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# THE BASENJI

**This rambunctious sighthound has the wrinkled brow of a problem-solver, and the exotic voice of a canid.**

**T**he packaging sounds perfect: barkless, odorless, a convenient size, non-shedding and hypoallergenic," says Paula Harshberger of Basenji Rescue and Transport, in Safety Harbor, Fla. But that perfect package holds a wild surprise: "The Basenji is closer to a [wild animal] than most other breeds."

Basenji owners already suspected that, but recent DNA evidence has identified the breed as one of the earliest domesticated dogs. African tribesmen have used them to chase game into nets since ancient times. Modern Basenjis are living antiquities that will make your home their jungle, your furniture their monkey bars, and every walk a safari.

## **Out of Africa**

Initially dubbed Congo Terriers by western explorers, the first Basenjis brought to England succumbed to distemper soon after their arrival. The first survivors, Bokoto and Bongo, aroused such interest in 1937 as exhibits at Crufts dog show, that security barriers were erected to keep the crowd moving past them. Basenjis reached the United States soon afterwards, and were AKC-recognized in 1943.

They didn't arrive in droves, however. Until recently, AKC Basenjis could be traced back to 12 foundation dogs, and about 90 percent of them could be traced back to only three. Such limited gene pools can cause health problems in any breed, and this breed was no exception. One of those founders probably carried a gene for a disorder called Fanconi syndrome, and by the 1980s the resulting renal failure was widespread in the breed.

Most breeds in that situation have no place to turn; but Basenjis had an untapped source of new blood among the native tribes of southern Sudan, the eastern Central African Republic, and Congo regions. In 1987, Basenji breeders Michael Work and Jon Curby (the latter currently the BCA delegate to the AKC) traveled to Africa in search of indigenous stock. They drove 800 miles through the Azande region of Sudan, stopping to ask about dogs or puppies. "The dogs' daily life was pretty relaxed," recalls Curby. "I'm sure they did some hunting, but for the most part they hung out around their owners' property. The dogs were not confined at all. Basenjis are the only breed of dog in that part of Africa, and planning of matings was never an issue."



BY D. CAROLINE COILE, PH.D.

Meet the **BREED**





The breeders were able to buy 13 puppies on that and a subsequent trip — four brindles, four tri-colors, and five red and whites. “Adults were very difficult to buy,” says Curby. “We bought only one adult — a bitch that was in whelp. The Azande are just as attached to their dogs as we are [to ours]. We tried to buy another adult bitch and offered her owner more money than he would likely ever see,

and he refused. The village chief could not convince him.”

The brindle pattern was not found outside of Africa at that time, nor was it recognized by the AKC standard. How to integrate these non-registered, non-pedigreed dogs into the AKC gene pool? The Basenji Club of America supported their registration, and in an unusual move, the AKC agreed. The standard was changed to recognize

brindle. Breeders from around the world welcomed the new genes, which have so far proved free of Fanconi.

“The imports were not enough in number to have a drastic effect on the gene pool to this point, but they have added options for breeders to add specific attributes to their programs that might not have been readily available earlier,” says Curby. Incorporating the native dogs has not compromised

## The Basenji

**Country of origin:** Central African Republic, Congo

**First use:** Hunting game

**Use today:** Hunting game (native country); lure coursing; most canine activities.

**Average life expectancy:** 12 to 14 years

**Height:** Males, 17 inches; bitches, 16 inches.

**Colors:** Red, black, black and tan, or brindle, all with white feet, chest, and tail tip; white legs, blaze, and collar optional.

**Good with children:** Yes, with gentle children.

**Good with other pets:** Generally, although they instinctively chase small animals.

**National breed club:**

Basenji Club of America

[www.basenji.org](http://www.basenji.org)

5102 Darnell Street

Houston, TX 77096

Email: [boca@basenji.org](mailto:boca@basenji.org)

**Rescue:**

Basenji Rescue and Transport, Inc. (BRAT)

100 Meadowlark Drive

Safety Harbor, FL 34695

Email: [pawla@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:pawla@tampabay.rr.com)

**Head:** The head is proudly carried. Skull is flat, well chiseled and of medium width, tapering toward the eyes. The foreface tapers from eye to muzzle with a perceptible stop. Wrinkles appear upon the forehead when ears are erect, and are fine and profuse. Side wrinkles are desirable, but should never be exaggerated into dewlap.

**Forequarters:** Shoulders moderately laid back. Shoulder blade and upper arm of approximately equal length. Elbows tucked firmly against brisket. Legs straight with clean fine bone, long forearm, and well defined sinews. Pasterns of good length, strong and flexible.

**Feet:** Small, oval, and compact, with thick pads and well-arched toes.

**Ears:** Small, erect and slightly hooded, of fine texture and set well forward on top of head.

**Eyes:** Dark hazel to dark brown, almond shaped, obliquely set and far-seeing. Rims dark.

**Body:** Balanced with a short back, short coupled, and ending in a definite waist. Ribs moderately sprung, deep to elbows, and oval. Slight forechest in front of point of shoulder. Chest of medium width.

**Tail:** Set high on topline, bends acutely forward, and lies well curled over to either side.

**Hindquarters:** Medium width; strong and muscular; hocks well let-down and turned neither in nor out, with long second thighs and moderately bent stifles.

**Coat:** Short and fine. Skin is very pliant.





Basenjis excel at mentally and physically challenging activities, including agility.

quality — just the opposite. The top lure-coursing Basenji for the past few years, and the top show Basenji (in fact, the top Hound in 1997), have something in common: both wear the brindle badge of recent African ancestry.

### Health Matters

Several disorders can affect Basenjis: In Fanconi syndrome, the kidneys spill electrolytes and nutrients into the urine, instead of reabsorbing them. Untreated, it can eventually cause poor health and death. Owners can detect it early by checking for sugar in the urine, and they can alleviate many symptoms with a special diet.

Malabsorption, or immunoproliferative enteropathy, is an autoimmune intestinal disease that leads to anorexia, chronic diarrhea, and even death. Special diet can improve the quality of life for afflicted dogs. The breed can also fall victim to progressive retinal atrophy (a degeneration of the retina causing blindness), and several less serious hereditary eye problems such as coloboma (a hole in the eye structure), and persistent pupillary membrane

(tiny threads across the pupil).

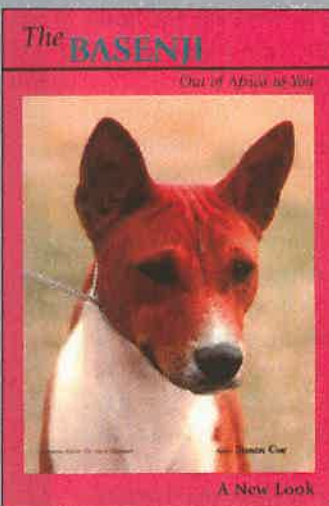
### Singing Canid Praises

Whether their ancestors arrived here in the 1930s or the 1980s, Basenjis remain close to their wild roots. Like wild canids, Basenjis don't bark. That doesn't mean they can't; they will, on occasion, give a single "woof." It certainly doesn't mean they are silent, either! They yodel, chortle, whine, squeal, and have their own, trademark, Basenji "baroo." Why bark when you have so many other choices?

Also like wild canids, most Basenjis come into season only once a year, usually in the autumn. If you're looking for a Basenji pup, be prepared to wait until late winter.

Basenjis were one of five breeds that John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller compared in their famous behavioral genetics research (published in *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog*). They found that while the breed scored lower on tests of control, such as leash walking, they scored high on problem-solving tasks, especially those involving manipulating objects. That comes as no surprise to Basenji breeder Mary

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Lou Kenworthy, of Jasper, Ga. She recalls the case of the escaping Basenji named Cruise: "There was a solid gate between two of my yards that was fastened with a spring-loaded hook that kept the hook from bouncing out of the eye. This worked until Cruise came along. Cruise was standing up on the gate and using his mouth and paws to work on the hook. By the time I got there, it was open."

Cruise demonstrates another of the breed's talents: they are adept climbers. They can scale a wire fence and take off for unleashed adventure — a trait that can lead to disaster, because they expect all cars to stop for them. One loose Basenji is hard enough to get back; two loose Basenjis goad each other toward the horizon. They are still driven by their hunting heritage, and will give chase to any animal that runs — or flies — from them.

Basenjis can be lovers, but they aren't your prototypical fawning dog. They are out to please themselves first, and have a sense of self-importance they feel is entirely justified. Often described as catlike, Basenjis think for themselves, don't like getting wet, love to shred tissues, enjoy basking in the sun, can climb anything, and groom themselves and each other.

If that barkless, odorless, compact dog is starting to sound less like a fairytale canine, you're getting the picture. Too many people buy a Basenji expecting it to act like a fantasy dog, only to discover the book their pup had in mind was a thriller.

As a director and coordinator for Basenji Rescue and Transport, which placed more than 200 Basenjis in 2003, Harshberger daily sees the results of people getting Basenjis for the wrong reasons. There was the 9-month-old whose owners were too busy to keep him out of trouble; when vet bills for

intestinal blockage surgery (from eating a dish towel) were followed by poison treatment (from eating fire ant poison), he became unaffordable and they relinquished him. There was the 1-year-old whose owner couldn't con-

Basenji), and want to be in on all the action, all the time," says Harshberger. "This breed does not do well in a home that cannot devote a lot of time and commitment — Basenjis do not appreciate being left out, or left behind, and can show their displeasure by being destructive."

### Gifted, Challenged, or Both?

Not surprisingly, Basenjis excel at mentally and physically challenging activities. Lure-coursing trials and amateur racing are among their favorite events. Known for their endurance, Basenjis are as diverse in running styles as they are in temperament. "Some Basenjis run with the grace of a gazelle, while others run like a bull in a china shop," says breeder Judy Brader, of Falmouth, Va. Basenjis are clever runners, with a tendency to learn to outguess the direction of the lure earlier in their careers than other sighthounds. When running with familiar dogs, they tend to run cooperatively; but when running with unfamiliar, some will stop at nothing to get to the lure first.

While not as fast as some of the other coursing breeds, they hold their own in head-to-head competition. "A Basenji only runs as fast as it must," explains Wes Shainline, of Seabrook, Md., who has been lure coursing his Basenjis since the 1970s. "When running against other, faster hounds,



Two signature qualities of this distinctive sighthound are its devious smile, and yodelling "baroo" vocalization.

tain him in the yard; the 18-month-old who had spent his whole life running alone in a circle in the yard, disallowed from joining the family he longed for inside; the 16-year-old who spent most of her time chained to the kitchen table ... and hundreds of others.

"Basenjis are active, curious, need lots of exercise (a good Basenji is a tired

## Goodbye, My Lady

The most famous Basenji of all time was My Lady of the Congo, the star of *Goodbye, My Lady*, a story of a boy and his Basenji, filmed in Louisiana in the 1950s. The canine lead was imported from England as a pup for the role. Part of her contract was that she would become the personal dog of the 13-year-old star of the movie, Brandon deWilde. She became his constant companion upon her retirement from show business. Basenjis also appear briefly in many other movies, including *The African Queen*.



they run faster."

The rewards are many — seeing your dog run full-out, return with that Basenji smile, or even win a Best in Field — but there are special challenges. Brader admits: "You need to have good knees. Have you ever been dumped face first in the mud because your 'little' dog decides to lunge when the lure starts? I have!"

Native Basenjis didn't just chase game, they also found and flushed it. Those instincts are still strong. Kenworthy got her first Basenji, Kimmy, in the 1960s: "Kimmy would flash point a pheasant in a fence row, circle it, and flush the bird toward the hunters. She once ran a pheasant down a cornfield row, and when it took flight, jumped up and pulled it down." Kenworthy also recounts the time Kimmy ran a rabbit, then prevented it from going to ground by running interference between it and the hole until hunters arrived.

Ever versatile, these diminutive hounds use all their senses in finding game. Several Basenji clubs used to hold scent trials, in which the dogs were to find quail. Kenworthy recounts a trial held in waist-high grass. "The winning Basenji continually leaped up in the air to [sight] his prey, just as his ancestors did." Such trials are no longer held, but Basenjis can still test their noses at tracking trials, where several have earned titles.

Few breeds are as agile, but as usual, Basenjis do it their own way. Alanna Lowry, of Jacksonville, Fla., recalls her experiences in agility with her Trudy, the first Basenji agility MX: "At one of our first AKC trials, she got 'stuck' on the seesaw. Got right up to that pivot point, and it was like her feet were glued to the board for about two minutes. There was a loud cheer when she finally decided to tip it. She also liked to give a loud yodel on top of the A-frame when she was up there." Basenjis don't confine their antics to agility trials. "In obedience, I did the entire Open Heel Free exercise by myself because she caught a scent on the ring matting that she felt necessary to roll in. When you train a Basenji, you have to have a sense of humor! If you don't laugh, you'll cry."



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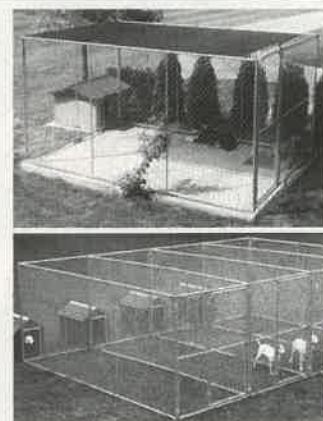
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## Rare Breed Spotlight

Marco Polo wrote of "dogs as large as donkeys" in his 13th-century travelogue. Writer Alice Bixler follows the ancient Tibetan Mastiff from its Himalayan origins to the show ring.

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Champions in the breed today, including the reigning lure-coursing Basenji and the AKC's top Hound in 1997, wear the brindle badge of recent African ancestry.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FURRY KIND



Recent DNA evidence identifies the Basenji as one of the earliest domesticated dog breeds, worldwide.

## Wild 'n' Wrinkled

The Azande call this breed *embwa na bwasenji*, or "dogs from when we were wild." Another native name is *M'bwa m'kuba M'bwa wamwitu*, which translates as "the jumping up and down dog," describing their habit of jumping straight up to spot their quarry. Other reports maintain that the word Basenji derives from the Arabic word for "wrinkles." Any theory seems plausible, as the Basenji wrinkles its brow planning its next escapade.

Training a Basenji is not like training a retriever. "Keeping a sighthound focused on the task at hand is always an issue. They are not always as handler-focused as many of the herding and sporting breeds, since they were bred to work independently and think on their own. If they don't really think what you are doing is that interesting, they will make up something else to do. Reward-based, consistent training methods work best. I also think that repetition is the enemy of a smart dog," says Lowry. "Do it once, do it right, and move on!"

Cindy Griswold, of Johnson City, Texas, has trained her Basenjis to advanced agility and obedience degrees. She explains that besides being distractible, they are easily stressed in some training situations. "A stressed Basenji will tend to shut down on you. Combine this with an independent mindset, and you will get a dog that often appears stubborn. Training sessions should be fun for both, fast paced, upbeat, with lots of variety."

Some people look at a Basenji in obedience and wonder why anybody would be such a glutton for punishment. Griswold disagrees: "While it is true they are harder to train than many other breeds out there, they are very rewarding to train. You need realistic goals to train them, and also you need to avoid the 'it's a Basenji' excuse. One of the first breeders I got a Basenji from said they are very trainable — you just have to be able to out-think them."

Harshberger is succinct: "The bottom line is that Basenjis are not for everyone. If blind obedience is a desired quality, look elsewhere. But if you want a wonderful companion who will challenge and enchant you every step of the way..."

...then sing (yodel, baroo, or squeal) with the breed's champions: *Wild thang — I think I love you.* **DW**

D. Caroline Coile, Ph.D., is a lecturer in neuroscience and behavioral genetics, and serves on the President's Council of the AKC's Canine Health Foundation. She breeds champion Salukis that compete in conformation, obedience, and lure coursing, and is the author of 29 books.