

Judging the Basenji

Doreen Duffin

*The Basenji, May and June 1984 started on page 16
Some points brought up-to-date in 2010*

Doreen Duffin is an Australian breeder and judge. She prepared the following detailed description and explanation of the Basenji standard to be used at Judging Seminars. The Australian standard does vary slightly from the American standard but the differences are generally not significant. It should be pointed out that this is Doreen Duffin's work and does not have the official sanction of any breed club. We hope newcomers, judges and everyone will find it useful and interesting.

The Basenji is a very ancient breed which dates back to the days of the Pharaohs. He is both a scenthound and a sighthound and is now used as a hunting dog by the natives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in the Southern Sudan primarily for flushing game. He will also kill. He must have the conformation and movement to enable him to do the job for which he was bred.

Characteristics

The Basenji does not bark but is certainly not mute. It is unlikely that you will be able to tell if he can or cannot bark, but if he emits a series of barks while in the ring, it will give you something to think about when considering the placings! When happy, he will yodel – the commencement of which is not to be confused with aggression. Basenjies are well known for not particularly liking their own breed and will sometimes have a growl at unfamiliar Basenjies, but any display of bad temper towards a judge should be heavily penalized. He is a remarkably clean dog, hates being dirty, and possesses no "doggy" odour. The most important characteristics are his wrinkled forehead, his tightly curled tail lying over either thigh, and his gait. I shall elaborate on these features further on.

General Appearance

The general appearance of the Basenji is a small, lightly built dog being high on the leg compared with the length. While legginess and showing plenty of daylight is considered a fault in most breeds, it is a most important attribute in a Basenji helping to give the impression of gazelle-like grace and elegance. High on leg compared to his length does not mean that he has to be taller than he is long. As you are no doubt aware, any dog like that would be incapable of good long reaching, ground covering stride. The previous (Australian) Standard, which was amended in 1965, had the words "*giving the appearance of being high on leg compared with length*", and I feel it is a pity that these words were altered. He has more length of leg than body depth. The Basenji is basically a square dog measuring ideally 17" at the withers for a dog and 16" for a bitch. An

inch either way is not to penalize an otherwise well-balanced specimen. It is better to have a dog which is slightly over the height standard, providing he is in no way course nor lacking in depth of brisket and also possesses the correct length of leg, especially in the forearm, than to have a standard size, heavy dog, short on leg, giving a corgi-like appearance, totally out of keeping with the desired resemblance to the gazelle. Coarseness is completely taboo in the Basenji. His wrinkled head must be proudly carried on a neck of good length and the whole demeanour should be alert and interested. The tail must be high set and curled over to either side of the back. The legs must be long, fine and straight with feet small, neat and compact with thick pads. It is most important that the Basenji be balanced.

Head and Skull

The skull is flat, well-chiselled and of medium width. It is 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. The distance from the top of the head to the stop is slightly more than from the stop to the tip of the nose. All the bones of the head should be well modelled, showing clearly through the skin, and he is definitely not to be cheeky. The side lines of the skull taper gradually towards the mouth giving a clean-cheeked appearance. We do not want a muzzle too short, which, because of the curvature of the zygomatic arch, usually goes with cheekiness and a broad head. Again, if the head is too broad you will often find the dog lacking wrinkle, and remember the wrinkle is only present when the ears are pricked. A faint tracing should show upon the brow when the dog is relaxed, but it is greatly enhanced when the dog is alert and interested. Please do endeavour to alert the dog at least once during judging, but do not expect him to be alert the whole time in the ring. A Basenji is a very intelligent animal, and particularly when older and accustomed to the show ring, gets rather bored. He would rather be home lazing in the sun or out hunting. Wrinkle is a very important characteristic of the breed and without it the head has lost Basenji type. We don't want a coarse or heavy wrinkle like a bloodhound, as this would hide the fine chiselling. Side wrinkles are most attractive and desirable at the outside edge of the eye, but they must not be exaggerated into dewlap. Wrinkles are not as noticeable in tri colours or black and whites, don't just say "he has a black head; it is not easy to see". Check carefully, as he may not have any wrinkle anyway! Lack of wrinkle is not typical of the breed and should be penalized accordingly. The stop on a Basenji's head is only slight. If there is too little or no stop, it can give the head a bull terrier-ish expression. If there is too much stop, it gives a foreign appearance to the head and he could end up looking like a Finnish spitz.

A black nose is greatly desired. Often during winter, a nose will develop a pinkish tinge but this should not be unduly penalized. While the leather of the nose should be black, there will often be pink pigmentation in the skin above or on the sides of the leather. This is often noticeable if the dog has a white muzzle and as it is skin pigmentation and not coat pigmentation, should not be penalized.

The mouth must be a scissors bite and teeth should be even. The lips are very neat and held closely to the teeth with no flews. A small amount of strong under jaw shows as he is a hunting dog and, for the size of him, has an extremely strong mouth. It has been suggested that a Basenjis should have a foxy head. The Welsh corgi standard says "Head to be foxy in shape and appearance" and we don't want a Basenji to have a corgi-like head. If you can visualize a fox's head, that also is not what we require in a Basenji. There is no reference to fox-like in the Basenji standard.

The ears help to give the head the desired expression. A small, pointed, erect and slightly hooded ear of fine texture is required. The ears should be well set forward on the top of the head with the tips nearer to the centre of the skull than the outside edge. It is said that the Basenji with ears too small has not been born yet. Large, low set, aeroplane ears hanging off the side of the head are foreign to the breed and completely ruin type. The small, slightly hooded, very slightly pointing, well-pricked ear set on top of the head is typical of the Basenji and helps to give the breed its smart appearance. Once again, if the head is too broad and cheeky, you will usually find the ear large, wide set and heavy. They should be fine textured, very pliant and very mobile. Usually if the dog has the correct fine skin and coat, he will have ears of the correct texture. Once again, do not expect the Basenji to be alert in the ring the whole time. As long as he has pricked his ears for long enough to enable you to see his expression that should be sufficient. One other tip: many Basenjies don't feel at ease when tabled; therefore will not always be as alert. It is an easy matter to alert him for a second when he has returned from being gaited.

A great deal of Basenji expression depends on the eye. It should be small, and obliquely set with a kind, intelligent, yet gentle expression. The eyes should have dark or black rims and be dark hazel or dark brown in colour, almond shaped and set fairly well apart. Large, round, light or staring eyes are most undesirable and quite out of character with the breed.

Note: Ears and eyes are a major contributing factor to the Basenji expression along with the wrinkle and shape of the head.

Neck

The neck must be strong and of good length with a graceful curve from the back of the head to the shoulders accentuating the crest. This crest is usually more noticeable in dogs than bitches. The head should be well placed so as to have a "lofty" carriage, and on no account should he be ewe necked. A short, stuffy neck detracts from the desired elegance. The neck is slightly full at the base of the throat and flows nicely into well laid back shoulders. He does not need an overlong neck, but must be balanced. There is no doubt the length of neck helps to give elegance and gazelle-like grace.

Front

The shoulders must be well laid back, muscular but not loaded and the points of the scapulae must be fairly close at the withers, but not too close thus preventing the head from being lowered to the ground. The humerus or upper arm should be approximately the same length as the scapulae to give the dog good front reach. Elbows should be firmly tucked 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. The entire front, which takes in the legs and chest, should appear of medium width when viewed from the front (the narrow front was changed in the standard to medium in 1994) but should not be too narrow between the legs. Three or four fingers' width is a good guide. One should get a picture of an inverted "U" between the front legs and not an inverted "V". Only a slight forechest in front of the point of shoulder is required as a heavy, protruding "pigeon chested" front is completely wrong and detracts from the desired grace and elegance of this breed.

The legs, while strong and straight, must be finely boned. It is very important that the forearms must be very long which again adds to the dog's elegance and gazelle-like grace. Any suggestion of heavy bone and short leggedness utterly ruins the grace of the breed. There should be sufficient slope to the pastern, which is of good length, to give flexibility without weakness and

the thickness of the pastern should just be slightly more tapered than the leg above. Bone in the dog should have slightly more substance than in bitches – if it is too fine in the dog you will usually find he is light all over and too “bitchy” looking.

Feet

The feet should be small, narrow, neat and compact, oval in shape with thick pads and very well arched toes. Nails should be short and strong. Dew claws are usually removed but this is not mandatory. A hare foot, cat foot, or big, round feet are undesirable – having in mind the breed’s purpose as a hunter.

Body

The brisket is let down to the elbow, and the ribs are well sprung, deep and oval (not barrel shaped nor slab sided) to allow the elbow free movement for his far reaching stride, and the deep brisket runs up into a definite waist, i.e. a good tuck up. The body is balanced with a short, level back. Back length is the distance from the withers to the hip bones, and, while the distance from the withers to the last rib should not be too short thus depriving the dog of heart and lung room, the length of loin should be short to give the overall impression of a short back. Again, remembering that the Basenji is a hunting dog which must be capable of twisting and turning suddenly, the loin should not be too short as to hinder him in this function, nor too long to show slackness and weakness. Any length of body should come from the sloping shoulder and well developed hindquarters. The Basenji is basically a square dog, i.e. the distance from the front of the sternum (breast bone) to the point of the buttocks (pelvis) should not exceed the height at the withers.

Hindquarters

These must be strong and muscular, free from droop or crouch, with long second thighs and hocks well let down. The hocks should turn neither in nor out. Stifles are moderately bent and over-angulated and straight stifles are to be avoided. There should be enough turn of stifle to prevent action from being in anyway stilted and to allow the dog to cover the ground with good drive. A short second thigh and straight stifles causes the hind legs to act as props rather than instruments of propulsion. It is important that the dog has width and strength across the upper and second thighs. Musculation should appear both inside and outside the thigh, so feel for it. Straight stifles can often make the dog appear higher in the hind quarters than at the shoulders which is extremely ugly. Another cause of this can be if the dog is too short in the forearm. Remember, the topline should be level. Cow hocks, open hocks and sickle hocks should, of course, be strictly penalized.

Tail

A well set, well curled tail is another most attractive feature of the Basenji. More important than the amount of curl is that the root of the tail should be set very high and 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. This is referred to as the “shelf” by Basenjis-ites. The tail curls forward and down from the root, to lie as closely as possible to either side of the hip. It doesn’t matter which side but only the root of the tail should show from the other side. The curl can be either a single or a double curl and, if it is a double curl, it will naturally be tighter than the single curl. The set-on of the tail is more important than a double curl. A tail which is carried along

the centre of the croup is not desirable as it gives a “tea pot handle” effect and spoils the outline of the dog. Occasionally, we will get a dog with a tail that is too low set. The topline falls away to the croup, the tail itself, even if well curled, tends to stand away from the thigh. This is not attractive and because the topline is not level to the tail, should be penalized to the degree of its importance. It is most important, however, to see the set of tail when the dog is on the move. Sometimes if he is slightly upset, he will hold his tail away from his back, but this should settle down when in motion. Never uncurl a Basenji’s tail when examining him, as some tails do have kinks in the bone due to the tight curl and it can be painful and upsetting to the dog if uncurled or handled roughly. If you wish to see the set-on, just lift the tail gently, and particularly look when the dog is in motion.

Gait

To see that “swift, long, tireless, swinging stride” is a joy to behold, but, unfortunately, not seen often enough. The Basenji is basically a trotting dog, but they are capable of short bursts of speed, and many are capable of a double suspension gallop with all four feet off the ground at once over short distances. Their working gait is an effortless trot and they must expend only a minimal amount of energy, as in their natural habitat they are sometimes required to hunt all day – without collapsing. The old Standard, revised in 1965, had the phrase “resembling a racehorse trotting full out”, and I think it is a pity those words were dropped. The normal gait you should see in the show ring is the trot which should be effortless, tireless and far reaching with good rear drive. Like most taller breeds, he will tend to single track as he increases speed. Any toeing in, pounding, padding or swinging of the legs is a fault and should be penalized. A hackney gait, which sometimes is seen, looks attractive, but is definitely wrong for a Basenji. Little “tiddely”, stilted steps are also very wrong. The dog that takes two steps to another’s one will exhaust himself after a few hours of hunting. So always move a class around the ring to observe side movement, the length of stride, rear drive, smooth, level topline and effortless, tireless gait.

Coat

The ideal is short, sleek and close, very fine and should appear velvety to the touch. This is self explanatory. Scars should not be penalized. The skin is very pliant and can be felt easily by gently lifting the skin on the back of the dog. During winter the majority, especially those that are not house dogs, grow an undercoat and it is up to you, as the judge, to decide the placings when confronted with out-of-coat Basenjies. It is nature’s way of protecting them as they are hot weather dogs and they do feel the cold. It is sometimes rather useless to show Basenjies when it is extremely cold especially in the wind, as they will hunch up with a hunched back that would put an Italian greyhound to shame.

Color

(Australian standard: Pure bright red, or pure black, or black and tan, all with white feet, chest and tail tips. White legs, white blaze and white collar optional. American standard: Chestnut red (the deeper the better) or pure black, or black and tan, all with white feet, chest and tail tip. White legs, white blaze and white collar optional. The standards as they were in 1984.) **Please note that brindle has now been added to the standard and a brief description has been added.**

They come in three colours – pure bright red, black and tan, and black – all with white feet, white chest and white tip on tail. The desired red is a bright orange red but that is rarely seen now. However, the bright chestnut red is correct and far more attractive than the light red, sandy and brown shades, which are permissible but not preferred. Black should be jet black. Tri-colours usually have tan “melon” pips over the eyes, tan cheeks, a fringe of tan where the black joins the

white on the legs and tan around the vent. There should be no intermingling of the different coloured hairs of the body. We also have a black/tan and white colour often referred to as a recessive black and white, or a “Fula” black. This is a tri-colour without “melon” pips over the eyes or tan on the cheeks and often has only tan hairs inside the ears and a slight fringe down the back of the thighs. This is a permitted colour and not to be penalized, providing the black coat on the boat is not intermingled with tan or white hairs. However, you won’t see many of that colour in the ring. Intermingling of hairs on either the red, black or tri-coloured bodies giving a sabling effect is a fault and should be penalized accordingly. (Brindle is a red background with black stripes. The more clearly defined the stripes, the better.)

The white called for in the standard is “feet, chest and tail tips. White legs, white blaze and white collar optional.” Occasionally you may find one with white on only two or three toes. What constitutes the foot? Is it the whole of the part that touches the ground? I personally believe it is the whole foot, but when judging an exhibit like that, remember that it is just one part of the standard and what degree of importance does one attach to it? Part of the whole of the front legs can be white but if one leg is half white and the other is fully white, take a careful look at the movement as it can give an optical illusion as if one leg could be swinging out, when in fact, it isn’t. Although the standard refers to white legs, common sense must prevail where the hind legs are concerned and the white is generally acceptable to around the hock. More white than this would look unusual and would spoil the look of the dog. With regards to the white blaze: It is now quite common and acceptable that the white continues down and around the muzzle and in some cases a fine white joins the blaze over the skull to the collar. But wide white patches going right over the skull or blazes which include part or all of the eyes are not desirable and ruin expression. White collar means white neck markings whether they are full wide or narrow collar, or half collar. There has sometimes been controversy as to where the white collar should end, but I feel that anywhere behind the shoulders is not a collar, but a shawl; therefore it should end where the neck joins the shoulders. Since the early days, it has been accepted that the white collars can be joined to the white chest, to the white on the legs, and to a white underbelly that is not mentioned in the standard. I cannot recall ever having seen Basenjis without a white underbelly, and white there is quite accepted as part of a Basenji. The white is often carried through to form a thin line along the inside of the thighs and this is quite acceptable as long as it is just a thin line. White markings in the red or black of the overall body are not permitted and are miss-markings. It is most important that white markings on all parts of the body should be pure white with no ticking of red and black hairs. This is a fault, but should not be confused with spots of pigmentation on the skin itself, which many Basenjis, particularly those with very fine coats, have, and is quite permissible.

Summing Up

You will notice that I have stressed the need for grace and elegance. I cannot stress enough the need for an elegant, finely boned, aristocratic, well-balanced dog with gazelle like grace that can move with a swift, long, tireless, swinging stride. He should have a fine head with profuse wrinkle, small high-set ears, crested neck of good length, long forearms with small well-padded feet, well-laid back shoulders, deep brisket, short, level back, well tucked-up at the loins, strong, muscular hindquarters and a tightly curled tail over either thigh. If you can find that together with the correct coat and colour, then you should have a good Basenji.

Doreen and Ron Duffin, Makuba Basenjis, bred from 1970 through 2004. Doreen completed her qualifications in Australia as an all-breed judge in 2008.

Letter appearing in The Mailbox, *The Basenji*, July 1984

Norm and Mae Wallace, Tinas Comas Basenjies from the late 1950s into the 1970s, both became AKC judges.

Dear Jon and Susan,

It has been a long time since my last "letter to the editor" but I was so pleased to read Doreen Duffin's "*Judging the Basenji*" that it became a "must".

I'm sure you recall that before, during, and after my term as BCOA President and under the chairmanship of George Gilkey, breeder of the second litter registered in the USA, Sheila Anderson, Margaret Robertson, Bob Mankey and others worked on a "Clarification of the Standard" towards a new or revised standard. It never became a fact since the one vote margin in favor of the "slightly" revised proposal we presented was too small to suit the AKC – 1 or 2 votes, as I recall.

I believe the whole article presented to date (Doreen's article originally appeared in two parts, coat, color and summary followed a month later) warrants considerable study, review and UNDERSTANDING on the part of all Basenji breeders and judges. The portion that really earned my admiration is the section on "Tail" and its very strong stress on "set", "lie" and "placement" in comparison to "curl" and "with buttock curving out considerably beyond the root of the tail". NEVER HAS ANYONE, IN MY HEARING OR TO MY KNOWLEDGE, SAID IT SO WELL on the "Tail" subject. Many drawings were made and pictures were taken but they would not have been necessary had "Duffin" or her remarks been handy. Mae and I bred many, many champions under Tinas Coma prefix but only a few, coming down from the great Glenairley Black Munia, granddaughter of Wau and strictly "of the Congo", carried the attributes called for regarding tail as set out in this article. None were perfection, of course, not in twenty-five years as breeder-judges have we seen perfection in this regard. It is obvious that the breeders have not been trying for perfection in this department. The tail is one of the areas that I always stress along with proper size, type and movement when I am judging. I do not believe Mae lays quite as much stress in this area as I do but I'll have to leave THAT for her own statement. I do know that she was very impressed with the contents and thoughts of this article.

In recent years, Mae and I, individually and as judges of many breeds, have received letters from individual breed clubs, usually cleared through the American Kennel Club (we only consider them if they are from the national breed club) setting out some one area of judging in which the national breed club has asked our help. An example, of this was the Borzoi Club's request that we "count teeth" and penalize accordingly. VERY, VERY SHORTLY MISSING TEETH WERE RARELY A FACTOR IN OUR DECISIONS AS THERE WERE NO MORE MISSING TEETH. I recommend that the BCOA SEND A COPY OF THE "TAIL" paragraph of this article, along with their own request, to every Basenji judge, every hound group judge, and every best in show judge in the United States and maybe we can get the Basenji Club of Canada people to do the same thing.

Are our members concerned because of the few group placements and best in show placements, comparatively, in the U.S. and Canada? THEY SHOULD BE! Comparatively few specimen are worthy of such awards but sometimes definite superiority, of import to the judge, put them up there. THERE SHOULD BE MORE BUT THAT WILL DEPEND ON BREEDERS AND THEIR SELECTION EFFORTS. "GOOD" SHOULD NOT BE BRED TO "GOOD". THE BREED DESERVES BETTER THAN THAT. A "good" Basenji is a pet. Why not breed only the very best and diminish the dog pound population? Those with bad tail set and carriage should be graded no better than "good" and should not be shown!

Best to all, Norm Wallace