

CAIRN TERRIER TEMPERAMENT AND EXPRESSION IN DETERMINING BREED TYPE

BY PAT JOYCE

The US Cairn Terrier breed standard of 1938 refers to a “general foxy expression” in a hardy and game Terrier, but it gives no other description of expression or temperament. Most Terrier breeders desire “keen Terrier expression” that demonstrates the alertness and prey drive for which Terriers were developed. Originally used as working farm dogs that cleared the land and buildings of vermin, the Cairn lived inside the home with the family. Cairns are, therefore, highly social companions to their humans, but still highly vigilant for quarry. The breed is alert and intelligent, while remaining self-confident, independent, and fearless to the point of recklessness. Cairn personality may be stubborn, as they will decide on their own what they choose to do on any given day. Typically, this breed will know what their human wants, whether in house manners or in obedience training—but a Cairn chooses whether to do it. A Cairn will look right at you and say, “OK, I know what you want. But before I do it today, I want to know what it’s worth to you?” Every day is a new negotiation, even if they have done the thing a hundred times already.

In a show ring, a Cairn has a limited opportunity to demonstrate their full personality. Judges evaluate dogs for breed type based on factors such as size, proportions, coat, color, head, tail, and so on, but also from that characteristic called “expression.” As a longtime breeder, I object strongly whenever I hear a Cairn referred to as a “head breed.” These are working Terriers. Correct structure of their entire bodies is critical to allow them to do their job. However, the quality called expression does result from features of the head. Correct balance and proportions of the head give the impression of personality and temperament. To this end, the specific characteristics of a Cairn head and tail define and create the Cairn expression, unique to the breed.

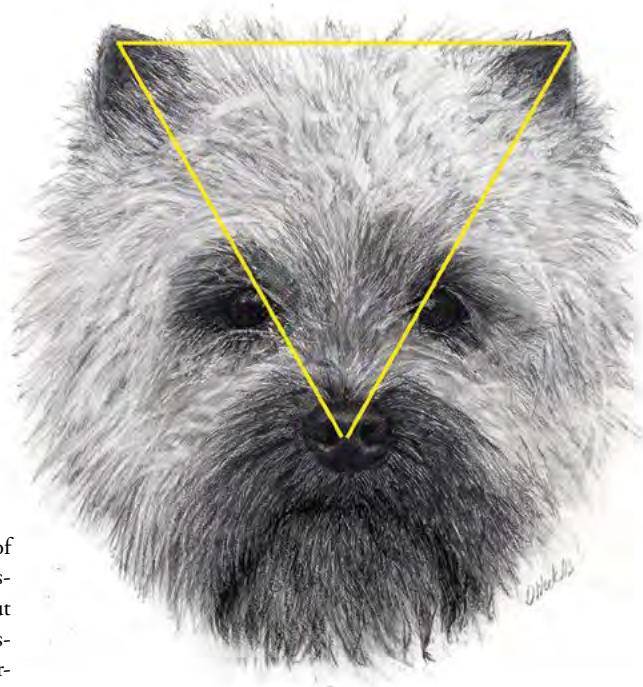


Figure 1. Ideal equilateral triangle of the Cairn head seen from direct front. The triangle is formed from the nose, through the eye positions, to the tips of the ears.

(Source: CTCA Illustrated Standard available for sale through the CTCA website.)

THE SKULL

The Cairn head is said to be the shortest and widest of the Terriers, with a slight rounding of the skull between the ears. The head shape begins with a characteristic domed appearance in puppies and develops into broad, well-developed skulls in mature Cairns. The Cairn skull is best appreciated by cupping the top of the head between the ears with a flat, open palm. Judges should not be afraid to flatten any head furnishing during an examination, to properly assess skull width and shape under the grooming.

THE EQUILATERAL TRIANGLE

Viewed from the direct front, the perfectly proportioned Cairn head type gives the impression of an equilateral triangle from the nose, through the eyes, and extending to the tips of the ears. This positioning of the nose, eyes, and ears gives a distinctive balance that sets off the face of a Cairn. A narrow Cairn skull will not show an equilateral triangle. (See Figure 1.) Poorly placed eye set will tend to fall outside the lines from the nose to the ear tips. Poor ear placement will result in a triangle that is too wide or too narrow at the top.



Figure 2. Side view of the Cairn head showing 4:5 ratio of muzzle to skull. The definite stop and the “eye brows” create widely-separated, but parallel, planes of the muzzle and skull. (Source: Image of “Brora” Kilmarree’s Highland Lass, provided by Liz Scougal and used with her permission.)



Figure 3. An expressive Cairn with a broad skull, equilateral triangular head, wide-set ears, deep-set and dark eyes, dark eye rims and no visible sclera, and that happy Cairn tongue! (Source: Image of “Bonnie” Orso Rosso Diamonds in your Eyes, provided by Olga Malinina and used with her permission.)

“ THE CAIRN MUZZLE IS NOT AS LONG, NARROW, AND SNIPY AS THAT FOUND IN A FOX. WHILE A CAIRN’S MUZZLE IS NARROWER THAN THE REST OF THE SKULL, IT SHOULD BE WIDE ENOUGH FOR A FULL COMPLEMENT OF TEETH. ”

THE MUZZLE

The proper Cairn muzzle is shorter in length than the skull, from the stop to the occiput, with a 4:5 ratio. (See Figure 2.) The Cairn muzzle is not as long, narrow, and snipy as that found in a fox. While a Cairn’s muzzle is narrower than the rest of the skull, it should be wide enough for a full complement of teeth. The Cairn underjaw is full enough to accommodate the lower teeth and to give strength in battle. The muzzle connects to the skull under a well-defined stop, with widely separated, but parallel, planes when viewed from the side. Snipy muzzles as seen in a fox are associated with poor dentition and missing teeth, and are not desirable in this breed.

THE EYE

The ideal Cairn eyes are medium in size, oval in shape, and deeply set under “eyebrows” created by the stop and the bony rise of the skull. The eyebrows are further accentuated by shagginess of the head furnishings. The position of the eyes and the furnishings gives Cairns an almost human expression. (See Figure 3.) Cairn eyes are dark hazel or brown. White eye sclera is covered by black eye rims, creating a Cairn gaze that is dark and piercing. “Ringed eyes” (visible white sclera) detract from the intensity. The most important component of Cairn expression is that highly-attentive “game-on” stare that betrays Cairn intelligence and independence—and terrorizes their prey.

THE EAR

Cairns should have small and pointed ears, with medium leather. They are set wide apart on the top of the skull. The ears form the outer corners of the equilateral head triangle. Cairns generally carry their ears erect, but may move their ears up and down with their moods. Groomed ears are typically free of long hairs. The ear tips are accentuated by dark color coming from a fine undercoat that covers the leather, not from skin pigmentation.

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THE NOSE

The Cairn nose is solid black, medium in size, and balances the proportions of the face. The nose is clearly visible and framed by generous furnishings on the muzzle. All Cairns are born with dark muzzles. However, it is normal for muzzle color to fade with age, especially in lighter-colored Cairns without coat brindling. Judges should question any dramatically dark muzzles or ears not consistent with coat color. Cairn lip and eye rim color is solid black, similar to the nose.

THAT TONGUE!

Nothing specifically describes a Cairn tongue in breed standards. While some handlers and judges may object to a Cairn with a visible tongue or may question if the dog is overheated, every Cairn fancier values the visible tongue as a marker of expressiveness and temperament. No Cairn smile is complete without that visible tongue. The mobile Cairn tongue, combined with a piercing gaze and, perhaps, a quizzical head tilt, all reflect the basic happy, independent, and intelligent personality characteristic of this breed.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE TAIL?

A properly proportioned Cairn should have a body that is fifty percent longer than high, comparing the height at

the withers to the length from the prosternum to the point of buttock. A proper Cairn displays a level topline, and has a tail set that is neither high nor low. The Cairn tail is carried at a 12 to 2 o'clock position, but may vary greatly according to the mood of the dog. A Cairn that is bored or in season may lower the tail despite otherwise good tail and hind-quarter conformation. When spurred or otherwise alerted, a Cairn may pull its tail well forward of the 12 o'clock position. At no time should the tail be permanently curved or bent. As a rule, Cairns carry their tails well above the horizontal when gaitting at a fast walk. A “flag pole” tail in the ring is not always the marker of the best Cairn tail in the opinion of this breeder-judge. During hunting or coursing, a rapidly moving Cairn will lower its tail to use it as a rudder for balance.

Cairns Terriers are outstanding companion dogs to their humans, but they still maintain the high prey drive and independent hunting style of their working past. Expression desired in a Cairn is created primarily by the head and tail, giving the impression of a small, friendly, alert Terrier with an intense gaze and an independent personality. Friendly and playful, a Cairn uses its eyes, ears, tongue, and tail to signal desire to love their human. Well, at least they do until the Cairn sees that quarry. Then the real expression begins. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat Joyce is a retired MD specialist in Infectious Disease and Public Health. She has owned and loved Cairn Terriers since 1983 when she picked the breed after reading the AKC dog breed book in her local public library. She is an AKC Breeder of Merit as well as an AKC Judge, working initially for approval of the Terrier Group. Her dog “Gordo” is a Platinum Grand Champion and won Best of Breed at Westminster Kennel Club in 2013.