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STANDARDIZED NOMENCLATURE OF COAT COLOURS IN DOGS

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The necessity of standardizing the terminology of coat colours in dogs has been felt for a long time; it is a fact that from one breed to another it happens that the same word designates different colours or, on the contrary, the same coat is given very different descriptions. Furthermore, traditional nomenclatures often deliberately employ imaginative terms to describe a colour rather than taking into account the precise nature of the basic coat. This present work answers the aim of standardization. It does not have the ambition of imposing itself or changing habits but it does aim at encouraging breeders to understand its interest.

The reference book is “Coat colours in dogs”, published by Royal Canin. The present document is a summary of the descriptive section to which has been added some possible equivalents for qualifying coats, showing how easy this nomenclature is to use and adapt. No terms concerning variations of shades are given; these can be chosen freely.

Remember that coat colour is due to the presence of pigments, i.e. melanins, which exist in two forms:

- eumelanin or dark pigment, black or brown (in the sense of “true brown”),
- phaeomelanin or pale pigment, fawn.

When there is no pigment, white is obtained.

Coats are classified as solid, mixed and modified.

SOLID COATS

They contain only one pigment, dark, pale or none at all. We therefore distinguish three types : dark, pale or white coats.

Dark coats

Those with hair containing eumelanin : they are black or brown if the pigment is not diluted, blue or beige if it is diluted.

The **black** coat presents no problem.

The **brown** (or **chocolate brown**) coat comes in various shades as it can be more or less dark. The nose leather is always brown. The iris tends to be paler.

The **blue** (dilution of black) coat is obtained by dilution of the black pigment. The nose is blue. Animals are blue at birth. Variations of shades are possible.

The **beige** coat is obtained by dilution of brown. There are variations of shades. The nose leather is beige. The iris is pale, sometimes even being the same colour as a “bird of prey”.

Pale coats

They are coloured by phaeomelanin. They are fawn if the pigment is normal, and sand if it is diluted. There is an enormous variety of shades in fawn and sand coats.

The **fawn** coat varies from orange to mahogany red. The colour of the nose can normally be black, brown or fawn (seen as reddish). The colour is often paler on distal parts of body and extremities. If the paleness is distinctive to the point of resembling “sand with fawn mantle” (cf Akita Inu), there is the possibility of precisising “fawn, very pale distally”.

The **sand** coat comes from dilution of fawn. It varies from a cream colour to a whitish colour. The limit between pale fawn and sand is, objectively, impossible to determine. There are important variations of shades to the point of being almost white on the palest subjects. The nose leather is always pigmented and can be of various colours, normal or diluted.

White coat

There is no pigment in the hair. Any colour of nose leather is possible, including partial (“butterfly”) or total depigmentation (flesh colour).

MIXED COATS

Mixed coats contain two pigments, dark and pale ; white being totally absent. They are, therefore, self-coloured and bi-pigmented. Depending on how the eumelanin and the phaeomelanin are distributed, we can identify five types of coat, each having a certain number of variants: fawn masked, fawn with black overlay, fawn brindle coat, black with fawn markings, fawn with mantle.

The **fawn (sand) with mask** coat is fawn (sand) with a black mask, more or less spread over the face. “Mask” alone implies that the mask is “black”. Otherwise state “brown mask”, “blue mask”..... The nose leather is the same colour as the mask.

It should be noted that masks, which are very common in dogs, can also be present on any of the following four coats.

The **fawn (sand) with black overlay** coat is characterised by the presence of hairs which are, themselves, bi-coloured (still called “zoned”, “banded” or “agouti”). The amount of dark pigment varies considerably, giving the fawn with black overlay a very diversified phenotypical expression, going from almost fawn to a blackish colour and all the intermediary colours. It is, therefore, necessary to state the extent of overlay (at the least: slight, moderate, heavy); however, if this precision is missing, it can be considered as a synonym for “moderate overlay”. If each hair has overlay, see further down.

“Overlay” alone indicates that it is black. Otherwise it must be stated “blue”, “brown”.... For example: coat “fawn with slight brown overlay”.

This coat is frequently masked: “fawn with overlay, masked”.

Finally, it happens that intense lightening on distal parts of the body is seen on fawn coats with black overlay.

*Particular cases in **fawn (sand) with complete overlay**.* Each hair is bi-coloured, or “agouti”. It is possible to use “agouti” to describe the whole coat (possibly “blue agouti”, “brown agouti”). Moreover, it is possible to describe the phaeomelanin by stating “blue sand agouti” or “brown fawn agouti”.

From a practical point of view, fawn coats with complete overlay can simply be referred to as “blackish”, “bluish”, “brownish”

In the **fawn (sand) brindle** coat, the eumelanin is condensed in the transversal bands called “brindling”. These are more or less abundant and can be almost black if they are very abundant. So is it necessary to describe the extent of the brindling (at least: slight, moderate, heavy); however if this precision is missing it can be considered that the coat has “moderate brindling”.

These coats are often masked. We therefore state: “Fawn brindle, with mask”.

“Brindle” alone implies “black”. Otherwise it must be stated “blue”, “brown”... For example: coat “sand with heavy blue brindling, with mask”.

The **black with fawn (sand) markings, and variations**, corresponds to the “black and tan” found in traditional nomenclatures. The fawn markings are found on the extremities. The variations are first caused by black being replaced by blue, brown or beige.

It also happens that fawn markings are observed on a base coat with complete overlay (agouti), thus creating another variant: “fawn with overlay + fawn markings” (implying: “with complete overlay”). We will refer to “agouti” rather than fawn with complete overlay, giving for example: “agouti with fawn markings”, “brown agouti with sand markings”...

In the case of **fawn (sand) with mantle coat and variations**, the eumelanin is less, or much less, invasive than in the previous example, being reduced sometimes to just a saddle. The variations are first due to black being replaced by blue, brown or beige.

It can also happen that the hairs of the mantle are banded, which allows us to refer to “fawn with black overlay mantle” (implying “complete overlay”) or, even better, “fawn with agouti mantle”.

It is possible to add a description of the extent of the mantle. For example: “fawn with small mantle”, “sand with extensive brown agouti mantle”...

MODIFIED COATS

The basic coat can still be identified but has undergone modifications which have changed the aspect. Three procedures have been retained: greying, mottling, spotting.

Greying: greying coats

The coat is normal during the first weeks of life; thereafter whitish hairs appear to various degrees.

All coats can go grey. A description is classic: grey, which corresponds to a mix of black and white hairs (the animals are black at birth). Greyish-beige (mix of brown and white) and red-roan (mix of fawn and white) can also be included.

In all other cases, it is recommended to retain the base coat followed, after a comma, by “greying”. For example, “fawn with mantle, greying” (instead of “red-roan with grey mantle”).

There is the possibility of describing the intensity of the greying factor: “black slightly greying”, “agouti moderately greying”...

Mottling: mottled coats

Only the dark pigment (eumelanin) is concerned.

The ground colour is paler (dilution, greying, or both together), or even lacking pigment, while the normal colour is maintained in the form of rough-edged (torn) patches distributed unevenly.

The classic description, beginning with the diluted ground colour, is “grey-blue with black mottling” (simply “blue merle”), “beige with brown mottling, with fawn markings” (logically: “mottled beige with fawn markings” is sufficient), “white with black mottling” etc.

According to another logic it is also possible to describe the basic coat, followed by “mottled” after a comma. For example: “black with fawn markings, mottled”, “sand with brown mantle, mottled”. Confusion must be avoided: with this other logic, the classic expression “blue merle” becomes “black, mottled”. The presence of the comma is fundamental.

Spotting: spotted coats

“Spotting” has become the synonym for “white spotting”. Spotting can be limited, moderate or invasive. The basic colour is to be identified (even if reduced to coloured markings on the ears) and then “limited spotting”, “moderate spotting” or “invasive spotting” will be added. For example: “black with fawn markings, with limited spotting”, “sand with overlay, masked, with moderate spotting”, “fawn brindle, with invasive spotting”. There is the possibility of increasing the number of categories and of describing the coat in a different manner, for example:

- fawn, with slight white markings,
- black with fawn markings, with white markings (which will be converted to “black with fawn and white markings”),
- sand with overlay, masked, and white,
- fawn brindle, with invasive white,
- fawn with overlay, with very invasive white. If one prefers, “white with fawn markings, with overlay”.

Spotted coats with particular characteristics

The white areas can be speckled (small points of colour), mixed (mixture of white and coloured hairs), or blotched (small patches of colour on the skin; the hair remains white).

The intensity of the particularity can be described by referring to, for example: “fawn, and slightly flecked white”, “black with fawn markings, invaded by heavily blotched white”; “brown and white, mixed”, “fawn with overlay, and heavily blotched white” etc...

NB: The most important, for modified coats, is to always identify the base coat (even if it is reduced to small points of colour) before elaborating the term which will describe the coat in full. Except in cases where a given term is recognized for describing the whole coat, the modification should always be placed after a comma: “base coat, modification”.

CONCLUSION

The standardized nomenclature is logical, precise and universal. It is sometimes clumsy but beauty is not always compatible with precision and universality.

Even if traditional terms remain those currently used, it is extremely beneficial for breeders to understand the standardized nomenclature and to know how to establish equivalents.

This summary was approved by the FCI General Committee on the occasion of its meeting in Vienna, July 2009.