

Flat-coated Retriever Head Type

By Rosalie Brady



This will be the most difficult article I have ever had to write because many years ago, I came to the conclusion that it was impossible to truly understand, and recognise, the classic head and expression (in any breed) just from the written word, or indeed from photographs. It seems to me the only way to really learn about head type is by discussion with the doyens of the breed, and with actual dogs in front of you. However, I will do my best to pass on the knowledge that my mentors gave to me.

My "bible" is, and always has been, Dr. Nancy Laughton's book "A Review of the Flat-coated Retriever". I still refer to it frequently. Building on this groundwork, it was during the many conversations over the years with Dr. Laughton, Mr. Colin Wells, Mr. Read Flowers and other senior breeders that I gained a greater understanding of what is the ideal. I strongly recommend this method of learning...just pluck up courage and ASK!! Unlike seminars, it is one-to-one tuition and for free!

Totally Different From Labrador and Golden

The classical Flat Coat head is completely different from either the Golden Retriever or the Labrador Retriever head. Not only is the whole head and expression different, but also, taken in isolation, the skulls are different and the muzzles are different. The Flat Coat head is a "one-piece" head. Were someone to be blindfolded and feel the correctly shaped heads of a Labrador, Golden and Flat Coat, it would be immediately obvious which was the Flat Coat. If a Flat Coat's head

bears even the slightest resemblance to a Labrador head, then it is not correct. The apparent shape of the eye also gives quite a different expression to the Flat Coat.



Head Shape From Above

Mr. Read Flowers described the Flat Coat head to me as being rather like a blunt wedge. The whole head is long and with a long muzzle, it should not be a square head. Viewed from above, the skull is flat with no furrow up the middle and no protrusion of the occiput, just smoothly moulded. Can

you visualise the skull of an Irish Setter, with its well-defined occipital protuberance? Like a knob at the back of the skull. That is not correct for a Flat Coat. The top of the muzzle is also flat. Although the muzzle should be long, it is not a pointed muzzle... the nostrils should be broad, (thus fulfilling Read's description of a blunt wedge), and the muzzle itself should be broad, so that at the sides it merges into the skull imperceptibly. Still viewing the head from above, there should be no evidence of the cheek muscles. Bring to mind the cheeks of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier the Flat coat must never have cheeks like that! With the correct width of muzzle and flat cheeks, your hands should run in a continuous diverging straight line on either side of the head from the nose to the ears. Again, remember the blunt wedge! No indentation at the sides where the muzzle joins the skull, and no cheekiness. Well filled in with bone under the eyes, so that the whole head becomes just one piece. However, wedges can be both narrow and broad, so which is it meant to be? Obviously not too broad, otherwise the overall impression of a long head is lost, and definitely not a narrow wedge, otherwise the muzzle would be narrow, weak and "snipey" and the skull too narrow. The skull itself should be just moderately broad. This is one of those points where tuition using actual dogs is the best way to learn. From a working point of view, the shape of the actual skull may be purely cosmetic, but the width and length of the muzzle is of the greatest importance, in order that the Flat Coat can easily retrieve a large hare.

Lateral Aspect

Now if we look at the head from the side, the skull should be flat on top (no raised eyebrows and no lumps and bumps). The muzzle is also flat. But viewed from this aspect, the muzzle and the skull are NOT joined in a straight line. There is a slight stop between the eyes; it must in no way be accentuated, but nevertheless it will result in the levels of the skull and muzzle being on slightly different (but parallel) planes. The stop itself is not like a "step" down to the muzzle, but rather more filled





about heads, I might also mention that it seems to me over the years, that those dogs whose lips are too pendulous are often the ones who are also too throaty, whereas the Flat Coat should have fairly tight skin over the throat to give a clean neckline).

Ears

Ears should be small and my own impression is that correct ears are "unobtrusive". If the skull is correctly flat, the ears will appear to be set on fairly high. Conversely, a domed skull will produce

an apparently low-set ear. Large, pendulous, low-set ears immediately alert me to the fact that there is something wrong with the head, whereas when looking at a classical Flat Coat head, correct small ears somehow seem irrelevant. ...as I said, "unobtrusive". Perhaps it would not be inappropriate at this point to say that any excess long feathering on the ears should be removed (no point in making the ears look bigger than they actually are!). They will look neater for the show ring and will gather fewer brambles, etc. when working. But please, only ever do this using your finger and thumb...



in with bone between the eyes, so that it is more of a gradual slope. Too much filling in will produce a "Borzoï" type head (not desirable). Too scooped out between the eyes will produce a "dish face" (equally undesirable). If the planes of the skull and muzzle are at an angle, with the muzzle falling away downwards, that is not correct. If the muzzle is curved on top, giving a Roman nose, that also is not correct. Remember flat and parallel planes are what is required. In order to give the requisite strength to the jaw, and also to maximise the scenting ability, the muzzle needs to be fairly deep. With correctly developed upper and lower jaws, the teeth should meet in a tight scissor bite (top incisors fitting over the bottom ones, and both set square to the jaw). Have a look at a pair of scissors... it is a perfect description of exactly how the teeth should meet. Incidentally, Mr. Read Flowers once pointed out to me his observation that if the nostrils and muzzle were broad (as they should be) the incisors tended to be nearly in a straight line. An important feature of the Flat Coat head, particularly from a working point of view, is the lips. They should be well braced, in other words fairly tight...not like the flews of the Setters. The reason is to minimise the collection of feathers in the mouth when retrieving birds. (Although this article is really only

NEVER use scissors to trim a Flat Coat's ears because the result will ruin that lovely soft expression the Flat Coat should have. Flat Coats must never show any evidence of having been trimmed anywhere... just presented looking entirely natural, yet neat and tidy with excess hair surreptitiously removed.

Eyes and Expression

So, finally we come to the hardest part of all for me to accurately describe on paper... eyes and expression. The shape should be oval and the size medium. A round, prominent eye is a fault. The colour should be dark brown or hazel (which is defined as reddish-brown). A yellow eye (or light eye) is a fault in the show ring, even though it does not affect the dog's vision in any way. The eye colour in liver Flat Coats should be the same as in the blacks, i.e. dark brown or hazel. Just because the coat colour is liver, that is no excuse for a light eye. The eyelids must be tight, and with very good reason... loose eyelids allow foreign bodies to collect in the eye, causing pain and damage. In my opinion, this means that loose eyelids should be considered a very serious fault indeed. As to the expression itself, it should be kind, and that is easily definable, but beyond that, to describe on paper that truly classical, unique expression which is pure Flat Coat, I find impossible. I hope that you will find someone who will be as kind to you as Dr. Laughton was to me when, at a show many years ago, and knowing that I had already asked her for advice on heads, she beckoned me over and said to me, "You see that dog there? That's the head to be looking for." I've never forgotten it.

Rosalie Brady breeds Flat-coated Retrievers in the UK under the BORDERCOT

prefix. She was also the FCRSC National Specialty judge held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1999. A big thank you to her for allowing us to reprint her article in this issue of Flatout.

