

Breeder Conversations

with Mary-Frances Makichen

In each issue I'll ask breeders one question about anything connected to the world of Cavaliers. Each of us as breeders has a unique perspective on that world. There are no right or wrong answers — just the delight of sharing information and finding out how we're all alike and different.

What part of the breed standard do you think new breeders or judges misunderstand or misinterpret the most?

Meredith Johnson-Snyder Rattlebridge Cavaliers

I believe the most misunderstood part of the standard is the head and expression of the Cavalier. I have a background in working herding dogs so I understand the need for good construction and structure. However, as a toy and companion dog, the Cavalier is meant to be so pretty, especially in the head, as to give pleasure to anyone who views him. The characteristic that sets the Cavalier apart from other breeds is the head and expression. It is difficulty to say why some breeders, exhibitors, and judges get the head so wrong. I know that it took me forever to understand the head properties and I am still learning everyday as I watch my puppies' head evolve.

The breed standard calls for a plush head, well-cushioned muzzle and beautiful large, warm brown eyes with a sweet melting expression. The eyes should radiate the soul of the Cavalier. The ears frame the face and are set rather high giving the rounded skull a flat appearance. All these properties of the head are meant to entrance the viewer. A Cavalier's head should be so appealing that it has an "Ahhh" effect on those who see it. Everything about the head should be soft and round, not sharp or angular. The muzzle should be about 1 ½ inches long. In young dogs the muzzle can appear longer and not as cushioned because the whole head has not filled out and come into proportion. The Cavalier has a definite stop that's never to be so sloping so that it resembles an English Cocker or so abrupt that it resembles an English toy. The eyes should not be beady, small, almond shaped, or have a white ring

around them. The standard calls for a scissor bite. If undershot dogs are shown and put up we are in danger of changing the shape of the muzzle. Cavaliers should definitely have an underchin that gives strength to the muzzle and a clean finish. All in all the head is beautiful; different lines will have slightly different styles.

The breed type is in the head, outline of the body (both moving and standing) and in the temperament. Again, it is very important to understand that correct head type and expression are what set the Cavalier apart from other breeds.

Patty Kanan Torlundy Cavaliers

The word "moderate" can mean different things to different people. As it relates to Cavaliers, it can cause misunderstandings. For instance, Cavaliers were not intended to have a dripping coat like a Cocker. Nothing should be extreme in a Cavalier except for the adorable factor.

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I think judges are challenged with our breed when they have three dogs in the ring that all look different but they can all be of correct type. Understanding type is a challenge for many. "Cushioning" is probably the ultimate issue for many judges. That bit of fill under the eye that comes so late in the development of a dog or bitch. It can make or break an expression. Cushioning can be difficult to understand.

On a final note, I would encourage

new people to dogs to work at learning and understanding the mechanics of canine construction. Newer exhibitors should not be made to feel foolish or shy about asking these questions. So many don't understand what is meant by "good structure." They know they're supposed to have it but don't really know what it is. Let's face it, if you don't understand what good structure is, then how can you breed for it?

Bettina Sterling Holyoke Cavaliers

I think the most challenging part of our breed for new breeders and judges is the head. There are several areas of the head that can take time for people to really understand. It can seem almost overwhelming to someone new to Cavaliers.

First, there needs to be a balance of equal proportions between the top and bottom of the skull. Although not specifically addressed in the standard, I think there are many dogs out there that don't have the correct proportions relating to height of top skull and equal distance of bottom skull, as well as, enough back skull. When you look at a Cavalier from the side, they should have a nice proportionate back skull that does not drop off but flows nicely back and down into the area where it attaches to the spinal column. There should also be an overall softness to the angles or planes of the head. The muzzle should be full and seem like a continuation from where it attaches to the head coming forward and tapering slightly. There should be cushioning under the eyes maintaining a fullness where it comes down to the muzzle. Many

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Breeder's Conversations

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Cavaliers fall off sharply from the eye down which gives a very sharp/harsh look. The muzzle should be clean—it should not be jowly—and the lips should not be pendulous. The eyes should be placed straight on and well spaced. The eyes should be big, round, and dark which makes for a soft expression. A dark eye rim adds to the softness of the Cavalier's expression. The ears should be high but not on top of the head. The ears should literally frame the face of a Cavalier. I love to see a Cavalier looking alert with their ears fanned forward. Also, the head should be in proportion to the rest of the body. You don't want to see a big head on a small body or small head on a big body.

When someone new to the breed is trying to understand correct head type, I always advise them to first look at the overall impression they get from a dog's face and expression. Do not try to analyze all the different parts of the head, right off. At first glance, the head should be visually soft and pleasing. There should be a melting, limpid quality to the face/head that you see right away. It's important to understand that you can have four dogs with a different look to the head but they can all be of the correct type. I think the key to understanding the Cavalier head is to observe as many Cavaliers as possible and especially at a big specialty show. Findings numbers of Cavaliers used to be limited to the National Specialty, however, now there are many sanctioned regional clubs where judges will be able to come and observe, be mentored and also attend breed seminars, thus giving them the opportunity to study and perfect their eye for this lovely and unique breed. Once you see the classic Cavalier head this will all fall into place. Then you must commit it to memory, so that it can serve as a template for which you can compare and contrast all other Cavaliers that you observe and judge.