

“Taking a Close Look at Heads”

First in a Series Exploring Breed Type

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The English Springer Spaniel breed standard describes the correct Springer head in great detail. Therefore, it stands to reason that proper head type is important in defining overall breed type and character.

The Springer head is quite different from that of all the other Spaniels. Our standard has distinct requirements that don't appear in the standards for any of those other breeds. This article is designed to look closely at the characteristics that make the Springer head unique.

First, and most importantly, we must remember that this breed was developed as a companion hunting dog-first used to “beat” game out of cover that was then brought down by hawks or coursed by hounds, and later refined to find, flush and retrieve both furred and feathered game within gun range. The sportsmen who created this breed utilized in their breeding programs only those dogs that could, with ease and efficiency, do the job that was required of them. The defining physical characteristics of the breed were established over time as a direct result of selection that was based on job performance. In the same manner, temperament was refined, as dogs were selected for intelligence, willingness to please and accept training, the ability to live and work together peaceably, and kindness and stability towards people. These temperament characteristics are readily expressed in facial expression, which is an important part of head type.

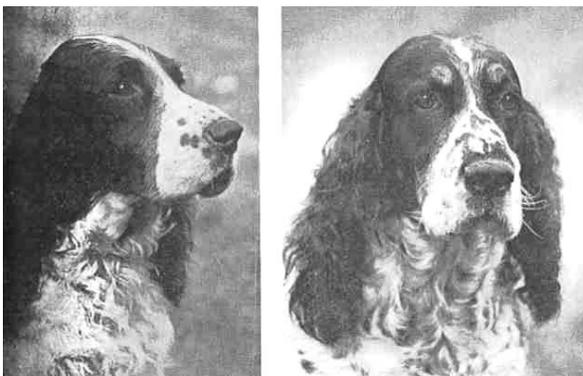


Figure 1. Early 20th Century English heads, clearly exhibiting the features described in the breed standard.

Breeders and judges must always look to the history and development of the breed for the reasons behind the standard's requirements. Failure to do so will result in the Springer becoming just a “generic” show dog, a path down which far too many Sporting breeds appear to be heading. In this day of “fancy show dog, big hair, runs fast”, breeders need to put aside petty differences and work together to maintain the integrity of this wonderful breed.

One of the ways that makes it easier to understand really correct head type in the Springer is to realize that Springers and Setters had common beginnings. In fact they were often divided by being called "springing spaniels" and "setting spaniels". Really good Springer heads have a number of things in common with proper Setter heads, many of them being characteristics which set this breed apart from the other Spaniels.

Our standard calls for the skull to be "flat on top", which is very setter-like. However, the Springer skull rounds gently into the arch of the neck with no prominence of occipital bone, different from the setters with their prominent occiputs which give a much sharper angle to the back of the skull. Also in common with the setters is the requirement for a straight nasal bone, the line of which should lie in a plane parallel to the line of the back skull. These two features (flat skulls and parallel planes) are in danger of disappearing from the breed entirely if breeders don't make a conscious effort to breed from and select for dogs that possess them. Historical photographs prove that flat skulls and parallel planes were the norm in the breed until the later half of the 20th Century, when they began to disappear. In their place today we frequently see high foreheads, round skulls and planes that diverge sharply, literally starting at a high point right behind the eyes and falling in opposite directions.



Figure 2. Artist's rendition of the head described in the breed standard.

Our standard also calls for a muzzle that is the same length as the skull, another similarity with the Setters. The muzzle should be broad and deep enough to facilitate the easy carrying of a large game bird. A broad muzzle also allows room for large, properly placed teeth, another important functional requirement. The standard says that the jaws should be "lean". This does not mean narrow or thin-instead it means "not fleshy", allowing for the bone structure of the foreface to be easily seen. In profile, the muzzle should taper little, if any, from stop to tip; instead, the depth of jaw and squared off covering of lip should carry well forward, giving strength and balance to the entire head.

The amount of stop in this breed should be MODERATE. In profile the correct Springer head appears to have more stop than really exists due to the development and placement of the eyebrows. The eyebrows should be up on the same plane with the back skull; the skull should never round up behind the eyebrows-that creates a very Cocker Spaniel profile that is totally incorrect in the



Figure 3. Correctly shaped and placed eyes, "looking out" from under the brow.

Springer. Springer eyes should be set fairly deeply in their sockets, and the eyebrows rise up and set over the eyes. This is critical for protection when the dog is pushing through heavy cover. A prominently set eye is much more prone to injury. A Springer should look at you "out from under" his eyebrows. And the eyebrows should be very mobile, which adds greatly to expression. The other typical component, which adds to the illusion of more stop, is the groove that rises up between the eyes. Dogs that lack groove will appear "flat" between the eyes or somewhat plain-faced.

Deeply set, properly shaped eyes contribute tremendously to characteristic expression. Eyes should always be oval—a perfect eye will appear somewhat "openly triangular" in shape. Round,

prominent, light eyes, especially in combination with pale eye rims, create a "startled" or harsh expression, which is totally foreign to this breed.

Dark, deeply set eyes, well-developed mobile eyebrows and delicate bone chiseling around the eye sockets combine to let the Springer's temperament shine through in his expression. Happy, sad, quizzical, or having a pout—all these can be read like a tickertape across the correctly made Springer face. Faults that produce untypical hard, staring or vapid expressions should be considered very undesirable.

A good Springer head is more than just a pretty face. Many of the "glamorous" heads seen in the ring today share a number of faults so commonly seen that they have been accepted as normal. The breed standard clearly describes the correct, functional (and beautiful!) Springer head. Breeders and judges should work together to restore this wonderful, unique feature to the breed.

Correspondence is always invited.

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