

Borzoi

In this issue we conclude our guest columnist Kristina Terra's article on the early development of the Borzoi Breed in Russia, concluding with the 19th-century changes and influences.

History of the Borzoi

PART TWO

By the 1830s, due to the deforestation of Russia, hunting practices were beginning to change. Breeders were dissatisfied with the Gustopsovaya Borzoi's ineptness for long pursuits. After the Russo-Turkish War of the late 1700s, Russia was flooded with drop-eared sighthounds.

The answer to the shortcomings of the Gustopsovaya Borzoi was found in the Mountain Sighthound, which possessed both great speed and stamina. This elegant, graceful, and well-proportioned sighthound had a slight rise to its topline, longer body, good spring of ribs, and great depth of brisket. It had a sickle-shaped or ringed tail, black eyes, short coat, and a marked seam on its chiseled head, as well as prominent eyebrows and occiput. Among other things, Mountain Sighthounds passed on the black-and-tan pattern.

Crimean Sighthounds, courser and more substantial drop-eared sighthounds, exhibited amazing stamina but slower speeds. They had smaller heads, level or sagging toplines, ringtails, great spring of rib, and shallower briskets. Both breeds were extensively crossbred with the Gustopsovaya, leading to the variety's demise in its pure form by the 1860s. Borzoi gained more stamina but lost speed on short distances. Also, many exhibited looser ear-sets and ringtails. Most self-respecting landowners in Russia hunted with sighthounds and developed their own distinct lines of Borzoi. After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, most could no longer afford to keep their kennels, some of which had housed up to 400 dogs. Many lines of Borzoi were lost, and different varieties and breeds of sighthounds (Chistopsovayas; Gustopsovayas; Mountain; Crimean; and even Hortayas, or short-haired Borzoi) were consolidated and crossbred rather carelessly.

After the Imperial Hunting Society dog show in 1874, the society's members agreed to close the Borzoi studbooks. Fanciers aimed to achieve uniformity and bring back the breed's lost features, while holding on to the positive traits acquired from the recent crosses.

In 1888, the society approved the first modern Borzoi standard, written by an undisputed authority on the breed, Mr. Nikolai Ermolov, whose family bred Borzoi for over 200 years.

The Perchino kennel of the Tsar's uncle, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, was the leading the efforts of bringing the Borzoi to its former glory and uniformity. Using his resources, the Grand Duke purchased the best breeding stock of functional Borzoi. He then selected for the original cosmetic features that were typical before the crosses with Mountain and Crimean Sighthounds, at the same time keeping those breeds' positive contributions. The Grand Duke valued hunting ability and breed type equally. He bred structurally sound animals that had the ability for acceleration (an original Borzoi feature) as well as the bonus of an ability for long-distance pursuits (inherited from the Mountain Sighthounds). Plus,

Perchino Borzoi were selected for such cosmetic features as narrow heads with veining, dark eyes, high ear-sets, straight tails, and proper silky coat texture with profuse feathering, so as to bring back the original Borzoi aesthetics.

The uniformity of type was not yet achieved when Russia was struck by the 1917 revolution, ending all breeding there. About 200 Borzoi were exported to Europe and the United States. Features of the Borzoi's ancestors are seen in different lines of the Borzoi of today. Presently it is more difficult to test the Borzoi's hunting ability, so functional build should still be of supreme importance; in addition, striving to breed for the desired cosmetic features cannot be overlooked. —K.T.

Thank you, Kristina. —Jon Titus

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