

Building a Breed

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Introducing a new breed of dog into any country is a huge responsibility and undertaking. It takes a lot of courage, money and hard work to make it successful and thriving.

There are many obstacles in the path to establishment. It is common that many breeders in other countries do not sell their best breeding dog or puppies needed to start the foundation stock in the new country of interest. Sometimes there is a language difference to make communication difficult. There can also be few specimens of the breed available for using in another country if the breed is a rare or unhealthy one. If distances between the countries are far, it is difficult to use breeding dogs that would otherwise be available. The costs are usually quite high for these dogs as well as the shipping fees, if it is an overseas country that has the most available breed specimens. And these are just a few of the concerns involved with introducing a new breed!

The numbers of foundation animals needed to keep the gene pool diversified and healthy is also a major consideration. Six dogs is not even close to the amount of breeding dogs such a venture would

need. New blood in the form of unrelated dogs will be a constant need for many years to come.

When the breed that is considered for introduction, is not a healthy one in the mother country, these new genes come at more than just a monetary cost. Most breeders do not divulge all the genes they have in their stock willingly. It is the responsibility of the buyer to make themselves aware before they purchase a dog or puppy.

Sometimes this needed information is readily available in health registries or through friends in the mother country, but most times it is near impossible to know what "extras" come in your little package of puppy genes that is not indicated on the pedigree.

The Australian Shepherd is one of these breeds that is new to Hungary. Only a few have been imported to date. Even though the name starts with Australian, it is an American breed. It is nicknamed Aussie and came many generations ago to the United States. No one is positive as to its originating heritage, but it quickly became known as a swift, loyal and hard working dog by those that came into contact with it.

It is herding breed by classification and work ethics. It is a lovely dog with rich, vibrant colors and a soft plush coat in a medium sized, sweet tempered package. They come in several colors and patterns and are usually competitive in almost any dog related activity.

In the USA there are two distinct breeding lines, the show lines (as in conformation dog show) and working lines (as in sheep/cow herding). Some breeders try to cross the two to produce a dog that can be competitive as a show dog and can also work on the farm, but the offspring are not as easily guaranteed in such a cross. As a result, most breeders concentrate in one area or the other.

Most show line Aussies are not as talented with sheep or other dog activities due to the lack of breeding for working ability. Most working Aussies are not as heavily boned and coated as the show line Aussies as this is a disadvantage to working ability. A very heavy coat in 90 degree weather is conducive to heat stroke. Heavy body structure is not as easy to be agile with as the medium frame the Standard calls for.

The Australian Shepherd Standard, the blueprint for the breed, says the Aussie should be a dog of medium size and bone and of moderate coat. He

should be able to work all day and be agile and able to change direction or alter gait instantly. Non-typical coats are severe faults.

If a breeder chooses outward beauty over function, the working ability will be sacrificed. The Aussie is a working dog by nature not just a pretty face. Its form should follow its function, not the fashion of the show ring with enriched traits not suitable to the breed's purpose. This should be the case in every breed however, not just the Aussie. When enough generations have been bred without selection for working ability, the behavior will mostly be lost. How many generations are too many? No one knows exactly, but active selection for proper herding ability is a multi faceted one and needs to be consistently bred for with every generation or it is gone.

In the USA there are many Kennel Clubs and most recognize the Aussie. A few of the most popular clubs are the AKC (American Kennel Club), UKC (United Kennel Club) and ASCA (Australian Shepherd Club of America). The Australian Shepherd is also an accepted FCI breed.

ASCA is the original founder and owner of the Australian Shepherd breed and was founded in 1957. In the 1980's several breeders and

enthusiasts wanted to take the Aussie to AKC for breed recognition and formed a parent club, the USASA (United States Australian Shepherd Association) to parent the breed in AKC. The Aussie was eventually accepted and has been a recognized AKC herding breed since the 80's.

The Aussie comes in two accepted colors and several patterns. The two colors of black and red can be merled, solid, bi or tri patterned, with or without white markings and or copper points. There is no order of preference of color or pattern. The red color in the Aussie is genetically brown, but tradition keeps the name red. Occasionally other colors can be born in a litter, but are not accepted according to the standard and are not eligible to be shown in the conformation ring and should not be used for breeding.

The eye color can vary as much as the body color pattern. It can be brown, blue or amber with any combination or variation, including flecks and marbling and even two different colored eyes can be on the same dog. All are normal health wise and are accepted as naturally occurring eye colors in the breed.

The merle of the Australian Shepherd is the same merle as in the Collie, Border Collie and Sheltie. If

two merles within these breeds are bred together, approximately 25% of the resulting puppies will be deaf, blind or have microphthalmia (smaller than normal eye). The others will be approximately 50% merle and 25% solid, bi or tri. A litter consists on average of 8 puppies.

It is believed by geneticists that the merle pattern gene in these breeds carries with it a defective white gene that accounts for the birth defects. Other breeds that are largely white are also affected by hearing birth defects such as the Dalmatian and Bull Terriers. The merle pattern is not connected to any health problems in a normal heterozygous merled dog of any breed. It is only when the merle genes are doubled by breeding two merles together, that these problems may occur and a homozygous merle is born. These defective puppies can usually be detected at birth, as white will be the predominant color of the dog and one or both of the eyes and ears will be surrounded by white only. Any Aussie that exhibits lack of color around even one eye or ear should be tested for its ability to see and hear. Smaller than normal eyes can be seen within the first weeks after birth as well.

Red and black puppies can be born in a litter if both parents carry both color genes but are the

same color outwardly. The merle pattern can be produced only if one parent is a merle. Many breeders specialize in one color or the other with black tri's and blue merles being the predominant color and patterns bred more recently.

Along with these outward appearances are the temperament and health aspects of the Aussie. All dogs are a sum of their parts.

The temperament of the Australian Shepherd is one of an intelligent active dog with an even disposition. The dog should be good natured and not prone to fight. They can be somewhat reserved in meeting strangers. But any display of shyness, fear or aggression is incorrect and is a severe fault according to the breed's standard. The parents of any puppy or dog you are considering should be met to see their own temperaments as they also have a genetic influence on their offspring. Seeing other relatives is also valuable.

The health issues list for the Aussie is quite long and of great concern to some breeders in the US. Many breeders take part in disease research either through supplying the different research organizations with genetic material from their own dogs or through monetary support. It is interesting to note that in a recent well known

Australian Shepherd magazine, an ad asking for help with Epilepsy research was not sponsored by eight of the most well known Australian Shepherd breeders in the USA. I found this to be a very sad commentary on the future of the Aussie's health. Without the top show line breeders supporting the research, the increasing incidence of epilepsy will continue to grow at an alarming rate in the breed. According to one Aussie researcher, epilepsy in the show lines is so widespread that it is nearly impossible to avoid it, although it is less risky in some families than others. Any close relatives of an affected dog such as parents, offspring and siblings should be avoided for breeding purposes.

This long list of diseases can be attributed to several factors. The current popular breeding methods of linebreeding (which is the polite name for inbreeding), the use of popular sires, the intense desire to fix breed type and the rapid rise in popularity have all served to greatly stress and weaken the foundation of the Aussie as well as many other breeds. The Golden and Labrador Retrievers and Border Collie breeds have also struggled with these issues as have most popular breeds in the recent past in many countries around the world.

The Australian Shepherd was mainly a working dog used to herd cattle and sheep in the United States. As the dog sports grew, it was found that the Aussie like most of the other herding breeds, was quite good at these sports and the Aussie's fame as an excellent competitor grew. Sadly the health and temperament plummeted as the breeds popularity rose and today the Aussie is plagued by many diseases as are the other popular breeds.

The practices of close relative breeding and a few popular sires used too frequently, results in a higher common gene pool.

Aussies from show lines have an average 12.5% Coefficient of Inbreeding (COI) which translates to a half brother to half sister mating. Working lines on average are lower. These common genes mean more diseases, congenital defects and lower reproduction rates. The more closely related the parents are, the more likely the dog will have inherited problems. The top 12 inherited problems in Australian Shepherds today are:

Cataracts

Epilepsy

Bad bites and missing teeth (the Aussie should have a scissors bite and a complete set of teeth)

Autoimmune diseases

Hip Dysplasia

Iris Coloboma (a cleft in the iris)

Allergies

Cancer

Persistent pupillary membrane

Distichiasis

Retained testicles

Collie Eye Anomaly

The best breeders screen their breeding stock before breeding them for hip, elbow and patella problems after two years of age. Eyes should be annually certified free of the related diseases and can be tested at an earlier age. There are several other tests available as well and someday DNA will be able to identify those most at risk for breed specific diseases. Fortunately some of these problems can be identified before the dogs reach breeding age. Buy from a breeder who cares enough to test and removes these failed dogs from their breeding programs.

A good place to start your research for a healthy dog is the test registry websites which list the results for any dog or a puppy's parents you may be interested in. If the dog or the puppy's parents are not listed on these websites or the breeder cannot provide a recent certificate, then it should be assumed that it either has failed the exam or the breeder did not care enough to get the test done.

In either case, this dog/puppy should be avoided either for purchase or breeding.

The fewer dogs that are used in any breeding program the less is the genetic diversity that keeps the breed healthy. The lack of truthful information shared among breeders is also not productive for a healthy stock foundation. Much help is needed to be given a new breeder, and often little is offered by the experienced ones. So those new to the breed must look where they can for ways to overcome the odds and remain structurally and healthily sound.

Some other options include the use of Inbreeding coefficients (COI) which are an extremely useful tool to have available to keep your dogs genetically divergent. So is the internet, a computerized pedigree program, the health registries such as OFA, CERF and ASGHI (for US bred dogs) and breeder's networks and groups for pedigree research for disease occurrence and probability of recurrence in a prospective litter.

A good breeder will only breed animals that improve as well as compliment their existing ones, not add to the existing problems. A good breeding program will be one that produces puppies that are better than the parents in all aspects. A good

breeder can stand back and examine their dogs objectively and not be blind to their dog's faults and will make every effort to improve them and not just cover them over with some pretty decorations. A good breeder will breed only the best to the best and continue to build for the whole package while being honest with themselves and others and working for the best dogs they can produce and will help others to do the same along the way.

A good breeder does not just breed their dog to see what it will produce, or breed to every bitch to further his type among the population no matter the quality of the bitch. They will not breed a nervous or temperamentally unstable bitch to help her temperament improve (this is an old wives tale), breed a bitch more than once a year, or breed with animals that are less than two years of age. They don't give puppies away without pedigrees and breed close relatives together. A good breeder does not let puppies go to their new homes before 7-8 weeks of age and without several shots and worming already in effect.

A good stud owner will not breed to any bitch that appears on his doorstep. The stud will only be bred to bitches whose health tests are passed and are otherwise sound in temperament and structure.

The bitch's ability to perform the breed's purpose should also ideally have been tested.

Enumerating dogs is not what a good breeder does. Much thought and care should be exhibited by them. Profit is seldom, if ever, made in dog breeding. Dogs are not livestock. The best breeders do it because they love the breed and want to produce the best dogs possible so others can have a happy healthy dog to enjoy. Not for money in their pockets.

Some Australian Shepherd (and other American bred dogs) internet resource websites to help you locate healthy dogs are:

* www.hrdndog.com/pedigrees/index.htm this is a pedigree research site for Australian Shepherds

* C.A. Sharp's Open List is a list of Australian Shepherd's with genetic issues. If used with the website above this can be a very informative tool for seeing areas of potential concern in a dog or prospective litter planning. To request a copy of the list, post helix@qnis.net and type "Open List" in the subject line.

* OFA (Orthopedic Foundation for Animals) similar organization to FDB in Hungary. This is a website listing many different test results on most breeds of American bred dogs and other than just hip ratings results are often given. www.offaa.org

* CERF (Canine Eye Registration Foundation) verification of eye clearance screening website: www.vet.purdue.edu/~yshen/cerf.html

* ASGHI (Australian Shepherd Genetics and Health Institute) a website devoted to the Aussie with tons of info and useful links for breeders: www.ashgi.org

* ASCA (Australian Shepherd Club of America) www.asca.org

* AKC (American Kennel Club) www.akc.org

* UKC (United Kennel Club) www.ukcdogs.com

* USASA (United States Australian Shepherd Association) www.australianshepherds.org

Building a healthy breeding program in your dog kennel is the same as building a house. Without a strong foundation, sooner or later that house will fall down around you. The key foundation elements in your breeding program should be health, temperament, structure and the ability to do the breeds intended purpose. If you keep these as your top goals, your present and future house will be a solid one that will stand the test of time.

And one final note, please do not buy a puppy from a puppy miller, puppy trader or pet shop. These people and stores do not care for the animals they sell or trade, no matter what they tell you, they are only concerned with money. Be careful of internet purchases and please only purchase from a caring

and concerned breeder who sells from their home, not in a convenient parking lot. A caring breeder wants to know and keeps track of every puppy they sell. It is in your best interest to keep in contact with the breeder. If they are a good breeder, they will help you and answer your questions. The internet puppy buyers and sellers and the pet shops do not care once they have the money in their hands. A good breeder never sells through these people or places. Most breeders' prices are considerably less than these middle men charge as well. Be an aware and informed buyer, it is your greatest asset in developing your new breed!

(This article was written in August, 2004 and data may have changed since then.)