set, this produces the aptly named and unpleasing 'aeroplane-wing' appearance, giving the impression that they are falling off the **side** of the head. This is a most unattractive fault; it ruins type and gives a common mongrelly look, and should be watched for more carefully than it is at present, both for showing and breeding. The ears should be fine textured and very pliant, being small and leathery rather than large and soft. It is usually found that the dog with the correct fine skin and coat has ears of the right texture.

Eyes

A great deal of Basenji expression depends upon the eye. It should be small and obliquely set, with a keen and intelligent, yet gentle, expression. A hard look is incorrect and is usually caused by the eyes being either set too close together or too high in the skull. There is a very fine bone structure round the eye, which is set in a bony cup as thought modeled by a sculptor. The eyes are wide set, allowing for wider vision, an important point in the African bush. They should be dark hazel or dark brown in colour, very dark eyes being especially important with the darker-coloured coats. Round, full, light or staring eyes are most undesirable and quite out of character with the breed.

Neck, Shoulders and Chest

The neck must be strong and reachy, with a graceful curve from the back of the head to the shoulders, accentuating the crest. The head being well placed so as to give a 'lofty' carriage. The shoulder must be well laid back, muscular, but not loaded. The points of the scapulae (shoulder blades) should be fairly close together at the withers, the shoulders gradually increasing in width to the elbows, which should be tucked firmly against the brisket so as to form a straight line with the ribs. When viewed from the front, the elbows should be in line with the ribs and the legs should continue in a straight line to the ground, giving a narrow front. The ideal is to have the forelegs working smoothly close to the ribs but not fouling them. All the lines of the neck, should and legs should flow smoothly and gracefully into each other.

Body

The ribs must be well sprung, but deep and oval rather than barrel-shaped, with the brisket well let down to the elbows. The waist is well defined with a good tuck-up. The back is short and straight. **Length of back should not be confused with length of body.** Back length is the distance between the shoulders and the hip bones; this should be short, especially in the loin, and any length of body should come from the sloping

shoulder and the well-developed quarters. The shoulders should be higher than the hindquarters so as to give a proud appearance with the desired lofty head carriage.

Hindquarters

These must be strong and muscular, with long second thighs, the hocks being well let down and the dog standing well up on them. They should be free from all exaggeration and suited to the quick-turning, untiring work for which the Basenji is built. Therefore there should be no droop or crouch in the quarters; over-angulation must be carefully avoided, but there should be enough bend of stifle to prevent the action from being in any way stilted, and to allow the dog to cover sufficient ground. Far too many Basenjis appear higher in the hindquarters than at the shoulders, which is extremely ugly and is often caused by straight stifles. Like the neck, shoulder and forelegs, the hindquarters, second thighs and hocks should all flow smoothly and gracefully into each other. Cow hocks, sickle hocks, straight or over-angulated stifles are all serious faults.

Legs and Feet

The Basenji is essentially a clean-limbed breed, and the legs whilst strong should be fine. They should be straight with clean, fine bones and **must** be of good length. The Basenji gains its elegance through its long forearm and pastern. Any suggestion of short-leggedness and heavy bone utterly ruins the grace of the breed. There should be sufficient slope to the pastern to give flexibility without weakness, and the thickness of the pastern should not be much narrower than the leg above.

The ideal feet are small, neat and compact, oval in shape, with thick pads and very well-arched toes, the foot being very little wider than the pastern. In a really good foot the nails are short and strong; they seldom need cutting or filing as the dog wears them down by walking on them. Larger and less good feet have longer nails and, if the dog does not walk correctly on its toes, the nails must be filed regularly; this will improve the foot immensely, besides adding to the dog's comfort.

Tail

In the imported stock the tail, almost without exception was a single curl; but, after a few years of selective breeding in England, a double-curl tail was produced. On the expedition to the South Sudan in 1959 a number of native dogs were seen to have the most superbly placed double curls. This is a very attractive feature, though even more important than the curl is that the root of the tail should set very high and be placed right on top of the hindquarters., with the buttock curving out considerably beyond the root of the tail, giving a strong reachy appearance to the hindquarters, as opposed to the weak crouching look given by a tail which is too low set and has no curve of buttock behind it. The tail should lie as closely as possible to one hip or the other; a central curl is not desirable, as it gives a 'tea-pot' handle effect and spoils the outline of the dog. The ideal is a double-curl tail lying well down against one hip, so that only the root of the tail shows from the other side.

(BU note there is a lengthy discussion of color and its history in the breed in the chapter that has been omitted here.)

Coat

In Africa the coat is always short, velvety and very close and there is never any undercoat. In colder climates, and especially during the winter, some Basenjis grow a much heavier coat, with an undercoat, which is shed in the spring and which should remain close and fine during the summer months. It is never as fine as it is with dogs which do not grow undercoats; these are the ones which are usually finer-skinned and keep a fine coat all the year round. The skin is very loose and pliant and can be picked up in folds. A fine skin and a fine coat give a very aristocratic appearance, and have great bearing upon the quality of the ears and wrinkle.

Movement

Its lovely movement is one of the first things noticed in a Basenji, so the necessity for good movement cannot be too strongly emphasised. The action must be straight and free, with the forelegs swinging well forward from the shoulder in a straight line, and the elbows under the body, so that the utmost length and lightness of stride is obtained. The hind legs should follow in line, the hocks being turned neither in nor out. The description 'greatly resembling a racehorse trotting full out' cannot be improved upon. A Basenji with poor, sloppy or unsound movement should be very heavily penalized and should remain unplaced in the show ring.

Faults

Faults are as stated in the 1965 standard of the breed:

“Coarse, domed or peaked skull. Muzzle too long or too broad. Cheekiness. Mouth overshot or undershot. Round or light eyes. Ears too low set or too large. Wide chest. Barrel ribs. Shelly brisket. Short in the leg. Out at the elbows. Toe-ing in. Heavy bone. Cock hocks. Low-set or straight tail. Long or heavy coat. Creams, sables, or any other colours than those defined in the “color” paragraph should be heavily penalized.”

Strangely enough, straight stifles are not mentioned in the “Faults” paragraph, and should certainly be included.