

# Elements of Breed Type in the Cairn Terrier

by Pat Joyce

The AKC Glossary defines the word type as “the sum of qualities that distinguish dogs of one breed (breed type) or dogs from one kennel (kennel type) from others.” On a simpler level, we understand type when we immediately recognize a dog by its breed. Instant recognition occurs because we understand the essence of the breed even if only on a gut level. We have a mental image of that breed-ness which includes all those characteristics that make a distinct breed. If I see a Cairn in front of me, across a distant field, or merely in silhouette, I recognize its “Cairn-ness” immediately by the components which separate it from other breeds. When you know breed type, you can’t help but see it.

What makes a Cairn a Cairn? What makes any other breed not a Cairn? And what makes a specific Cairn a better or lesser quality example of the breed? All these questions come back to an understanding of breed type. Breeders and judges must have a clear mental image of the unique combination of characteristics that coalesce into the identity of Cairn and make the breed unlike all others.

A systematic description of type is the basis of all breed standards. According to the AKC Glossary, *breed standard* is a word picture describing how an ideal dog of a breed should look, move, and behave. A well-written breed standard should describe a dog so clearly that the reader could visualize the breed even without a picture. The wording of a standard should convey the breed type as a clear mental image. Even mixed breeds are compared to concepts of correct type. “What’s in it” is the first question asked about any rescue. Understanding type is the basis for recognizing a correct dog of a specific breed, as well as for knowing that another dog is clearly something else.

Starting with an overall look, the Cairn is a small sturdy dog with short legs. These qualities alone immediately separate a Cairn from the majority of dog breeds. The Cairn cannot belong with other breeds outside the short-legged terriers or some Toy breeds. The concept of type immediately differentiates what cannot be a Cairn.

The Cairn head is short in length, with a muzzle shorter than the skull, and a definite stop. Seen from the front, the skull is quite wide and said to be wider than any other terrier. The muzzle-to-skull has a ratio of 4:5 seen from the side. Viewed from the front, the Cairn has small pointed ears that form an equilateral triangle with the nose. The eyes are positioned to be crossed by the sides of the triangle. The muzzle profile alone should separate a Scotty, Australian, or Bedlington from a Cairn. The Cairn eyes are medium, oval, and dark with an intense expression characteristic of the breed. The head profile should separate Cairns from Norwich and Norfolk as well. Cairn teeth are large but not as large as found in other terrier breeds. A correct scissors bite, in a strong jaw, is important at the business end of a Cairn for him to do his job.



Silhouette of a Cairn. The concept of “breed type” makes a Cairn instantly recognizable from any other breed even if no other details are given. (Image provided by author)

Per the 1938 US breed standard a Cairn should weigh 13-14 pounds and measure 9.5-10 inches at the withers. The FCI standard allows for 14-16 pounds and 11-12 inches. Clearly a Cairn far outside these measurements is not following type.

The Cairn body is longer than tall at the shoulders giving a rectangular appearance. The correct Cairn body proportion is length (prosternum to point of buttocks) measuring 50% longer than the dog is high at the withers. The elbows should be level with the bottom on the chest and be 50% of the body height at the withers. A Cairn should never be short-backed, square, or with great amounts of “daylight” under the body. A squarish Westie body with a shorter back should not be confused with a Cairn even with show grooming. An Australian terrier should be instantly separated from a Cairn as his body proportions are quite different. Even an over-sized Cairn should never be mistaken for a Glen of Imaal which may be 60% longer than tall, measure 12.5-14 inches at the withers, and weigh up to 35 pounds.

The level topline of a Cairn ends with a sturdy tail set high on the rump. The correct tail is carried high and straight, at a 12-2:00 position. The Cairn tail is

groomed in a conical or carrot shape. Tails that are thin, lightly-boned, curved, or forwardly-angled would not represent proper Cairn type. A docked tail should never be found on a Cairn. The loin of a Cairn is medium and "strongly coupled" to muscular rear legs. Unlike some other terrier breeds, a Cairn should never have a "waist" when viewed from above. A Cairn should be in "hard flesh" if conditioned properly.

Cairn legs should form straight and strong columns in both front and back. Similar to Westies and some other terriers, the front feet are larger than the rear. The feet are round and compact. The front feet may turn out slightly from the pasterns but not from higher up on the leg.

Cairns come in a multitude of approved colors, with and without brindling. Not consistent with breed type would be white, solid black, or black-and-tan colorings as those would be more typical of the Westie, Scotty, or other terriers. While "any color but white" is the simplest way to describe a Cairn, color is the least specific quality of the breed. We desire black mask, ears, and tail tips in Cairn puppies but these markings may fade or blend into

the coat color as the dog matures. Darkening coat color with maturity is a breed characteristic, particularly if brindling is present.

Even when seen only in a black-and-white profile (therefore no obvious color as clues), the Cairn outline should suggest a generous coat on the jacket as well as furnishings on the head and legs. While some terrier breeds have hair that grows like humans and requires scissoring, the Cairn has a hard outer coat and a soft undercoat. While Cairns seen in historic pictures have shaggy rugged coats, the modern grooming convention is to hand strip the coat to remove dead hair and select for the hard outer coat. While a Cairn may be cleaned up for show, excessive grooming is not consistent with breed type. The highly stylized show grooming of a Westie or Miniature Schnauzer should differentiate them immediately from a Cairn even if only in silhouette.

Temperament is another important part of breed type. A Cairn should demonstrate keen terrier expression as he assesses his environment but remains highly social and interactive with his humans. Extreme submissiveness or aggressiveness are not

correct breed type. A Cairn should express intelligence, independence, and a sense of humor. The "Cairn Smile" is loved by every Cairn owner even if not described in any official standard.

A proper Cairn should move smoothly and effortlessly, as befits a predator that must capture his quarry with little exertion. The US Cairn standard is one of a dozen AKC breeds which officially state the dogs should be shown on a loose lead. A Cairn gaited on a tight lead, lifting the head and straightening the front assembly, is incorrect and suggests an exhibitor's attempt to hide a structural problem.

The first question when people see any dog is "What is it?" We identify Cairns because we have an inner image of Cairn essence. That inner picture is our guide even if we have not carefully considered the specific characteristics of breed type. Understanding correct breed type is important for successful breeders and good judges.

*Editor's Note: The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not express the views or opinions of the Cairn Terrier Club of America.*

## Elements of Breed Type in The Cairn Terrier

**Small sturdy short-legged terrier with rugged appearance.**

**Equilateral head triangle formed by nose through eyes to tips of ears.**

**Wide skull. Decided stop. Ratio 4:5 muzzle to skull.**

**Medium oval eyes. Dark hazel with piercing gaze.**

**Small pointed erect ears set wide apart.**

**Scissors bite preferred.**

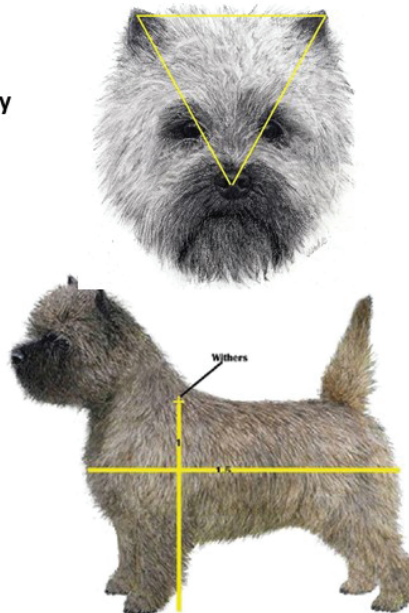
**Dogs: 10" and 14 lbs.**

**Bitches: 9.5" and 13 lbs.**

**(Note: per 1938 US standard)**

**Feet tight and round.**

**Front feet larger than rear and may turn out slightly.**



**Proportion: Prosternum to point of buttocks 50% longer than height at withers. Not square.**

**Color: Any color but white.**

**Commonly brindled. Dark markings (muzzle, ears, tail tip) desired.**

**Coat: Hard outercoat with soft undercoat. Softer head furnishings. Excessive grooming to be faulted.**

**Tail set high, carried 12-2:00 position. Groomed "carrot shape." Level topline. Strongly coupled.**

**Hard fleshed and gaited on loose lead.**

**Keen terrier expression created by eyes, ears, and tail carriage. Intelligent and independent. Spurred.**

-MP Joyce

(Images taken from the CTCA "Illustrated Guide to the Cairn Terrier")