

Judging the Doberman Head ©

By Bob Vandiver

AKC defines “Breed type” as the sum of the qualities that distinguish dogs of one breed from another.

Richard Beauchamp in his book Solving the Mysteries of Breed Type states “There is no characteristic among dog breeds that is more variable than the head, and it therefore imparts individuality to each of the breeds.”

This statement makes the case that the head is one of the most important elements that identify “breed type.” It applies equally to all breeds, including the Doberman.

Given the importance of the head to identify the Doberman as a Doberman, judges must put head conformation in proper perspective. What does that mean? It means to the Doberman fancy, that the head is important ... even essential to breed type ... but the Doberman is not a “head breed”.

We all know what a “head breed” is. It’s a breed that has let the head become the most defining element of breed type. Unfortunately, when a breed concentrates on heads to the exclusion of other qualities, those other qualities suffer. What results is a breed with a beautiful head, that often times have poor structure, proportions, and movement. As you observe other breeds, it will become obvious which ones are “head breeds”.

Doberman fanciers are inclined to take a middle of the road approach. They expect the head to be considered equally with other type-defining characteristics. The head is not more important than profile, gait, angulation, or proportions, but is certainly equal to each of them.

The judge simply has to decide for himself the level of importance the head has in defining the overall breed.

There are three disqualifications in the mouth of the Doberman. They will not be discussed as one of the defining elements of the Doberman breed, simply because a dog with a disqualification is disallowed from any consideration. Further evaluation of the head or any other attribute is moot. A discussion of the mouth appears later.

The first things that you should notice about the head are the overall shape and size.

The standard describes the head as “*Long and dry, resembling a blunt wedge in both frontal and profile views. When seen from the front, the head widens gradually toward the base of the ears in a practically unbroken line.*”

“Long” is not a quantifiable description, but for the Doberman it is generally considered to be about equal to the length of the neck, and about half the length of the topline as measured from the withers to the base of the tail. You can confirm these general guidelines

by measuring the drawings in the Doberman Pinscher Club of America Illustrated Standard and by measuring photos of dogs considered as having correct heads.

Of course, “dry” simply means no loose skin, with tight lips and flews.

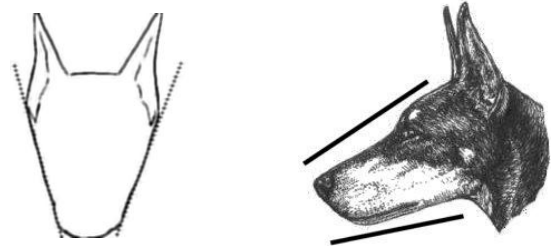


Figure 1 – “Blunt wedge”

Figure 1 will help to visualize the look of the blunt wedge. These two graphics show the head as a blunt wedge when viewed from the front or in profile. When facing the Doberman, you should be able to place your flat hands against sides of the muzzle and cheeks and feel the smooth flat planes of the dog’s head. On a correct head, your hands will form the flat planes of the blunt wedge.

The “blunt wedge” is another non-measurable description. A blunt wedge may be fairly wide, somewhat narrow, or in between. There are no concrete measurements to give as guidelines, simply because different head shapes are correct for different body styles. A heavy boned, substantial dog will nearly always have a broader “blunt wedge” than a less substantial one. A refined dog may have a narrow “blunt wedge”. Any of these may be suitable for that dog.

Note the standard also calls for “*Jaws full and powerful well filled under the eyes.*” If a dog does not have sufficient muzzle and underjaw, then the head won’t form the planes of the blunt wedge. The full muzzle and underjaw are also important to hold the 42 large teeth required by the standard.

It is the judge’s responsibility to see enough Dobermans and to be mentored by enough different people to determine the normal acceptable limits of the “blunt wedge”. The judge can then evaluate within those limits, and reward dogs that fall within the acceptable norm.

The standard continues “*Eyes- almond shaped, moderately deep set, with vigorous, energetic expression. Iris, of uniform color, ranging from medium to darkest brown in black dogs; in reds, blues, and fawns the color of the iris blends with that of the markings, the darkest shade being preferable in every case*”

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This paragraph is self-explanatory. The key words to remember are “almond shaped”, “dark”, and “expression.” The first two are easily understood.

The term “expression” is not easily described. In the Doberman we expect a look of intensity. The dog’s expression should convey the image that is described in the General Appearance section of the standard “*Energetic, watchful, determined, alert, fearless*”.

A good way to describe expression is the overall image formed by the head position, facial mood, lips, eyes, ear carriage, muscle intensity, and so forth. Doberman fanciers often call the typical expression the “look of eagles”.

Describing correct expression is a lot like defining quality. It has been said of quality “I don’t know how to describe it, but I know it when I see it.” Your mentors will help you understand correct expression by showing you examples. With enough study, you’ll know it when you see it.

In describing the ears the standard says “*Ears- normally cropped and carried erect. The upper attachment of the ear, when held erect, is on a level with the top of the skull.*”



Figure 2 Ear set

The standard is clear on the placement of the ear, i.e. level with the top of the skull.

The discussion of ear cropping however is not quite as clear. The statement that the ear is “normally cropped” is sometimes interpreted to mean that it is typically cropped, but not required. The phrase “and carried erect” clarifies that our breed is a cropped breed and the ears are carried erectly.

Uncropped ears are allowed, and some Dobermans have finished their championships with uncropped ears. Nonetheless, uncropped ears should be thought as a deviation from the standard. You must make your own decision as to the magnitude of the deviation. Bear in mind that you must also think about

the impact that uncropped ears have on expression and the overall look of the dog.

Consider the planes of the head (Figure 3). The standard states: “*Top of skull flat, turning with slight stop to bridge of muzzle, with muzzle line extending parallel to top line of skull. Cheeks flat and muscular. Nose -solid black on black dogs, dark brown on red ones, dark gray on blue ones, dark tan on fawns. Lips lying close to jaws.*”

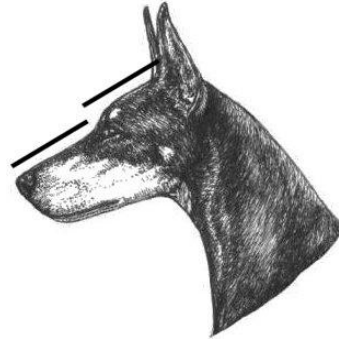


Figure 3 head planes

The description of most characteristics of the head as set forth in this part of the standard are clear and need little amplification.

One characteristic of the head that is not in the standard is the relationship of the muzzle length to the back skull length. Though it is not addressed in the standard, the Doberman Pinscher Club of America insists that the correct Doberman head have a muzzle length that is equal to the back skull length.

This is an issue that has never been contested by members of the Doberman Pinscher Club of America. All knowledgeable members of the fancy (breeders, judges, and handlers) agree that the muzzle and back skull should be of equal length.

The impression one gets upon viewing the Doberman head should be one of angles and planes. The skull and muzzle are straight and flat. The underjaw is straight. The cheeks are flat. The ears are erect with straight edges on the front and back. There is no description in the standard that calls for a curvy, soft-looking head.

Although some breeds have standards for the head that are very similar, representatives of that breed are often found to have curves and a soft look about them. This is not typical of the Doberman, even though the written word is similar for both breeds. Remember that the Doberman head is one of angles and planes.

Now let’s discuss the teeth and the disqualifications. The standard says “*Teeth- strongly developed and white. Lower incisors upright and touching inside of upper incisors a true scissors bite. 42 correctly placed teeth, - 22 in the lower, 20 in the upper jaw. Distemper*

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teeth shall not be penalized. Disqualifying Faults:- Overshot more than 3/16 of an inch. Undershot more than 1/8 of an inch. Four or more missing teeth."

The teeth are important because they are integral to just about everything a dog does. They are not there in the Doberman just to grind food to digest. They are at the core of his very existence. They are his defense mechanism, his means to acquire food, and his offensive weapons for his originally intended work. As importantly, the mouth and teeth are the dog's arms and hands. He must use them for picking up items, transporting them, and placing them where needed. Indeed, so vital are the teeth that they play a critical role in the birthing process of cutting the umbilical cord.

Our standard calls for 42 correctly placed teeth. Let's first discuss the bite. The correct bite occurs with the outside top edge of the lower incisors meeting the inside inner edge of the upper incisors as shown in Figure 4. Further, the upper and lower premolars intermesh evenly.

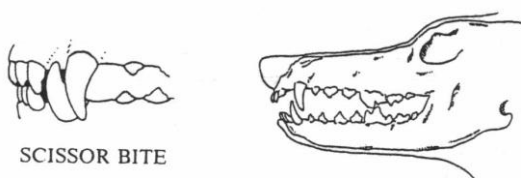


Figure 4 Correct bite

Incorrect bites include a level bite (the upper incisors meet the lower incisors at the biting edge) an undershot bite (the lower teeth extend beyond the upper teeth) and an overshot (the upper teeth extend beyond the lower teeth without contact). All are shown in Figure 5 below:

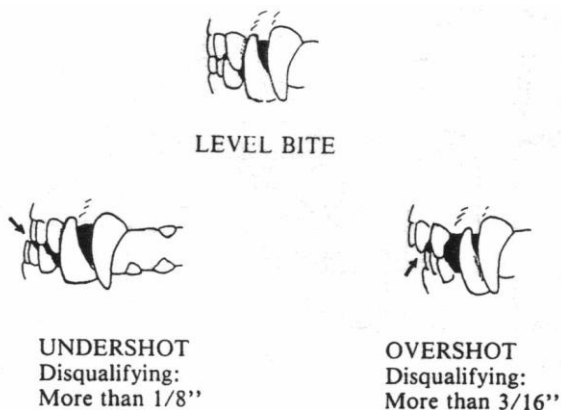


Figure 5 Incorrect bites

There should be 42 teeth as shown in Figure 6. This is common to all dog breeds, but for some breeds, teeth are more important than others are. The Doberman is expected to have a full complement of teeth.

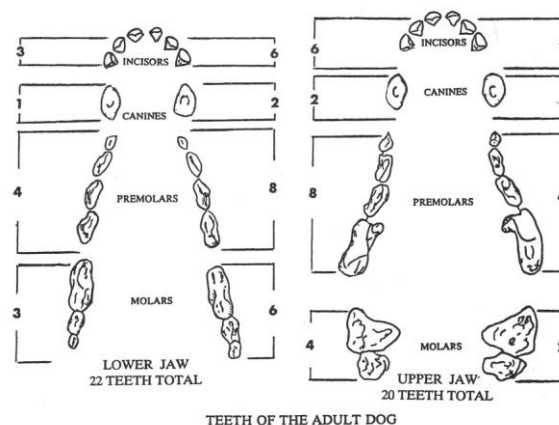


Figure 6 Correct teeth placement

The teeth and the muzzle and the underjaw are all interrelated. Each has an important affect on the other. Missing teeth are considered to be a structural fault because they have the potential to affect these other elements of the head and because of their importance to the functioning of the dog.

The Doberman judge must take examination of the mouth seriously. With each additional missing tooth the dog more closely approaches disqualification. This is not to say that a dog with a missing tooth or two should not be rewarded for his virtues. Dobermans with missing teeth do become champions. It is the judge's responsibility to weigh the deviation along with the merits and other deviations of this dog. If a dog with a missing tooth more closely meets the standard than the competing dogs, by all means reward him. Many judges do not consider a missing tooth as a serious fault. Two missing teeth are generally considered serious, and three are very serious.

Missing teeth can appear in a number of places. Sometimes there will be five incisors that are evenly spaced, and a missing tooth can be difficult to detect. Missing premolars are the most common. Occasionally the rearmost molar is missing, especially on the lower jaw.

When examining Dobermans, you will sometimes find extra teeth, usually in the forward premolar area. Although there is no disqualification for extra teeth, the standard does call for 42 correctly placed teeth. Extra teeth deviate from this in two ways 1) the extra number of teeth is a deviation and 2) the extra teeth affect the correct placement of the other teeth.

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One or two extra teeth are not uncommon. Three and four extras are seen occasionally.

When extra teeth are found, the premolars are smaller to allow space for the extras. It is easy to visualize judges forgiving extra teeth, until it becomes common to have too many small teeth ... piranha-like in appearance. This is not the mouth that the standard requires.

Earlier we mentioned the importance of occlusion as it relates to the standard phrase "*42 correctly placed teeth, - 22 in the lower, 20 in the upper jaw*" It is important to note the intermeshing of the premolars to determine correct occlusion. Figure 7 and Figure 8 below will show you the correct and incorrect occlusion that you may encounter.



Figure 7 Correct Occlusion



Figure 8 Incorrect Occlusion

Examining the mouth is not a difficult task, once it has been practiced. The Doberman exhibitors are usually excellent trainers and presenters of their dogs. Dobermans are trained as pups to have their mouths examined, and there is seldom a problem in the ring.

You may ask the exhibitor to show the mouth, or you may examine it yourself. Both methods are commonly practiced in the Doberman ring. Most exhibitors are prepared for either option. Be careful when allowing an exhibitor to show the mouth that the exhibitor doesn't cover gaps (missing teeth) with their fingers.

We have covered the head in detail, but it is important to summarize the essential elements. A correct Doberman head will have these six characteristics:

1. Blunt wedge from the top or in profile
2. Full muzzle and underjaw
3. Equal length and parallel planes (top of muzzle and head)
4. Dark almond eyes
5. High ear set
6. Doberman expression

Find these six characteristics and you have found a head that conforms to the standard.

You will find dogs that meet these characteristics, but are dissimilar in appearance. That is perfectly normal and acceptable, because much of the evaluation of the head is subjective. Expression, angle of the blunt wedge, balance with the body and other aspects of the head are subject to the preferences of the judge. As long as the head has the general appearance of planes and angles and as long as it meets the six criteria listed above, then the judge is free to select the "best" head based on his own desires.

The photos that follow are considered to be examples of pleasing Doberman heads.

Acknowledgements

1. Artistic drawings courtesy of Jeanne Flora
2. Photos courtesy of Cheri McNealy
3. Outline graphics from the DPCA Illustrated Standard 1993

About the Author



Bob Vandiver is a former Chairman of the DPCA's Judge's Education committee and is presently one of the five members on that committee. He has exhibited Dobermans since 1969. He and his wife, Nancy, have done limited but successful breeding under the Mistel prefix. Bob was approved to judge Dobermans in 1995 and is now approved to judge all working, sporting, herding, Best-In-Show, and all breed Junior Handling.

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