



• BREED PRIORITIES •

BASENJI

BY NIKKI RIGGSBEE

Basenjis are an ancient breed from central Africa, based on DNA, cave art, and pyramid art. When discovered by Europeans, they were described as a small bark-less dog, with short yellow-tan hair, large erect ears, and a short, curled tail. The Basenji is still used in central Africa as a hunting dog.

Basenjis were imported to England and later to the United States and were officially recognized by AKC in 1944. In the late 1980s and early '90s, several American Basenji breeders traveled to central Africa and brought home some Basenjis as part of the African Stock Project to introduce new dogs. Not many breeds have the opportunity to do that – to return and have access to foundation stock working at original jobs.

This article is not intended to promote fault or part judging. Nor is it to imply that any characteristic called for in the standard is unimportant. Judging, and breeding, is about prioritizing and about what the judge or breeder will forgive. Discussing priorities can help in learning how to better evaluate a breed.

Questions, Comments, or Concerns? Contact AKC Judge Ms. Nikki Riggsbee at this email address: Nriggsbee@aol.com

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We invited nineteen Basenji breeder-judges to take a survey on their breed's priorities, and nineteen agreed to participate. Eleven completed surveys were received. More input would have been good, but typically relative priorities stay fairly consistent with ten to fifteen participants.

The Basenji survey results didn't show consistent agreement on how important features were. Many virtues and faults were ranked differently on different surveys. Many had skewed distributions, with one group ranking a feature much more important or serious than another group did. Still, the ranked lists had the priorities in approximately the same sequence as I have heard from breed mentors.

The participating breeder-judges averaged nearly thirty-six years involvement in the breed and more than eleven years judging the breed. Half have judged their national specialty, and all have judged Basenji specialties.

Basenji Virtues

The survey included a list of breed characteristics from the Basenji AKC standard for the breeder-judges to prioritize by their importance when evaluating their breed. Below is the list in sequence by the average ranks, with one being the most important.

1. Wrinkles on forehead fine and profuse
2. Short back
3. Ears small, erect, slightly hooded, fine texture, set well forward
4. Back level
5. (tie) Swift, effortless gait (resembling a racehorse trotting full out)
5. (tie) Neck of good length, well crested
7. Tail set high and well curled
8. (tie) 17" height and from front of chest to point of buttocks for dogs
8. (tie) High on leg compared to length
10. Eyes dark hazel to dark brown, almond shaped, obliquely set
11. Muzzle shorter than skull
12. Shoulders moderately laid back
13. Coming and going, converging toward the centerline under the body
14. Elbows tucked firmly against brisket
15. Lightly built
16. Black nose

Nine breeder-judges, the largest majority, agreed on "Short back" (2nd) and "Black nose" (16th). Seven concurred on "Lightly built" (15th). The smallest majority similarly valued "Wrinkles on forehead fine and profuse" (1st), "Back level" (4th), "Shoulders moderately laid back" (12th), and "Elbows tucked firmly against brisket" (14th). "Back level" (4th) was midpoint or below for the greater number, but five had it from 3–6, improving its average.

Several virtues had split results with five agreeing. Among

those were "Ears small, erect, slightly hooded, fine texture, set well forward" (3rd), "Swift, effortless gait (resembling a racehorse trotting full out)" (tied at 5th), "Neck of good length, well crested" (tied at 5th), "Eyes dark hazel to dark brown, almond shaped, obliquely set" (10th), and "Muzzle shorter than skull" (11th).

"Ears" (3rd) were middling ranked by five, but four had it in the top quartile. "Gait" (tied at 5th) had the bigger number of breeder-judges in the second quartile, and another four in the third quartile. "Neck" (tied at 5th) was placed 5–7 on five surveys, but four others put it well below average. Five had "Eyes" (10th) 6–9, with another four 12–14.

Some virtues garnered only four in agreement. Four surveys had "17" height and from front of chest to point of buttocks for dogs" (tied at 8th) in the top quartile, but another four ranked it 14–15. Four others put "Coming and going, converging toward the centerline under the body" (13th) in the second quartile, while four placed it 11–14. "Tail set high and well curled" (7th) was around second quartile for four, with the rest all over. "High on leg compared to length" (tied at 8th) was 11–14, but all over on the others.

Because there was less than normal agreement with this group, there were two ties and some other averages closer together, so that additional input could well change the relative rankings. "Tail set high, well curled" (7th) was close behind the tie at fifth. "Muzzle shorter than skull" (11th) and "Shoulders moderately laid back" (12th) were also close to each other.

Less agreement and more split opinions are often not because there is much disagreement in the breed, but rather because many features are very important to breed type rather than a relative few.

Basenji Faults

The breeder-judges also ranked a list of faults taken or derived from their breed standard. Below is the list in sequence by the average of the breeder-judges' rankings, with one being the most serious.

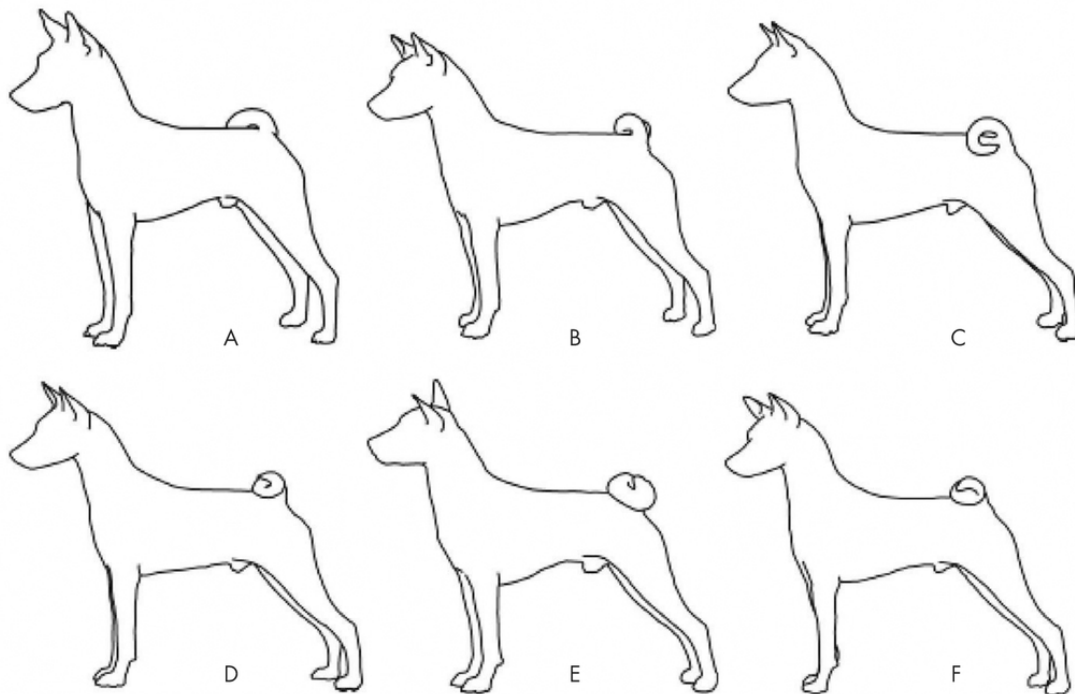
1. Forehead wrinkles lacking or not fine
2. (Gait) topline does not remain level
3. Not short-backed
3. Tail not set high
3. Muzzle coarse or snipy
6. Not elegant and graceful
7. Pasterns not of good length, strong and flexible
8. Muzzle without rounded cushions
9. Legs not straight columns of bones coming and going
10. Feet not small, oval, compact, with well arched toes
11. Chest not medium width
12. White predominating over primary color
13. Coat not short and fine
14. Not scissors bite
15. Dewlap
16. Tail not well curled

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Basenji Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

DOGS



The largest agreement on the faults came on “Tail not well curled” (16th) followed by “Forehead wrinkles lacking, not fine” (1st) and then by “Dewlap” (15th).

Four more had a majority of six experts concurring: “Topline not remaining level (when moving)” (2nd), “Tail not set high” (4th), “Chest not medium width” (11th), and “Coat not short and fine” (13th). The majority had “Topline” (2nd) in the top quartile, while four more were midpoint or below. “Chest width” (11th) was below average in seriousness for six, but another five were in the second quartile. “Bad coat” (13th) was middling for most, but three ranked it at or near bottom.

Several faults had bipolar rankings, with four or five surveys agreeing on one level of importance and another group placing it much differently. “Pasterns not of good length, strong and flexible” (7th) was 2–5 on five surveys and 11–14 on five others. “Legs not straight columns of bones coming and going” (9th) was ranked 7–9 by five experts and 11–13 by four. Four breeder-judges put “White predominating over primary color” (12th) in the bottom three, two ranked it twelfth, but five considered it considerably more serious. “Not scissors bite” (14th) was

middling for five experts, but not important for another five.

Several other faults also did not have majority opinions. Five breeder-judges ranked “Not short-backed” (3rd) as quite a problem, although three had it below average. “Muzzle coarse or snipy” (5th) was above midpoint on five surveys and in the third quartile on four. “Not elegant and graceful” (6th) was in the top quartile for four, second quartile for three, and 11–13 for another three. Five experts considered “Muzzle without rounded cushions” (8th) between 3–6, three between 7–10, and the last three fourteenth or fifteenth. “Feet not small, oval, compact, with well arched toes” was in the third quartile on five surveys, with the rest all over.

There is a consistency between the virtues and faults lists. “Wrinkles” top both lists, followed by “Level topline” and “Back length.” “Tail set” is valued more important than amount of “Curl.”

Defining Characteristics

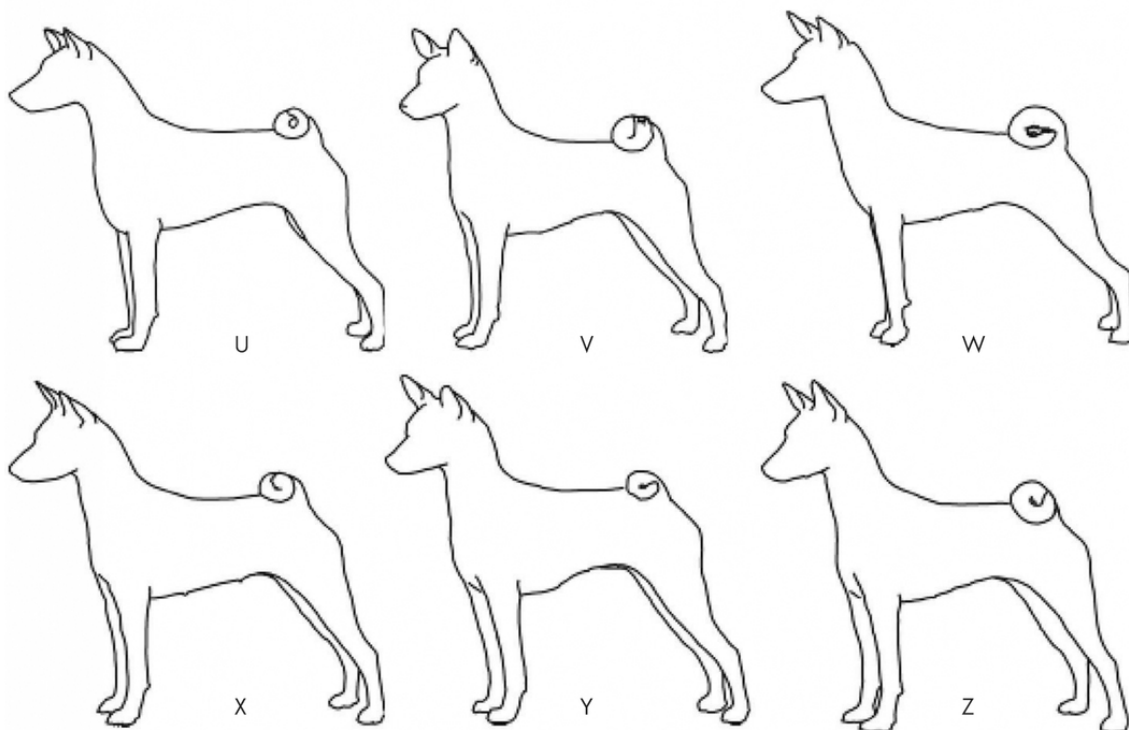
The breeder-judges continued to be consistent when listing four to six characteristics that a dog must have to be a good

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Basenji. Head was listed most often, followed by movement and wrinkle. They wanted a short, level back both standing and moving. Tail set was more important than curl. They also called for a square, well-proportioned dog.

Outlines

The survey included two sets of Basenji outlines—six males and six females. The breeder-judges placed each as they would a class in a dog show—first through fourth—and then selected Best of Breed. The outlines were made from photos of real dogs with good breed type, but none was perfect.

Basenji dog “A” tied with dog “D” in having the best average placement, but “A” was placed first one more time than “D,” and was never out of the ribbons. Those who liked Basenji “A” said he had a “short back, high on leg, proper tail set and lie, proper moderate angulation,” was a “nice square dog with short loin,” and “well crested, balanced outline, good topline, proper underline.”

Comments on dog “D” included “the best combination of front assembly placement, neck set, tail set, and rear angles,”

and “best overall breed type, ears correct size and placement (and so should have good wrinkle), neck of good length and arch, set well into shoulders, correct tail set and shelf, well let down hocks, could use more depth of chest.”

The favorite bitch was Basenji “V.” Those who placed her first wrote “great proportions, nice head and ears, could be a touch shorter bodied and front further back,” “overall balance, short/level back, good neck, good underline,” “square,” and “more second thigh to hock proportion, better upper arm placement.”

The comments on second place Basenji bitch “Y” included “graceful and elegant outline, square, up on leg, short level back, well set and curled tail, proper skull to muzzle proportion, small ears well set, body balanced with correct angulation at front and rear, nice forechest, correct substance,” “good neck, good tuck, short muzzle,” “good shoulder layback,” and “best breed outline, nice shelf.”

Best of breed was difficult. Dogs “D” and “F” and bitches “V” and “Y” were each named BOB by two judges. Bitch “V” had the best average placement score of the twelve, and bitch “Y” had the most first placements—five.

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Basenjis “C,” “U,” “W,” and “X” were not placed first by any judge. Basenjis “A” and “Y” were never out of the ribbons. Bitches “U” and “W” were out of the ribbons on every survey. Dogs “C” and “E” were most often out of the ribbons among the dogs.

Additional Notes

The Basenji breeder-judges shared additional suggestions for students of the breed.

- Head, expression, and wrinkle are very important—without them, a Basenji is not a Basenji.
- A loosely curled tail, although not visually pleasing, is okay as long as the set and carriage are correct.
- This is a working animal. The Basenji needs to be on the go for hours to help bring home dinner. It needs balance. Poor topline and weak feet don’t do this.
- The tail must lie on either hip, not in the middle of the back.
- I look for movement first, then head characteristics, then size and elegance.
- The back must be level standing, and the topline remain level when moving.
- “Lightly built” is within the context of height to weight ratio; lack of substance is a problem in the breed.
- This is a primitive, aboriginal hunting breed, built for survival in a hostile environment.
- First and foremost, they must have breed type.
- The Basenji came originally from the jungle—there were no large spaces for extended trotting. They were capable of jumping straight up in the air. We see far too many long-bodied dogs with over-angulated rears.
- Square is the most important word when describing a Basenji – along with hooded ears, set well forward.
- Good feet are essential.
- A problem coming into the breed is a short rib cage.
- Temperament is essential; any show of aggression towards humans and (very) little towards dogs is inexcusable.

Thanks to the Basenji breeder-judges who took the time to contribute to this project.