

COAT AND EYE COLORS

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In order to understand what are desirable coat markings in the Saint, an understanding of the breed is necessary, particularly that section that deals with a discussion of coat and color. If yours is a pet Saint who will not be undergoing the scrutiny of show judges in conformation rings you will not have to be as concerned with such details. If, however, you have purchased a fine puppy who shows signs of being a good show prospect, you will be interested in interpreting just what is or isn't desirable in terms of coat markings.

MIS-MARKED SAINT

The standard's section on coat color reads in part: "Necessary markings are: white chest, feet and tip of tail, noseband, collar or spot on the nape; the latter and blaze are very desirable. Never of one color or without white. Faulty are all other colors, except the favorite dark shadings on the head (mask) and ears."

A very important word in the above passage is favorite, when the standard is referring to head markings. It is an unfortunate occurrence when a misinformed breeder puts down any pup in a newborn litter who does not show a definite mask. The standard states that a dark mask on the Saint's face is favored - it does not state that the lack of such a mask is a disqualifying factor, or even a fault. Of course, the fact remains that many show judges do indeed favor a dark mask, and would be more likely to put up a Saint Bernard with such coloring than one without the mask. Still, white-headed champions are not unheard of in the Saint Bernard fancy, and one would hope that show judges pay attention to overall soundness of body and gait in a Saint when deciding which dog is to take the ribbon.

As for the preferred color of Saint Bernards, a black nose is demanded, and the coat color is to be white with red or red with white. As it happens, an occasional litter will turn up one or more pups without the black pigmentation, and they will appear more carrot-red than deep red. Such pups will have liver-colored noses-a definite disqualifying factor. The ideal Saint Bernard color is on the order of russet, a rich red-brown. Therefore, any pup born with bright red coloration and the liver nose will not be show quality, no matter how structurally perfect he may be.

These faults notwithstanding, such puppies can make marvelous pets and companions for a family, and it is very unfortunate when breeders put such specimens down, rather than merely selling them without papers or with the understanding that the dog is not to be shown.

Some Saints, even those of the correct color, are marked with spots or freckles, which can be either brown or black. Since the standard does not mention one way or the other about freckles, it is probably safe to assume that the appearance of such is not a fault. However, it is known that where there are two dogs of excellent type, one freckled and one with nary a freckle, in most cases the judge will choose the latter dog. Still, much of it is up to personal preference.

On a historic note, it may be of interest to members of the Saint Bernard fancy to include here a passage from the much respected old source, Hutchinsons' Dog Encyclopaedia. The following discussion points up terms once used to denote various color markings on the Saint. Most likely the names originated with the monks at the Hospice in the Swiss Alps, and refer to the various coat patterns. The terms were taken from the names of the vestments Roman Catholic priests wear to celebrate mass. The passage reads as follows:

...an explanation of the names given to the various markings may be found useful...The names are those of the vestments as worn by the monks during the celebration of Holy Mass. Alb: The stretch of white from the throat down to the feet, covering the breast. Stole: The clear white collar. Mitre: A dark orange (saddle colour) spot, surrounded by clear white, on the top of the skull just below the occiput: this is a rare marking. Chasuble: The saddle (which should be of a rich, dark orange).

BLUE SAINTS

Although the standard calls for the Saint Bernard's coat color to be red with white or white with red (with the red being either a deep russet or a brown-yellow) there do appear in infrequent litters "blue" dogs, also referred to as "gray". These dogs are born without the usual (and desired) brownish red coloring, but have instead a gray or blue cast about the coat. Although some breeders here in America and almost all breeders in Europe would put down such a "mis-marked" Saint, there is no overwhelming evidence to suggest that a Saint of such a color would be inferior to a properly colored one in terms of soundness and temperament. Still, an unwitting novice should not be convinced that such a Saint is of show quality and thus pay a premium for it, but should be aware that the dog is not a show specimen. The blue Saint should be sold as a pet only.

BLUE-EYED SAINTS

The section in the standard discussing eye color seems to be explicit, yet Saint Bernards that do not conform to this part of the standard have gained championships. The section on eyes reads, in part: "...and eyes that are too light, are objectionable." The fact that dogs have reached championship in spite of wrong eye coloring would indicate that they were superior in other more important respects than dogs competing with them that did satisfy the standard for eye color.

Incredibly, it is not unknown that Saints whose eyes were of a bluish color due to a serious defect, sometimes even partial blindness, have been handed wins. While it seems unlikely that a judge would neglect to look carefully at the eyes when examining a dog, there are known cases of partially blind dogs winning. The judge's decision notwithstanding, you would not want to include in a breeding program any stud that is known to sire pups with blue eyes.