

Although dogs have been our companions for millennia, we have to guess at what prehistoric dogs looked like exactly. One thing we do know for sure, though, is the work they did. They followed the prey, drove the flocks and herds, guarded livestock and defended their owners' property...

Billy

The French Pack Hound

text and illustrations by RIA HÖRTER

courtesy TON POPELIER

Pack Hunting

Where does this large French scent hound with an English-sounding name come from, and when was it developed? To understand pack hunting in France, a brief survey of its development may be necessary.

The history of pack hunting is more than 10,000 years old. In the Lascaux caves, in the French Dordogne, can still be seen drawings of a man hunting deer with his hounds. The drawings date from about 15000 years BC. When conquering Gaul around 50 BC, the Romans noticed that the Celtic Gauls hunted with their dogs.

In medieval Gaul, only kings, noblemen, and high clergy could participate in the hunt. In France, as in many other Western European countries, the best hunting grounds and vast forests were reserved for the aristocracy.

Saddle makers, tailors, and blacksmiths set up their shops around hunting castles. The hunt became an inspiration for tapestry makers, painters, writers, and illustrators who



The Billy is a strong, agile dog that gives the impression of lightness.

(Photographer unknown)

depicted game hunting – the *vènerie* – in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Hunting deer, wild boar, and wolf – the *grande vènerie* – needed a large, strong dog. Small game – the *petite vènerie* – for example, hare and rabbit, was left to smaller breeds.

At that time there were dozens of hunting breeds in France. Some were restricted to just one region and stayed numerically small. Other breeds and hunts were spread all over France and into other countries.

Dogs were crossbred and sometimes the result was a new breed that was named after the breeder or the region where they were developed (Vendée, Haut-Poitou).

Chiens d'ordre

The style of hunting in the *grande vènerie* is called *chasse-à-courre*. The dogs hunt by scent and follow the prey until it literally drops dead. The hunters follow on horseback. Dog breeds used in the *grande vènerie* were

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The caves of Lascaux in Dordogne, France. The drawings date from about 15000 BC.

Bretagne) were used in the *grande vènerie* and hunted according to the *à courre* method. But mostly they were used for hunting hare and wild boar in accordance with the *chasse-à-tir* method, meaning that the prey was driven in the direction of the waiting armed hunters.

The *grand vènerie* – hunting large game with a pack of dogs – survived the French Revolution (1789-99), the Great War (1914-18), and the Second World War (1939-45), but the grandeur of the 17th and 18th centuries never returned.

All the same, the present spectacle of the *chasse-à-courre* is still followed by tens of thousands of Frenchmen who watch and enjoy the centuries-old traditions of a hunting party.

Chiens Blancs du Roy

Outside of France, the Billy is a rare scent hound. According to Hans Räber, the author of the *Enzyklopädie der Rassehunde*, the Billy is the French scent hound that most resembles its forefather, the Chien Blanc du Roy (white dog of the king). It is



A watercolor by well-known modern French artist Matthieu Sordot

chiens de grande vènerie or *chiens d'ordre* – hounds that knew how to behave in a pack, which could easily consist of 50 or more dogs. Examples are the Billy, Poitevin, Français Tricolore, Français Blanc et Noir, Français Blanc et Orange, Grand Bleu de Gascogne, Gascon Saintongeais, Griffon Nivernais, Grand Griffon-Vendéen and Grand Fauve de Bretagne.

Sometimes the last-mentioned five breeds (Grand Bleu de Gascogne, Gascon Saintongeais, Griffon Nivernais, Grand Griffon-Vendéen and Grand Fauve de

said that Louis XII (1462-1515) created the Chiens Blanc, which then became the favorite dogs of the French kings Francis I (1494-1547), Henry IV (1553-1610), and Louis XIV (1638-1715). Hence, the name.

In literature, the Billy is often called a Chien Blanc du Roy. The name “Billy” comes from the castle of its creator, Gaston Hublot de Rivault (1858-1936), a nobleman who lived at Château de Billy, built by the Bourbons but now a ruin.

The Billy shares its ancestors with the Poitevin, another *chien d'ordre*. According to his own writings, Gaston Hublot de Rivault bred and raised in his kennels 3,000 (!) dogs. The last Billy bred by him was number 1834 in his stud book.

Hublot de Rivault was the first *maître d'équipage* (hunt master) of the Rally Billy Courage pack (1878-1933). At first he selected dogs from the 17th-century Larye (or Larrye), Cérés, and Montemboeuf lines. Marquis François Larye (or Larrye) is considered to be the man who created the Poitevin in 1692; his dogs had an excellent nose. Hublot de Rivault's uncle, Alexis de Montaubin, gave him two males and two females from the old Cérés strain as a present.

THE BILLY

Country of Origin: France

Use: Pack hound in the *grande vènerie*

Life Expectancy: 10-14 years

First Breed Standard: 1886

FCI Standard:

fci.be/Nomenclature/Standards/025g06-en.pdf

UKC Standard: ukcdogs.com/docs/breeds/billy.pdf

FCI Group 6 (Scenthounds and related breeds)

UKC Group 2 (Scenthound)

French Breed Club: Club du Chien d'Ordre; scc.asso.fr

French Kennel Club:

Société Centrale Canine; centrale-canine.fr

United Kennel Club: ukcdogs.com

The Old Lines

The Marquis Louis de Montemboeuf, lieutenant of the guards under Louis XIV, bred scent hounds originating from dogs that had been acquired from the royal kennels around 1700. His dogs hunted mainly wild boar and were known for their elegant appearance.

The Cérés dogs were known for their hare, deer, and wolf hunting abilities. The coats of the Montemboeuf and Cérés dogs were exclusively white and orange (yellow), the same colors de Rivault used in his breeding.

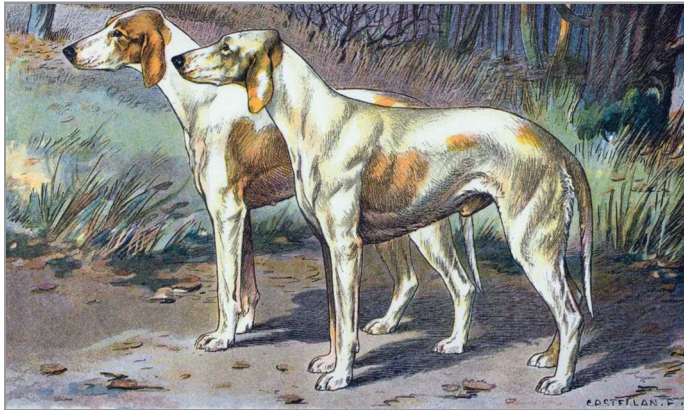
When Montemboeuf died, his dogs ended up dispersed over

the whole of France.

In 1877, Hublot de Rivault started breeding his “own” breed using the Larye, Cérés and Montemboeuf strains. No matter how industrious you are, you will achieve nothing without luck. In 1882, Hublot de Rivault found the Montemboeuf male, Blandino, which gave the Billy size and strength. After nine years, Hublot had reached his goal of re-creating the Grand Chien du Roy (according to Dr. C. Castets in his book *Les Chiens courants descendants des Chiens Blancs du Roy*, 1923), and with his first pack of Billys, he hunted almost every type of game. The dogs at the Château de Billy had white coats or white with lemon, but there were also dogs with a café-au-lait coat, as dog writer George Johnston mentioned in his *Hounds of France: Disciples of Diana* (1979).

In 1927, de Rivault's pack was dissolved and his dogs dispersed throughout France. Gaston Hublot de Rivault died in 1936.

HISTORY



A Beautiful lithograph from the book *Les Chiens de Chasse* by F. Castellan (1931)



A pack of Billys owned by Monsieur Gavinet
(Photographer unknown)

Recognition

This would have been the end of the Billy if Gaston Hublot's son Anthony had not decided to continue his father's work and was lucky enough to locate a pair of Billys by which he could start to restore the breed. The male, Vol-au-Vent, and bitch, Volga, were crossed with Poitevins, Chiens de Porcelaine, and Harriers. Anthony's program was successful. The breed was recognized by the FCI in 1973, and several Billy packs existed when Anthony de Rivault died in 1975.

According to David Hancock in his book *Hounds: Hunting by Scent* (2014), there are more than 300 active scent hound packs in France. Only breed authorities can see the differences between the Billy, the Poitevin, the Français Blanc et Orange, and the Anglo Français Blanc et Orange.

Some Distinguishing Features

The Billy's head is fairly fine, lean, and of medium length. It's rounder than the Poitevin's head, the muzzle is slightly heavier and the stop is well defined.

By comparison with other French scent hounds, the Billy's ears are set on relatively high, are rather flat, and turn slightly inward toward the bottom. The breed has a sonorous voice. The chest is very deep and quite narrow. The Billy is a strong dog, yet gives the impression of lightness.

The correct coat colors are pure white, milk-coffee white, or white with light orange or lemon patches or mantle. Size for dogs is 23.5 to 27.5 inches (60 to 70 centimeters); for bitches it's 22.5 to 24.5 inches (58 to 62 centimeters).

Sometimes, dog writers in literature and on the internet are

convinced that the Billy and the Chien Blanc du Roy are one and the same breed; however, the Chien Blanc is really the Billy's ancestor.

Fighting spirit

Today, the Billy is used mainly for hunting deer. Hans Räber stated that around the turn of the 20th to 21st century, there were two Billy packs that specialized in hunting boar. However, in 2017, they seemed to have disappeared. Today in France can be found only two or three

chasse à courre packs partly consisting of Billys.

The breed lost many fanciers because of its aggression in kennels, a characteristic that crept into the breed after the Second World War. The FCI standard states that an aggressive or shy Billy should be excluded from breeding.

Most Billys today are kept in small packs of 10 to 15 dogs. They excel at hunting fox and wild boar (*chasse-à-tir*). The Billy is not happy leading a quiet life; he feels most at home chasing game.

How extremely rare the Billy is nowadays is reflected in the standard work of Hubert Heuillet, *Tous les Chiens* (1934). The Billy does not appear in it! The same happened in van Bylandt's *Les Races de Chiens* (1904). According to the Dutch Scent Hound Club, the breed was never imported let alone used for breeding in the Netherlands.

The breed in America

When searching American websites for "Billy dog breed" or other combinations, there is no information at all. As in the Netherlands, the breed has apparently never been imported.



Typical Billy
(Photo: Ton Populier)