

The Head and Expression of the Pyrenean Mountain Dog

By Lavina Diamanti

So often we hear the comment to justify a dog with an inferior head type “but it doesn’t run on its head”. And that is a true statement, as soundness and movement are important in all breeds, but some breeds place a greater value on correct head than others. This is the case with the Pyrenean Mountain Dog, also known as the Great Pyrenees or, in it’s country of origin, Le Grand Chien de Montagne, which translates to The Great Mountain Dog of the Pyrenees.

In its native France, the first standard for the breed (published in 1927) placed much emphasis on the head, with one third of the wording describing the head, and of the faults, 13 of the 18 related to the head. This emphasis has continued to the current standard adopted in 1970. The American Standard Visualization and Commentary devotes 7 pages to the head as compared with 5 pages for the Neck, Topline & Body. I give you this information to give you some indication as to the degree of emphasis given to the description of the correct head where the standard has been expanded and interpreted.

It is not my intention here to duplicate the standards that have already been written. I will only touch on the basic points. What I want is to impress on you the importance of the correct head and expression. The Pyrenean is one of several big, white livestock guardian dogs, which originate from Europe. It is the head and expression that sets the Pyrenean apart from the others.

When I purchased my first Pyrenean I read much about the breed, its history and origins. And so, I also read much about the Pyrenean Expression. When I realised that the dog I had purchased had matured into a specimen with a lovely head who possessed the Pyrenean Expression, I have to admit, the first time I saw that look sent a shiver down my spine and brought tears to my eyes. You see, not all Pyreneans have that expression, but once you have seen it, you will never forget it.

The key to the true Pyrenean expression is the correct head. It is an elegant, moulded wedge with smooth, soft transitions, no apparent stop and a slightly rounded crown. It is not coarse, nor heavy. The eyes are almond shaped, dark brown, with close fitting lids. The ears are set on level with the eye and are fairly small and triangular. The most common faults seen are drooping or round eyes, prominent eyebrows, loose pendulous lips, high ear set, and flat skull.

So how do you describe the Pyrenean Expression? It is a regal, far-away, almost dreamy look. Sometimes you feel the dog is almost looking through you. Perhaps Bernard Senac-Lagrange, founder of the original Pyrenees club, best describes this “Only the true breed possesses this bewitching, almost indefinable expression in the eyes, both distant and caressing, contemplative and just a little sad. As you look in these eyes, the immense moral value of the breed pierces your soul.”

Without the correct head and expression, the dog before you is just another big white dog.