The head is the distinguishing feature in all the retriever breeds. While each retriever head should be recognizable from afar, the flat-coat head is particularly distinctive and yet inevitably we battle the “generic black dog head” in pursuit of what is correct for the breed.

This presentation includes a discussion of the elements of head type from the US Flat-Coated Retriever breed standard, including: the one-piece head; stop; depth and strength of muzzle; fill before, between and beneath the eyes; length and width of skull and muzzle; cheek; and, eye shape and color, and expression. These elements are always best understood when viewed in photo format or, better yet, on a live dog. We had planned to do this discussion with live dogs as examples at the 2020 FCRSA National Specialty, and will plan to do that when we are able to hold events again. Until then, we decided to go ahead and publish the presentation and begin the conversation virtually.

Hopefully, this is valuable for all of you. If you have any questions, please let us know. Our contact information is at the end of the presentation.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO PRINT THIS PLEASE PRINT IN COLOR AS WE HAVE FOUND THE BW IS NOT INDICATIVE OF WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO SHOW AND EXPLAIN

Thank you to those who have allowed us to use their photos in this presentation.
Head – The long, clean, well-molded head is adequate in size and strength to retrieve a large pheasant, duck or hare with ease.

Skull and Muzzle – The impression of the skull and muzzle being "cast in one piece" is created by the fairly flat skull of moderate breadth and flat, clean cheeks, combined with the long, strong, deep muzzle which is well filled in before, between and beneath the eyes. Viewed from above, the muzzle is nearly equal in length and breadth to the skull.

Stop – There is a gradual, slight, barely perceptible stop, avoiding a down or dish-faced appearance. Brows are slightly raised and mobile, giving life to the expression. Stop must be evaluated in profile so that it will not be confused with the raised brow.

Occiput – not accentuated, the skull forming a gentle curve where it fits well into the neck.

Expression alert, intelligent and kind.

Eyes are set widely apart. Medium sized, almond shaped, dark brown or hazel; not large, round or yellow. Eye rims are self-colored and tight.

Ears relatively small, well set on, lying close to the side of the head and thickly feathered. Not low set (houndlike or setterish).

Lips fairly tight, firm, clean and dry to minimize the retention of feathers.

Jaws – long and strong, capable of carrying a hare or a pheasant.
The language in the breed standard about head type includes multiple references to the ability of the flat-coat to carry game, including:

The long, clean, well-molded head is adequate in size and strength to retrieve a large pheasant, duck or hare with ease.

Lips – fairly tight, firm, clean and dry to minimize the retention of feathers.

Jaws – long and strong, capable of carrying a hare or a pheasant.

As called out in the illustrated breed standard, a dog with the correct long muzzle and large strong jaws will be able to hold large game gently and securely and retrieve repetitively with stamina and longevity.

These pictures of dogs holding goose, pheasant and hares, show how the correct length of jaw allows the dogs to firmly grip and carry large game through a variety of terrains. You can see the tight, dry lips lying cleanly on the game.
Elements of Head Type
One-Piece Head, Description of “Stop”, and Other Elements

This flat-coat bitch has a fairly flat skull when viewed from the side and her skull is in a parallel plane to her long muzzle. The muzzle is deep and strong out to the end, with the lower jaw almost as long as the upper jaw. Her cheeks, which are the skin along the sides of her muzzle, are flat with no excess skin or lip.

“Stop” refers to the space between the muzzle and the skull, in between the eyes. This flat-coat has the slight, barely perceptible stop described in the standard. On page 7, a Golden Retriever head is shown for comparison – the Golden breed standard calls for “a definite stop.” If we draw a triangle from just above the eyes to the tip of the nose and along the planes of the head in this flat-coat photo (see red triangle on left), that triangle is much longer and skinnier than the one you see in the golden photo on page 7.

Her raised eyebrows also conform to the standard and give her the classic, slightly naughty expression that is a hallmark of the breed.
Overall, this dog’s head is long and strong and free of right angles or chiseling. His skull is a little more rounded than the bitch pictured above, but is still fairly flat with barely perceptible stop (see red triangle) allowing a smooth flow into his muzzle.

He has a beautiful dark, almond-shaped eye.

His eyes are set widely apart (though not apparent in this picture), largely due to the correct fill before, between and under his eyes. The interplay of these elements of eye color, shape, and positioning combined with the correct fill give him the kind expression referred to in the standard. As with the previous flat-coat, his cheeks are flat and his muzzle is deep and strong out to the end.

This dog also has the correct curve of occiput (the bump or protuberance at the back of the skull), without being accentuated and allowing the skull to form a gentle curve where it fits well into the neck.
Elements of Head Type
One-Piece Head, Stop, Muzzle, Cheeks, and Other Elements

This Flat-Coat head also illustrates most of the elements of the one-piece head described in the breed standard.

When viewed from the side, this Flat-Coat has a fairly flat skull which is in a parallel plane to her long muzzle. The muzzle is deep and strong out to the end and with her mouth closed you can see the strong almost rectangular muzzle with the lower jaw almost as long as the upper jaw. Her cheeks, which are the skin along the sides of her muzzle, are flat with no excess skin or lip.

This flat-coat has almost no stop and her raised eyebrows and alert ears indicate she is focused on something beyond the photo.

Although this photo of a Golden Retriever head is at a slightly different angle than the previous Flat-Coat heads, it clearly illustrates the distinctions in the elements of stop, backskull, and length of muzzle when compared with the Flat-Coated Retriever photos.

The AKC Golden Retriever Breed Standard describes a head that is “Broad in skull… Stop well defined but not abrupt. Foreface deep and wide, nearly as long as the skull. Muzzle straight in profile, blending smoothly and strongly into skull.”
This liver dog demonstrates the proper length of skull to muzzle when viewed from the side, helping to create the impression of the head cast in one piece. As it says in the standard, “the muzzle is nearly equal in length to the skull.”

This dog’s coat is a proper dark liver color with eye rim, nose and lip pigment to match the coat color.
Elements of Head Type
Breadth of Skull to Breadth of Muzzle

This veteran bitch is used to illustrate a muzzle that, viewed from an angle that is almost from above, is nearly equal in breadth (width) to the skull, as described in the breed standard.

The green lines on the drawing of the skull viewed from overhead that is used in the Illustrated Breed Standard show the proportions of breadth of skull and muzzle. We then use the same green lines on the photo. Although the photo is not from the direct overhead angle, you can see the same breadth of skull and breadth of muzzle as in the line drawing, showing that this bitch has the correct proportion of skull to muzzle. The skull measurement does not include the ears and flesh on the skull.
The standard states: The impression of the skull and muzzle being "cast in one piece" is created by the fairly flat skull of moderate breadth and flat, clean cheeks, combined with the long, strong, deep muzzle which is well filled in before, between and beneath the eyes (see blue arrows). Viewed from above, the muzzle is nearly equal in length and breadth to the skull.

“Fill” can be a difficult concept to understand. Imagine a piece of wood with a large divot or indentation in it. Fill is the “opposite” of such divots or indentations, as if you had taken wood putty and filled in any divots or angles, then smoothed and sanded the surface, removing the appearance of any indentation. You are left with something that appears to be smooth and clean looking that is fill.

The fill between the eyes is important as it helps spread the eyes out so that the eyes are set widely apart.
The angle of this dog's head clearly shows the fill between the eyes – remember the image of that piece of wood after filling in and sanding. This angle also nicely presents the fill before the eye.

You can see how the fill between the eyes is necessary to achieve the correct eye placement and makes it so that the eyes are set widely apart.

Presented at a different angle, this dog's head also shows beautiful fill between the eyes. The fill beneath the eyes is also clearly visible.
Elements of Head Type
Illustration of Fill Before, Between and Beneath the Eyes

This photo of a veteran bitch shows fill from a different angle, viewed almost from above, and you can again see the fill before, between and beneath the eyes.

This bitch also has a skull of moderate breadth and flat, clean cheeks, combined with the long, strong, deep muzzle.
The “opposite” of fill is chiseling, angles or divets.

The collie standard states “The foreface must be chiseled to form a receptacle for the eyes and they are necessarily placed obliquely to give them their required forward outlook.”

This chiseling has also been described using clay for the area between the eyes, you push your thumb into the clay to make an indent, this helps pull the eyes into the forward facing position. The blue arrow clearly points out the indent between the eyes.

This is obviously in contrast to the Flat-Coat standard which requires the fill between the eyes which sets up the required widely set apart eyes.
Elements of Head Type
Flat, Clean Cheeks

We are using these heads to illustrate flat, clean cheeks with no exaggeration or excess skin. The green boxes highlight the flat plane going from almost the end of the muzzle to under the eye on each dog.
Elements of Head Type
Eye Shape and Color

The dog in the back of this photo has widely set eyes with beautiful fill between them. His eye is medium sized, almond shaped and dark in color with dark rims.

The dog in front demonstrates some of the common faults in eyes. Though wide set, his eye is more round than almond shaped and is lighter in color. An eye such as this tends to take away from the kind expression called for in the standard.
Gallery of Flat-Coated Retriever Heads Displaying Correct Elements of Breed Type

In addition to those in the presentation, these heads, ranging from adolescent to veteran, are good illustrations of many of the elements of head type described in the breed standard.
Gallery
Gallery
Gallery
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