

By Massimo Inzoli



## HEADS UP THE FINER POINTS OF CANE CORSO CONFORMATION

From time immemorial there has existed a lighter type of Molosser in the Mediterranean area, with diverse names and breeding criteria, depending on location. Other than the Cane Corso, which was typical of the southern areas of Italy, such as Lucania and Salento, in Sicily there was, for example, the Brachiero, as well as the Vucciriscu, the butcher's dog of Palermo who took his name from the Vucciria, the historical open market of the city's neighborhoods. The Majorca Mastiff (Ca de Bou), the Spanish Alano and the Presa Canario also resulted from a functional selection in past centuries for a lighter Molosser, tied to a geographic area from which oftentimes its name was derived. All these evolved, however, from a common root, dating back to the Roman Empire and even before the Phoenicians.

One characteristic that always marked the Cane Corso was its versatility, highly valued in antiquity up until today. Assigned to duty in war and in the Roman arenas, the Cane Corso was also employed with excellent results in hunting dangerous game such as wild boar. The dog immobilizes the wild creature, which is then finished off with a knife to the heart by the hunter. Another use was as a butcher's dog, both to defend the herds and to manage and stop the bull by grabbing him by his muzzle to block and hold him.

The Cane Corso was the ultimate guardian of property, specifically of the *masserie*, or interconnected farms that were real, self-sufficient microcells. Because of their location in the open countryside, they required a true defense of their property from thieves as well as attacks by people with ill intent.



Today this marvelous breed has maintained its versatility. In fact, in addition to admirably discharging his guarding duties, the Cane Corso is an excellent defense dog, and several Corsos have competed with optimum results in working-dog sports such as Schutzhund.

These characteristics of type make the Cane Corso unique, and differentiate it from related breeds.

As a lightly built Molosser, the Cane Corso is very strongly made, with well-developed muscles. He is rectangular in outline, with a body that is slightly longer than its height at the withers, which predisposes him to have good length of body that covers a lot of ground. The breed is balanced in terms of its general outline, which is to say that each part is in good proportion to the others. On the profile, the level top line contrasts with the trend of the planes of the head and muzzle to converge slightly, which is an indispensable characteristic of Cane Corso type.

The Cane Corso head merits a deeper exploration, as it is so crucial to type. Do not confuse the axes (or planes) of the skull and muzzle with the upper profiles of the head and muzzle, because they are not exactly the same thing. I dwell on these relationships between skull and muzzle because they were “invented” and introduced by esteemed Italian cynologist Giuseppe Solaro, who illustrated them with a wealth of particulars and listed them among those characteristics of breed type that must always be made very clear, whatever breed is being examined.

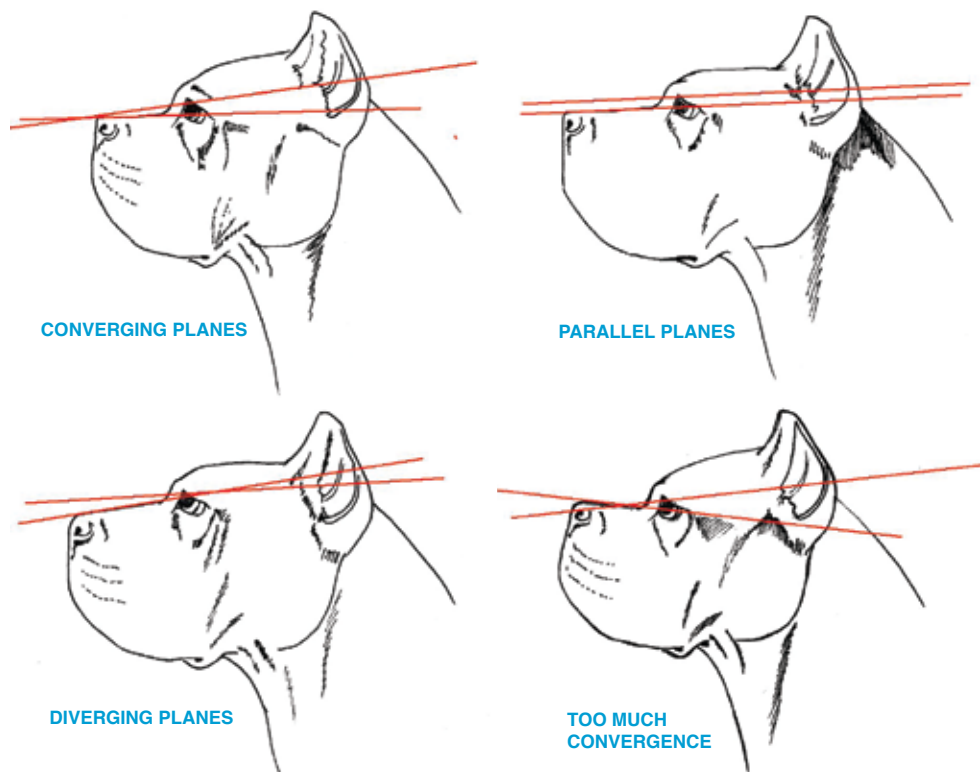
The axis, or plane, of the muzzle is the upper profile of the muzzle. However, the axis, or plane, of the skull is not the upper profile of the skull, as many might be led to believe, but rather an imaginary straight line that starts at the point where the nasal bones meet the frontal bones and terminates near the center of the occiput. Practically speaking, it is an axis that intersects the head and therefore cannot be guessed in an instant by an untrained eye. The difference seems subtle, but it is fundamental. There can be heads that seem exactly convergent between skull and muzzle, as the standard asks, but instead they have only the upper profiles of the head that converge as a result of a flat forehead. If they are examined with respect to the axes described above, they are not slightly convergent, as is required.

The axes of the skull and muzzle of the Cane Corso are and must be slightly convergent with each other. This is an indispensable characteristic of type, as is a short muzzle. Muzzle length is about half the length of the skull, with a well-defined stop. Seen from the front, the bone of the nasal bridge is lower in respect to the frontal bones; this is seen even more markedly in profile, as a result of development that is accentuated by the frontal sinuses. These frontal sinuses are well developed and evident in this breed.

The slightly convergent direction of the skull/muzzle axes is influenced considerably by the relationship of the length of each, which produces the correct expression for the breed.

Instead, when skull and muzzle axes are parallel to one another, we have an overly long muzzle, which is associated with a stop that is not sufficiently marked; the eye tends to have an almond shape instead of an oval that is slightly protruding. In the opposite scenario, with axes that converge too much (what we would term hypertypical), the muzzle will shorten too markedly, with an eye that will move in too frontal a position. The muzzle and head will tend to be covered with wrinkles, changing what should be a correct expression.

The Cane Corso head is a clean one, without wrinkles and with masseter muscles that are well-developed and ample, but they should never become hypertypical, overloading the region of the cheeks. The muzzle is nicely full and parallel, with the front of the muzzle very ample and flat. The disjuncture of the lips – that is, the point at which the two upper lips separate under the nostril – must be shaped like a bucket handle and never form a “V” shape. Contributing to this correct form is the correct projection of the lower jaw, where the two bottom canines, positioned on a lower jaw of good width, support the upper lips and give a fullness to the front of the muzzle.



Courtesy of Mr. Mariano Di Chicco, author of “Il Cane Corso”

## PlaneTALK

Many American fanciers are flummoxed by references in FCI standards to **converging or diverging head planes** (also called **axes**); in most AKC standards, planes are either parallel or they are not. In breeds requiring converging planes, such as the Cane Corso, the planes of the skull and the muzzle, if extended in space, would meet at some point in front of the stop. In breeds with diverging planes, such as the Fila Brasileiro, the distance between the planes of the skull and the muzzle, if extended in space, would meet at some point behind the stop. (In breeds requiring parallel planes, if extended, they would never meet each other.)

– Eds.

According to the FCI standard, the correct projection of the lower jaw is a slight one, where the ideal is around 5 millimeters, and can be as much as a centimeter (about 3/8 of an inch).

The ears are set high and if uncropped should not be too small to a medium size. They are carried hanging, and their inside edge should not lie perfectly close to the cheek (that is, not carried like a Rottweiler).

The neck is of a good length, and not overly powerful or short. The dog may have a light dewlap; as long as it does not correlate to a general bloating of the animal, it is not an issue, but rather a sign of the breed's rusticity.

The limbs are a good distant apart, robust and terminating in a strong, very compact cat foot.

The thorax must be well developed in depth, width and length, without terminating in a barrel chest. It's important that the thorax be of a good length, which is a sign that the ribs are a good distance from each other and sloping.

The topline is firm and straight, with a rather short and slightly arched loin that blends into a long, wide and moderately sloped croup. I want to give this hint about the underline: It should taper slightly in the direction of the groin. Beware an underline that tapers too much, as it leads to dogs that are too light and greyhound-like, as well as an underline that is too straight and parallel to the ground, which would indicate the wrong tendency toward a type that is too heavy and mastiffy. In Europe we speak of three different body types based on metabolism: The ideal for the Cane Corso is an intermediate type, with a balanced endocrine system and tending toward a muscular type.



## Viva la DIFFERENCE

One area of significant departure between the Italian and American Cane Corso standards involves the bite. In the FCI standard, discussed in this article, a scissor bite is a severe fault, while the level bite is acceptable but not desirable. By contrast, the AKC standard asks for a bite that is slightly undershot by no more than ¼ inch, or a level bite, giving no preference to either. It also permits a scissor bite, providing the parameters of the head and muzzle are correct.

Another area of difference is size, with the FCI standard allowing for smaller dogs overall, though the expectation is this will be changed in an upcoming standard revision. The AKC standard gives a size range of 25 to 27.5 inches for dogs; and 23.5 to 26 inches for bitches, compared to the FCI standard's ranges of 64 to 68 cm (25 to 26¾ inches) and 60 to 64 cm (23½ to 25 inches), respectively, with a tolerance of 2 cm (¾ inch) in either direction.

— Eds.

*has decided to invite judges officiating at single-breed and specialty shows to pay particular attention to*

A word about color, which we must remember is essentially a question of aesthetics and almost never one of function in dogs. In recent years overseas it seems that if the Cane Corso is not black, no one likes it. This is absolutely false. While the black color is typical of the breed and renders a dog immediately identifiable as a Corso, the other colors are equally correct, and perhaps more original and authentic than the black, whose popularity has been boosted because of strong demand, especially from the foreign market. The most beautiful color is the color of the most beautiful dog!

Acceptable colors, other than black, are brindle, gray and tawny in all its tonality, culminating in *frumentino*, which is the color of fermented wheat. In tawny and brindle dogs a black mask is present (it is gray in the gray and *frumentino* dogs), which should not go above the eyes. The nose is always black, except in the gray and gray-masked dogs, where it may tend toward a slate color.

A parting thought on the coat, which should be short, but not smooth like that of a Boxer: The ideal length is about 2 to 3 cm (¾ to 1 inch) and the texture is glossy but never too soft.

Finally, I'd like to share a document prepared by the Technical Committee of the SACC, which in Italy officially protects the breed on behalf of ENCI (Ente Italiano della Cinofilia), the Italian kennel club. SACC give judges important considerations to respect in judging the Cane Corso at shows:

*"The Technical Committee of SACC, meeting in Genova on November 18, 2007, analyzing commonly occurring faults in entries at all-breed shows and analyzing data from evaluations of dogs made at specialty shows in 2005,*

the following points that define the Cane Corso, which all too often are overlooked:

- *Convergence of the skull and facial axes. Very often one sees dogs that are rewarded who in profile have decidedly parallel planes.*
- *Relationship between skull and muzzle. Frequently one finds entries with muzzles that are long, insufficiently deep and not correctly square. (One must remember that the length of the muzzle should never exceed more than 34 percent of the total length of the head.)*
- *One must also remember that the stop is an indispensable characteristic of type, and that the correct stop is formed by the angle of the frontal sinuses (105 degrees) and the angle of the nose to the face (130 degrees). Equally as important is that the frontal furrow is evident and should not extend past the middle of the skull, which has the bregma (the point where the frontal bone and parietal bones of the skull meet) as its point of anatomical reference.*
- *Height within the limits indicated in the standard. Too many dog and bitches are found at the lower limits. (Let's remember that an Italian Champion should never be shorter than 65 cm [25.5 inches] for males and 60.5 cm [24 inches] for females – even if the standard allows a height minimum of 62 cm [24.5 inches] for males and 58 cm [23 inches] for females.)*
- *In the same way, one must respect the correct length of body that the standard places at 111 percent of the height at the withers. Some judges are awarding dogs that are too compact and tending toward square in outline, when the Cane Corso is a rectangular breed!*
- *Major attention should be paid to defects in construction, including front and rearquarters and topline (roaching).*
- *One must remember that a pincer, or level, bite should not prevent a dog from winning the points at a show. It is tolerated in an otherwise typey dog.*



Massimo awarding Ch. Tigran del Orte, owned by Marcin Luciak.  
*Photo credit Tigran Del-Orte*

## About The AUTHOR

A breeder of Dogo Argentinos with the affix “de Angel o Demonio” since 1994, Massimo Inzoli’s life with dogs started as a youngster in the late 1970s, when his family bred a few litters of Neapolitan Mastiffs and he grew up amid the legs of a few of them. A Dogo Argentino and Cane Corso specialist judge, he judges all the breeds in FCI Group 2 (which includes the Molossers) and Group 4 (Dachshunds), as well as bull-type terriers, Akita Inus and Alaskan Malamutes. A member of the Technical Committee of the Italian Club of Cane Corso (SACC), he has judged Cane Corso in many Specialty shows for the breed in Italy as well as the U.S., Israel, Belorussia, Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic and in all breeds shows all over Western Europe. He will be judging the United States Neapolitan Mastiff Club regional specialty in California this May and the Cane Corso in the World Dog Show 2012 in Austria.