

# Today's Great Pyrenees

Keith T. Weber, LadyHawke Great Pyrenees

Anyone who is familiar with Great Pyrenees knows the origin of these dogs and the fact that they are the product (or maybe even *by-product*) of selection by shepherds of the Pyrenees Mountains. This selection process began centuries ago when some dogs began exhibiting preferred traits –and therefore were considered superior livestock guardians—while others exhibited unsatisfactory traits and were considered inferior guardians. Most certainly the selection process was not as controlled as modern breeding programs and “selection” was perhaps more “culling” than planned breeding.

To appreciate this idea, one needs to understand that the Pyrs from days of yore were a land race --a class of domestic dog that “are largely the results of environmental adaptation, mostly under conditions of natural selection, but nevertheless influenced by human preferences and interference. They fit the requirements of a specific human society living in a particular ecosystem.” This is in contrast to today's Pyr which is undeniably a breed “obtained through strictly selective breeding for particular features as...laid down in a breed standard.”

What is interesting to keep in mind is the Pyr developed as a land race but today is maintained as a breed. This fact differentiates Great Pyrenees from many other recognized breeds (sometimes known as artificial breeds) and places upon breeders a substantial responsibility. The potential difficulties created under these circumstances are furthered by the fact that the majority of Pyrs today are not working dogs but companions.

What do we breed for? The original, albeit obsolete role of the Pyr, today's new livestock guardian dog, conformation show dogs, or family companion dogs? Luckily each of these four options is not mutually exclusive save for perhaps the first two (i.e., the historic role played by the Pyrenean Mountain Dog as a land race and the role played by today's livestock guardian breed. I fully realize that the last sentence is sure to provoke some questions so I will address it right away.

How are the roles of yesterday's livestock guardian different from that of today's? At face value there is no difference. The Pyr was and still is expected to provide early warning and, if necessary, protection to flocks of

sheep from predators like wolves, coyotes, and bears. If we can agree that this is a good summary of the mission of the Great Pyrenees', then it takes only one more step for us to realize that the manner in which Pyrs accomplish this mission today has changed right along with the changing face of agriculture. What is radically different today is the almost complete lack of transhumance –the seasonal movement of livestock (especially sheep) between mountain and lowland pastures—in western cultures. To appreciate the significance of this difference, understand that the seasonal, transhumant movement was sometimes in excess of 300 miles, each way. Granted, the journey was not performed at the dog show trot, but be assured, dogs that came up lame en route were almost certainly left behind the flock to fend for themselves and take whatever Mother Nature threw at them. As a result of these forces of selection --applied time and again over the centuries-- the Pyrenean land race must have been sound, with good agility and stamina, and a general physiology well suited to the rigors of this way of life. Metabolically, this means the type of Pyr selected by nature must have been a dog of medium substance and rarely larger than 125 pounds.

Today however, there is a demand for “Super-sized” Pyrs based on the premise that larger dogs are superior guardians. Since transhumant migrations are a thing of the past, one could fairly easily argue that the traits selected to support the long migrations (endurance, stamina, and agility) could be compromised in favor of traits to support the guardian who spends his days within a pasture. Thus, we select for larger dogs.

I would have no argument with this logic if it could be demonstrated to be true. But unfortunately, the data I have seen does not support it. On the contrary, some of the most effective livestock guardian breeds actively in use today are medium sized dogs. That is because whether the dog and flock are pasture-bound or free-ranging, the first and primary course of “guardianship” is the early-warning system, better known as the bark!

So, we have come full circle and in so doing, have answered the question “what should we breed for?” The answer of course is to breed true to the historic Pyrenean Mountain Dog or Great Pyrenees. For with that, will come wonderful family companions and our own share of conformation ring champions.