

· BREED PRIORITIES · COLLIES

BY NIKKI RIGGSBEE

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.



Some breeds are recognized as “head” breeds, where the head conformation and components are valued above other characteristics. Other breeds are definitely not, with many other features prioritized over head details. Some breeds have experts saying their breed “is a head breed, but...” Experts in other breeds say theirs is not a head breed, but... heads are important, but so is the rest of the dog.

The “General Character” paragraph of the AKC Collie standard describes the whole dog, focusing on balance and harmony. The first sentence of the “Head” paragraph states, “The head properties are of great importance.” I was interested in what Collie experts would focus on in a survey on their breed.

Often the popularity of breeds, based on registration statistics or large entries at dog shows, will indicate that there are a large number of breeder-judges, and lower rank and entry breeds usually have

fewer specialty judges. Collies were quite popular when Lassie was in the movies and on television. More recently, they ranked 38th in AKC’s registration statistics.

Still I was surprised to find 124 Collie breeder-judges with emails to invite to take a survey on their breed’s priorities. Seventy-three initially agreed to participate. Thirty-five completed surveys were received. While they average over forty-four years in the breed, many participants have been involved much longer. They average more than seventeen years judging their breed. Less than forty percent have judged their national, but almost all have judged other Collie specialties.

Collie Virtues

The survey included a list of breed characteristics from the breed standard for the breeder-judges to rank from most important to least

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important. The list below is in order by the average of the breeder-judges' placements, with 1st being the most important. One expert did not complete this portion of the survey.

1. Expression sweet, bright, alert, full-of-sense (combined product of skull, muzzle, eyes, and ears)
2. Eyes almond-shaped, medium-sized
3. Planes (tops of backskull and muzzle) parallel
4. Head...a well-blunted lean wedge
5. Head inclined to lightness in proportion to size of dog
6. Smooth, well-rounded muzzle
7. Stop very slight but perceptible
8. When alert, ears carried three-quarters erect, with one-fourth tipping forward
9. Body a trifle long in proportion to height
10. Neck long, muscular, heavily frilled
11. Back strong and level
12. Standing naturally straight and firm
13. Coming to a natural stop with legs placed well apart and feet straight forward
14. Front and hind legs track comparatively close together
15. Straight, harsh outer coat
16. Small feet, oval in shape, toes well arched and close together

Over ninety-percent concurred on both first place "Expression sweet, bright, alert, full-of-sense (combined product of skull, muzzle, eyes, and ears)" (1st) and last place "Small feet, oval in shape, toes well arched and close together" (16th). Almost three-quarters agreed on "Eyes almond-shaped, medium-sized" (2nd), "Back strong and level" (11th), and "Straight, harsh outer coat" (15th).

Over sixty percent of the group were of the same mind on "Planes (tops of backskull and muzzle) parallel" (3rd), "Stop very slight but perceptible" (7th), and "Coming to a natural stop with legs placed well apart and feet straight forward" (13th). Smaller majorities similarly valued "Head...a well-blunted lean wedge" (4th), "Head inclined to lightness in proportion to size of dog" (5th), "Smooth, well-rounded muzzle" (6th), and "Front and hind legs track comparatively close together" (14th).

"Standing naturally straight and firm" (12th) had the smallest plurality, with sixteen putting it in the third quartile and eleven in the bottom quartile. Half of the respondents agreed on the value of, "When alert, ears carried three-quarters erect, with one-fourth tipping forward" (8th), "Body a trifle long in proportion to height" (9th), and "Neck long, muscular, heavily frilled" (10th). "Neck" (10th) had a split opinion, with seventeen placing it 7–10, and thirteen ranking it 11–14.

"Expression" (1st) was more than two points ahead of "Eyes" (2nd) emphasizing its importance. The top eight-ranked virtues were all head properties, which supports the proposition that Collies are a head breed. "Neck" (10th), "Back" (11th), and "Standing naturally" (12th) were very close, and could change rank with additional input. Almost two points separated "Front/hind legs track close" (14th) and "Straight harsh outer coat" (15th), confirming the lower relative importance of the last two virtues.

Collie Faults

The breeder-judges also ranked faults from or derived from the

standard, from most serious to least serious. The list below is in sequence by the average ranks, with 1 being the most serious. One expert did not complete this section of the survey.

1. Backskull receding laterally or backward
2. Heavy head
3. Sullen expression
4. Large or prominent eyes
5. Undershot
6. Cheeky head
7. Cowhocked
8. Lacking well-sloped shoulders
9. Lacking strong underjaw
10. Tail carried over the back
11. Not single tracking at increased speed
12. Large ears
13. Soft, open or curly outer coat
14. Undersized
15. No undercoat
16. Oversized

While the consensus on valuing faults wasn't as strong as with the virtues, most characteristics had a majority of breeder-judges placing them similarly. Over eighty percent put "Oversized" (16th) in the bottom quartile. Around three-quarters of the experts faulted "Backskull receding laterally or backward" (1st) in or near the top quartile and "No undercoat" (15th) in the bottom quartile.

The averages of the top five on the list, all head details, were close, varying from 4.147 to 4.91, indicating that many varied on which faults they found worse. Over sixty percent put "Heavy head" (2nd), "Sullen expression" (3rd), and "Large or prominent eyes" (4th) in the top quartile. A similar number agreed on "Lacking well-sloped shoulders" (8th), "Soft, open or curly outer coat" (13th), and "Undersized" (14th).

More than half of the group concurred on "Undershot" (5th), "Cheeky head" (6th), "Cowhocked" (7th), and "Large ears" (12th). Half of the breeder-judges had "Not single tracking at increased speed" (11th) mid-point or lower.

"Lacking strong underjaw" (9th) was 6–9 for sixteen breeder-judges, and 11–14 for another nine. "Tail carried over the back" (10th) was ranked 11–14 on fourteen surveys and 7–10 on nine.

Several features averaged very close to each other and could change placement in the list with additional input. "Cowhocked" (7th) and "Lacking underjaw" (8th) were separated by less than one-tenth of a point, as were the last two, "No undercoat" (15th) and "Oversized" (16th).

Virtues garnered twelve majorities and faults fourteen, with very few split opinions. Head features dominated the top of each list. Coat was fifteenth on the virtues list and thirteenth and fifteenth on the faults list.

Defining Characteristics

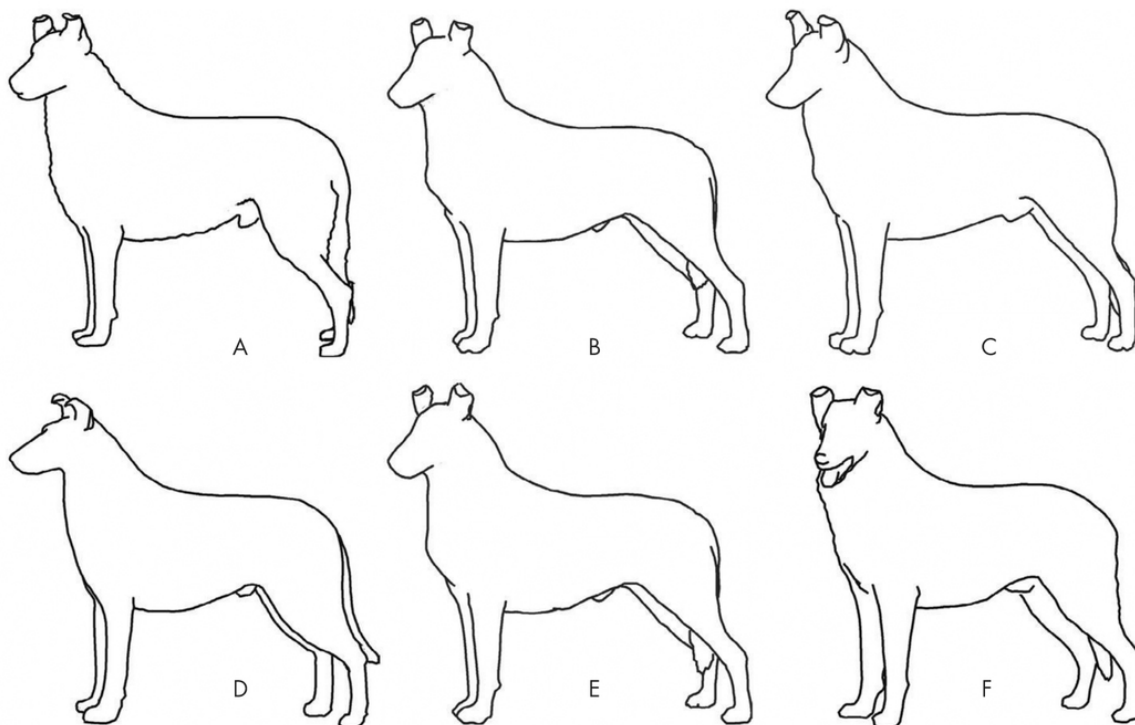
The survey had the Collie breeder-judges list four to six characteristics that a good Collie must have. "Expression" was overwhelmingly first and named by almost everyone. Near behind were "balance," "head," and "movement." Many head features were also named separately, including the correct eye and head planes.

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Collie Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

DOGS



Several Collie experts described “balance” as between head and body rather than matching front and rear angulation.

Outlines

The survey included two sets of outlines, one of dogs, the other of bitches. We used smooth Collies rather than rough to get more dog and less hair in the outlines. The outlines were made from photographs of very good real dogs, so none is ideal. The breeder-judges were asked to place them as they would classes at a dog show, first through fourth. They couldn’t see expression or movement; placements might change if they judged the dogs in person.

The dog with the best average placement and most first placements among the dogs was Collie “F.” Those who liked him said he had “proper length of body, slight rise over loin, proper turn of stifle, overall balance including length of neck,” “masculine with substance, though head appears too wide and ears too large,” “gentle curves flowing each into the next,” and “outline, head, and chest.”

The second place Collie dog was Collie “B.” Judges who placed him first commented that he had good “head and body type, overall balance,” “nice but too short and lacking prosternum,” “proper

balance and nice forechest,” “pleasing outline,” “good head planes, not deep, level topline, correct croup, good bone,” and “correct depth of chest, good neck placement with proper arch, head light.”

Seventy percent of the breeder-judges placed Collie bitch “V” first. Those who chose her said “balanced, style, head light, arched neck, good topline,” “clean head, level planes, good bone, well bent hocks, correct size,” “elegance, nice angulation,” “most feminine,” “not extreme, curves flow,” “better proportions,” “typey,” and “good head characteristics, ear set.”

Runner-up bitch was Collie “X.” Those who chose her liked her “shoulder layback, depth of hip, static balance,” “proper curves everywhere,” “nice front assembly,” “croup steeper, topline stronger, chest deeper,” and proper “balance.”

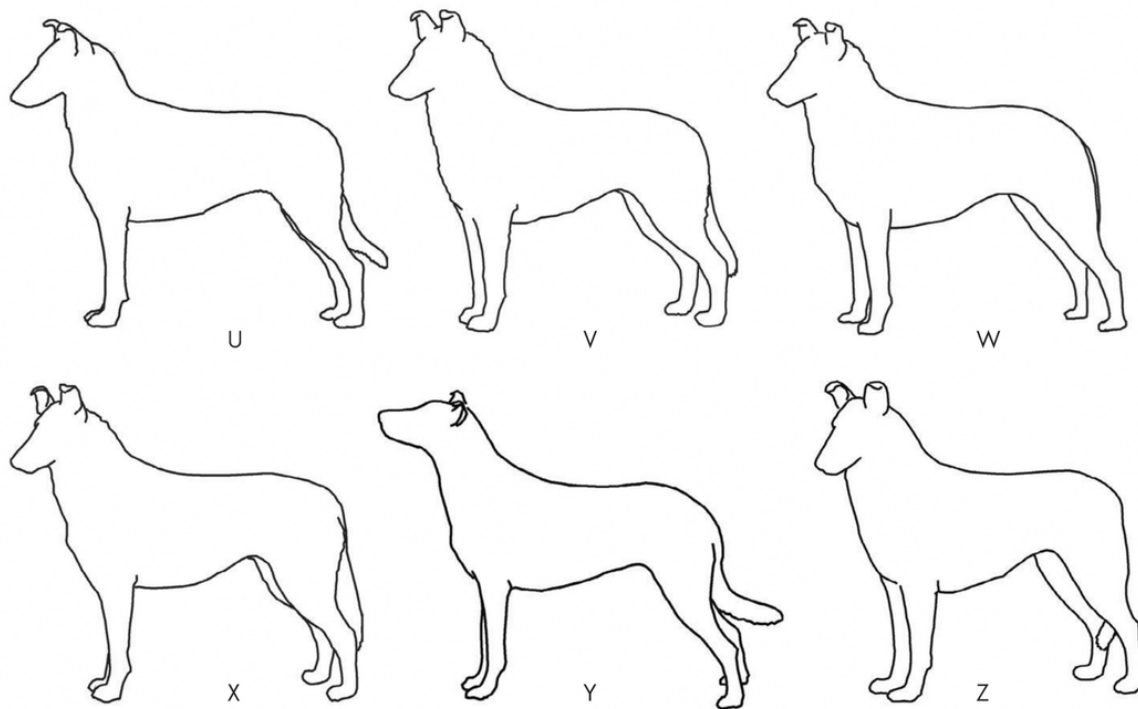
All the male outlines were placed first by two or more judges, and each was left out of the ribbons on at least six surveys. Collie “A” was unplaced more often than the other outlines, making him the least favorite.

Bitch “V” was the overwhelming favorite, with more than twice as many first placements than any of the twelve and with the best overall average. More than half the experts selected her Best of Breed. Second place bitch “X” didn’t get many blue ribbons, but had

Collie Outlines

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BITCHES



many seconds and thirds since her average placement was only .8 behind the winner 'V' and was better than the first-place dog.

Of the bitches, only Collie 'Y' was never placed first and was almost always left out of any ribbon. Collie 'U' was left out of the ribbons by half the group.

Additional Notes

The Collie experts offered the following comments to students of their breed.

- The Collie cannot be judged properly unless its expression has been carefully evaluated and compared to its competition; then you should back up and view the silhouette before placing.
- The balance of parts is more important than the correctness of any one part. That said, a Collie must have breed type which includes a long, lean head with no depth, a sweet inquisitive expression, and overall soundness and strength of body.
- Look for the best picture overall; pay attention to movement. They must have expression and must be able to get around the ring.
- A Collie must have type and balance.
- Look at expression while looking over the handler's shoulder.
- Check into the coat for where the underjaw ends to see if the wedge shape continues into the backskull.
- Collies should be shown on a loose lead with no excessive

posing or hand stacking.

- It is difficult to rank virtues because it is the combination of virtues that comprise an outstanding Collie. Don't eliminate a Collie with breed type, and many virtues because of 1 or 2 faults.
- A Collie should not be clumsy or chunky, but should be light on her feet, alert and eager.
- The standard clearly indicates that the Collie is a head breed. To have the proper expression, the head piece must be correctly proportioned.
- The most important thing is the general outline.
- A Collie should have a sweet expression with a light head and parallel planes.
- When moving, the side gait is smooth with no roll and with good reach and drive.
- Good expression is desirable, but without soundness, we don't have the balance, proportion, and style that make true Collie type.
- Size can be a problem – too small, seen more in males.
- The best Collie is the one who has the most "Collieness."
- The only way to learn about head detail is to examine as many dogs as you can, talk to knowledgeable breeder-judges, attend seminars, ask questions, go to the national.

Thanks to all the Collie breeder-judges who shared their expertise with this project.

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