

Argente Noir

by Peter Smith



History

The Argente Noir was standardised in the UK in the late 1990s. The process to standardise them was started by me, as a result of, let's say, an episode of colour blindness.

As the gene pool for Bleus in the UK was diminishing, I asked a UK fancier who was visiting one of the shows in Holland in the mid-1990s to see if there were any Bleus over there, and if so, to see if they could bring one back. This was in the days of when rabbits had to go into quarantine in the UK.

I was told he had purchased a Bleu and that it was in quarantine at Lew Bevan's in Doncaster. Once the quarantine period was over, I arranged to meet Lew on the platform of Doncaster train station, as I was travelling back from London on business one day. I told him which carriage I was in and as we pulled in to Doncaster, I hopped off the train, picked up the box, paid Lew and jumped back on.

It had a good start in life as it travelled back to the North East in First Class, albeit it raised a few eyebrows when it started scratting in its box, but thankfully my fellow passengers turned a blind eye and the Guard didn't hear it.

Once I got back home, I eagerly opened the box, to find a beautifully typed buck, but immediately knew it was a Noir. With no Noir doe to mate him to, I put him to a Bleu doe and all of the resulting litter were Noirs.

I then put kept putting each subsequent generation of does back to this buck, and bred Noir to Noir all the way through to increase the percentage of Noir genes in each generation, and after the requisite number of presentations to the Breed Standards Committee, the Noirs were standardised.

They became popular very quickly, both from the original ones that I had bred from the initial buck I obtained, but also, given their availability in Continental Europe and the relaxing of the quarantine rules, it was easy to import them.

There were some good classes at the major shows and they had success too, with one belonging to Blackwidow Stud going best Fur in the three star young show at Bradford, as well as other wins at Open Shows and in stock shows.

However, numbers started to dwindle a little, and now there are only a few Noirs around the UK, which is a pity, as they are a striking rabbit in my view.

Type

Once again, a Noir, to all intents and purposes, should be a carbon copy of a Bleu, apart from colour. The standard is the same for both and it should be remembered that the standard says: 'fairly cobby body, short neck, markedly broad and rounded loins with wide, well developed hindquarters. Front legs straight, short and fine in bone.'

I have underlined the fine in bone extract, as many of the imports I have seen are quite thick in bone and go beyond being fairly cobby. The Argente is not a New Zealand White or an Alaska.

Colour

Noir - French for black. The young Noir is born a self-black and just like all the other Argente colours it undergoes the silvering process, which commences around the four weeks old stage and can take around five months to complete.

We have two aspects of colour to concentrate on. Firstly, the top colour and the evenness of this from nose to tail. This should be of a greyish white shade. The extent of the shade of this colour is determined by the extent of the longer black guard hairs (ticking) that come through the topcoat. Little or no ticking gives a very white looking rabbit, which is too light, but usually very even in colour. Too much and you get a blackish grey colour, with little or no sparkle.

So, what we want is the ticking, moderately interspersed, in order to show the sparkling shine that the silvering gives when coupled with the longer black ticking.

There have been some very dark exhibits, in all Argente colours, shown over the years, some of which have won rather large shows. Such exhibits, as well as very light ones, according to the standard, should be discouraged.

The dark ones usually have dark muzzles, ears and toe ends which, to my mind, on any colour of Argente, is undesirable. Even more undesirable is the dark body colour, due to excess ticking and a lack of silvering. Equally, the light ones have little or no ticking and appear almost white, they usually lack depth of undercolour as well.

So, it's really all about balance, getting the right mix of silvering and moderately interspersed ticking in the top colour and ensuring the evenness of colour throughout the Argente, whatever its undercolour.

It's not easy, but selective breeding and good stockmanship is the key to this, as well as taking advice from experienced breeders.

It is a source of deep frustration to knowledgeable breeders to see white-topped or dark coloured Argentes winning at major shows, which, in yesteryears, wouldn't have got a card under experienced breeder judges.

Time and again I hear non-breeder Judges saying that Argentes are one of the most difficult breeds to judge. That may be so, if you haven't kept them, so the sensible thing to do is ask experienced breeders and listen to them, rather than take either an educated guess, or just judge them on one facet, usually coat density. There's no shame in asking and more importantly, listening!

Secondly, the undercolour should be dark slate blue and extend as far down the hair shaft to the

skin as possible. In recent years this has been the main strength of Noirs, as most have very good undercolour. However, it should be remembered that it is deep slate blue, not black, and those which have undercolour tending towards a black shade are often those with the dark extremities referred to above.

As with all the Argente colours, it is a question of balance, and when judging them weighing up all the various components of the standard and then placing the rabbits accordingly.

However, what I would say is this, look at the faults and the seriousness of them. Dark ears and dark muzzles are faults, with white-topped or too dark exhibits to be discouraged. White toe-nails are a minor fault in all colours, except the Champagne which is a serious one, yet some Judges seem to jump on the white toe-nails and then totally overlook the more serious faults listed above. I rather think it should be the other way around, if the standard is applied properly.

Coat

The coat of the Noir should have the same length, density and texture properties of the Bleu, Brun and St Hubert. However, some of those from the Continent tend to be very harsh in coat, lacking the requisite silky texture and also the glossy top.

When I first crossed the Noir buck I received to a Bleu doe, the coat texture and glossy top came to the fore, as well as balanced colour from nose to tail. So there is certainly a way of getting good coats onto the Noirs, albeit it may take a few generations to get everything balanced out. It should also help the type and reduce down the strong bone found in some of the Continental Noirs.

Future

After a buoyant start to its life in the UK, once standardised, the number of Noirs being shown has unfortunately dropped off. However, they are more than capable of winning top honours at shows.

They are a very good natured breed and I'm sure that anybody starting out with them, either as a second breed or newcomer, would have no regrets in having some Noirs in their rabbitry.



Next: The St Hubert