

# Afghan Hound Head Carriage

Terry Wilcox

I want to discuss an important aspect for correct Afghan Hound gait, being “Natural Head Carriage”. Any breed can be taught to carry their heads in an artificial manner, many show dogs do. Afghan head carriage is derived from a totally different origin and purpose, head carriage is inherent and should not need to be held up by a lead.

The first Afghan standard was written in Colonial India, modelled on Zardin, circa 1906. Photographs of Zardin demonstrate his natural head carriage. Anglicised breed standards are all based on Zardin: all of which mention the characteristic “Proud Head Carriage”.

It was American author, breed enthusiast and owner, Connie Miller, who originally coined the term “reconnaissance trot”, and provided a superior explanation of this unique characteristic and significant survival trait. She provided a plausible reason for what has evolved naturally, positing it as an “over the horizon surveillance” technique for spotting potential prey.

Considerable emphasis needs to be placed on “Head Carriage”. This unique and “Breed Hallmark” characteristic is intrinsically tied to the breed’s evolution, structure and demeanour, and is essential for the correct execution of the “Classic smooth, springy gait”, another “Breed Hallmark”.

Few if any, Breed Specialist Judges currently test for “natural head carriage”. Sadly many judges accept the dictates of handlers/exhibitors. Many exhibits, are “strung up” to such an extent they take on the appearance of some breed where the front feet are no longer instrumental in the guidance of the gait. Ask these exhibitors to show on a true loose

lead, and then observe the response.

By loose, I define that the lead must be placed low on the neck or wither. This requires a mutual respect and trust, understanding and training, between the exhibitor and their charge. In stark contrast, many handlers locate a choker flush and tight under the chin, on the opposite side to the handler. (This is also termed the double choke effect) Any neck lead control is itself a contradiction in terms, for the King of dogs. After all this is the breed where its natural demeanour, attitude and proud head carriage is what sets the breed apart from all other canine species.

**Lead control is best explained by observing the action of the tail.**

The tail response is a straight forward matter when an exhibit is shown on a loose lead. What should be observed is the following: The tail should unfurl with each and every stride.

This unfurling is a natural consequence of the (load) impact of the front limb as it makes contact with the ground, and as the forequarter assembly absorbs the load (shock) and transmits this impact along the torso and spine, finally terminating in the coccygeal (tail) vertebrae.

This unfurling is absent when exhibits are strung up. In fact the exhibit which is strung up is denied the opportunity to correctly negotiate ground impact in a normal manner. This is particularly the case when exhibits are gaited inappropriately fast, whereby the exhibit needs to over step, with the full load bearing joints absorbing the impact in an asymmetric (and oblique) manner.

This obviates unbalanced wear

on the forequarter joints, notably afflicting the elbows and shoulders. Serious, irreversable damage is commonly observed in young exhibits. The result is most likely permanent orthopaedic damage and inevitable chronic lameness in later life

Dogs do not over step naturally, unless they are grossly unbalanced

When an Afghan gallops, its tail actually recoils at the full extension stage. In contrast, it unfurls in the trotting gait.

The tail tells much about the dog’s demeanour, especially when their tails are “bolt upright”, with little or no movement. It is normal for the tail to sway slightly to the opposite side to the reaching front limbs. The tail’s ring should still be seen to slightly unfurl.

The dogs whose tails fail this test, requires your critical appraisal. Take the time to observe the tail carriage of Afghans at some large events this will help develop a more considered critical appreciation of this important indicator for balanced locomotion.

**Head Carriage.**

Correct head carriage is a “Primary Hallmark” of the breed. I propose that a maximum of 10% of Afghan exhibits still present natural head carriage.

There is no doubt that many dogs given half a chance or encouraged early in lead training would be able to gait, expressing natural head carriage. Unfortunately many Afghan Hound pups are not afforded this opportunity. (Being strung up like toy poodles from the start)

Many of today’s show/conformation Afghans have been sadly reduced to



being presented like any other show dog. Is this truly what judges with a moral imperative really admire?

### **What has happened to this breed over the last few decades?**

Digital technology allows us to compare exhibits of yesteryear with those of today. The elevation in popularity, and exponential rise in numbers during the nineteen sixties and seventies facilitated the breed's burgeoning, gene pool, this giving rise to the full potential of the enormous genetic diversity within the breed. This explosion in numbers produced some amazing individuals.

Film and video from yesteryear, whilst lacking the clarity of contemporary media, remain an invaluable resource for comparison. (A small sample has been provided). Note how these dogs didn't need to be strung up.

### **Head and Neck Carriage Structure**

There are no discernable differences from other Sight Hound structure regarding the head carriage, other than that observed with the best exponents of this breed. These individuals have well developed cervical musculature with well arched necks. The uncanny ability of the Afghan to provide high head carriage, whilst promulgating the full flying trot still remains an enigma.

### **Natural Head carriage and the Flying Trot.**

Definition of the Flying trot : "An accelerated, four step trot where all feet are off ground momentarily". All canine breeds can execute this gait to some degree or other. In the case of the Afghan Hound, the elevated or air borne segment of each stride can vary from 30% to 50% of each cycle. The greater the air borne duration, the faster the speed, the greater the degree of synchronicity, and coordination required by the individual, however often increased

speed leads to the detriment to the smooth springy effect. The Afghan's square/compact conformation and long limbed angular structure renders this gait all the more remarkable, and defies conventional gait orthodoxy. Correct high head carriage is essential for the effective execution. This trot form can vary from the slow trot to the highly energetic flying trot

On a comparative basis the Afghan Hound's gait is unique and very different from all the other sight hound cousins. The Afghan's gait could be deemed flamboyant even exaggerated due to its compact body and leggy angular structure. Nature has evolved this distinct gait which is in its self, efficient for its own specifications, though compensational when compared to the ultra efficient orthodox gaits.

The breed's unusually large front feet may also provide a further function to the gait. These large, weighty feet and pasterns might be employed, not only in providing a broad footprint for traversing snow or sandy terrain, but also permits the dog to extend the reach stroke through momentum. As the weight of the forearm (ante brachium) is thrust forward. This throwing forward anterior action can engender an impression of a floating gait. Now compare the unusually large feet and the refined skull with other Sight Hound breeds (another interesting "Hallmark" of the Afghan).

### **How do we tell if an Afghan Hound has good movement?**

The human eye can discern movement at around one tenth of a second, or 100 milliseconds. The Afghan pastern lift generates the smooth springy impression, and takes around 5 milli-seconds to occur. Consequently, this fine detail is only detectable and accurately measured with high speed video cameras

The pastern lift ranges in height and distance, with its degree and measurement determined by gait

velocity. Even when the individual is over stepping or crabbing, pastern lift is still achieved, though not to the same degree nor as smoothly.

### **Visual Assessment for Correct Gait.**

Observe the footage provided and in particular: the interchange pattern of the front and hind feet as they traverse. The fore foot must lift whilst the hind foot must extend directly under the fore foot. Over stepping occurs when the hind foot obscures the fore foot. If such over stepping occurs on the opposite side to the fore foot, the opposite hind foot will slide behind the front foot whilst still on the ground.

Next, the front reach and rear drive should terminate their actions simultaneously, and should achieve a similar reach height. If the forequarter has fully extended and commences its return to the ground whilst the rear drive continues in the drive swing, the dogs gait is unbalanced. Some judges mistakenly refer to this imbalance as a powerful rear kick action. This accentuated pendulous action should be termed "Wind Kicking". This is wasteful and unbalanced gait, this results from a lack of inherent synchronicity and co ordination often seen when exhibits are being dragged along at velocities the exhibit is unable to achieve naturally. Furthermore the exhibit will be seen to be crabbing badly, the head will need to be held up. The tail will show the exhibit to be distressed. Judges whom reward such action lack the basics in Afghan locomotion.

The topline ought to remain level whilst the exhibit is trotting, with the topline rising and falling smoothly and rhythmically, with each and every stride.

This rise ultimately reaches its highest point midway during each reach stride. The topline is at its lowest position when either fore limb is in the vertical position.



## Head Position during the Trot

Another feature of head carriage is that the head remains relatively static through the trot cycle. The top of the muzzle is, ideally, horizontal. The neck can be carried from a 65 degree to a 90 degree angle from the ground. This depends largely on the demeanor, interaction and engagement of the Hound.

Interestingly, high speed, slow motion cameras, fail to detect any head movement during the trot. The head remains horizontal, even as the velocity increases, although the neck may lower slightly. Afghans that are 'strung up' may well direct their heads downwards (colloquially known as "ground seekers") this carriage will have the effect of shortening the forequarter reach.

I contend that an Afghan Hound that carries its head high naturally, has a smooth springy gait, stands balanced and evenly on its large fore and hind feet, confronts the world with its natural demeanor, is a sight of awe, the antithesis and envy of any other show breeds.

The Afghan's very nature makes it the ultimate show dog.

## Afghan Hound Breed Hallmark Features

- 1 : Coat Pattern.
- 2 : Ringed Tail, Low Tail Set and Flat Croup.
- 3 : Smooth Springy Gait.
- 4 : High or Proud Head Carriage.
- 5 : Unusually Large Feet / Refined Sculpted Skull/Punishing Jaw.
- 6 : Eastern / Oriental Expression/ Certain Keen Fierceness
- 7 : Agility and Dexterity
- 8 : Stamina and Endurance.
- 9 : Oriental Scented Hound.

All purebred dogs are in a constant state of evolutionary flux. However, no other breed has evolved as many different unique physical breed characteristics as the Afghan Hound.

The World's fascination with the Afghan's continuously growing silky coat, has been well exploited and developed to where the coat is now a groomer's delight.

The evolutionary purpose of breed's ringed tail is not understood and often difficult to breed predictively.

The smooth springy gait is seldom appreciated as is the high head carriage which is so essential for correct Afghan gait. The Afghan's

unusually large feet are seldom checked.

Cherish the differences: Alfred Mendel

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# Publications from the AHA

"So You Are Thinking of Owning an Afghan Hound" – designed for anyone embarking on ownership of their first Afghan and also as a brief reference for all owners. Lavishly illustrated and very readable this booklet contains further reading and contact references. It draws on the original AHA advice leaflets and owes a debt of thanks to the AHCA for the inclusion of some of their excellent material. Cost £2.00

"The Illustrated Afghan Hound Breed Standard" – has been produced with the help of the Breed Council and is now the most up-to-date version of the UK standard with some additional new and improved illustrations. Cost £1.00

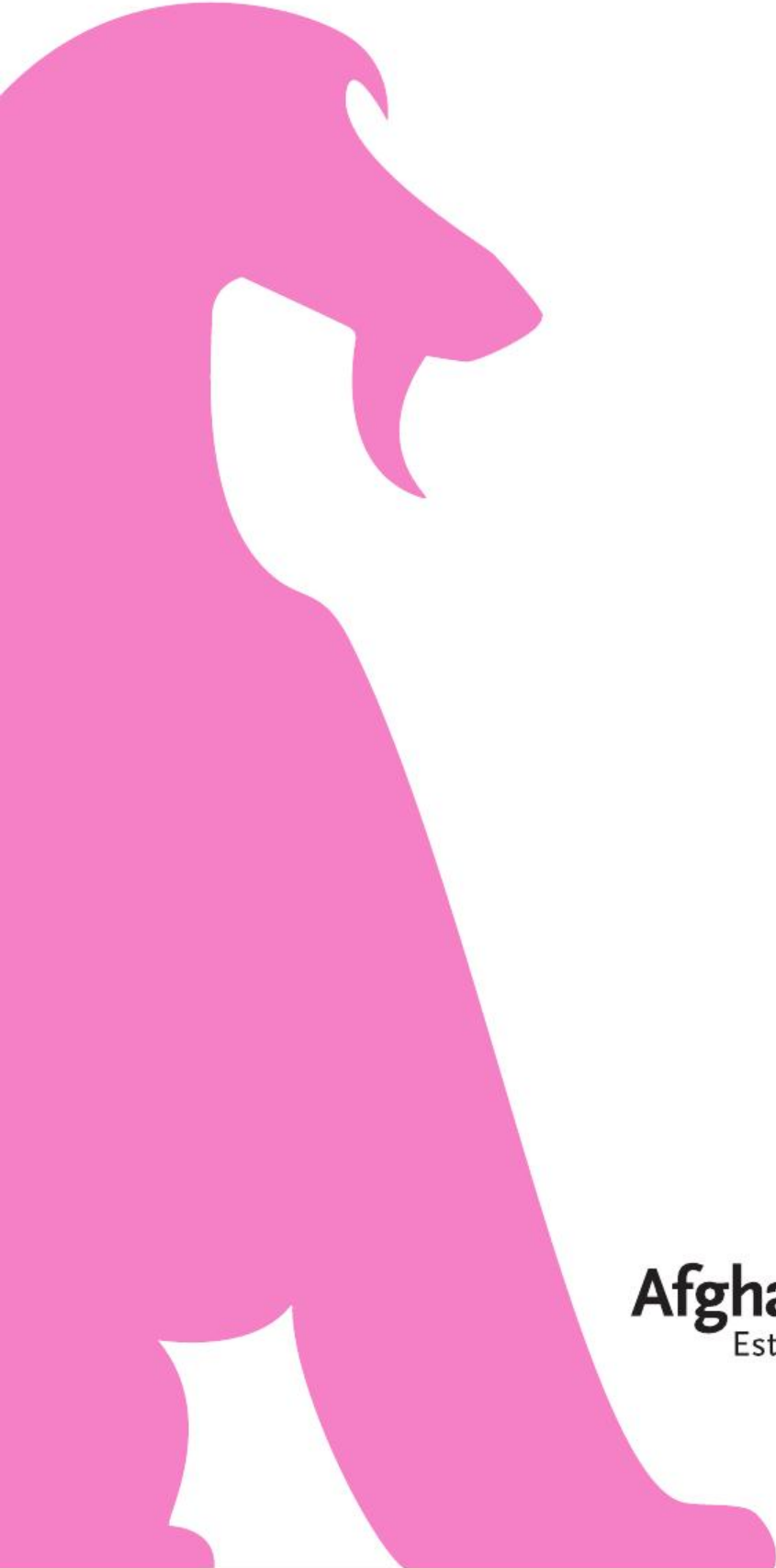
Both booklets are available on request from the AHA to individual owners, breeders, clubs and associations and indeed to anyone with an interest in this outstanding breed. Prices are £2.00 for "So You Are Thinking



# Think Afghan

£7 or complimentary to members.

## 2015



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