



**A GREENER WORLD**

# **Sheepdogs**

**Breeding, feeding, housing and welfare**

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**[www.bordercollies.co.uk](http://www.bordercollies.co.uk)**

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## Introduction

The training of a sheepdog requires skill and patience. If we imagine the stages of training as rungs on a ladder, the introduction to sheep should be approximately halfway up. The breeding of a puppy, the housing and general welfare must all be negotiated first and, as in any successful partnership, a bond must be formed between handler and dog.

To get in a car and drive it without due care and consideration will result in mechanical failure due to neglect. It is an accepted fact that cars which are cared for last longer and serve better – and they are merely machines. Dogs are not machines: they do not break down, they do not require expensive fuel to work, they will give and go on giving, and they will work above and beyond the call of duty. A good sheepdog makes a shepherd's life easier. A good shepherd reveres their sheepdog.

Learning lasts a lifetime, but a good foundation of knowledge makes the rungs on the training ladder easier to negotiate. The following information is a guideline to the foundation knowledge needed to create empathy between dog and handler. Never discount the importance of nutrition, breeding and general care of a dog, for too much of a good thing can be as harmful as too little. Feeding, training, breeding and all things pertaining to a sheepdog (Border Collie) require balance. Once the balance is understood it is the responsibility of each handler to adjust the scales to their own and their dog's individual requirements.

# Breeding

## Choosing a puppy

I have seen puppies with great potential fail to make good working dogs as a result of bad training and management; and I also have seen puppies of lesser breeding make excellent working dogs with sympathetic training. However, the better the breeding the better the chance of a good working dog. But good breeding does not necessarily mean famous parents, neither does two good working parents dictate that the offspring will be satisfactory workers. The breeding lines of the sire and the dam must be compatible. Quite often two very good lines, appearing to have all the qualities needed to produce a good litter, can produce a less than average litter because although both of good breeding, they were not compatible lines.

Choosing a puppy from unregistered stock does not necessarily mean it will not be of good quality. But unless the breeder has bred with the same line for a number of years and can provide a seven-generation pedigree, there is no way of knowing the genetics of the line.

Choosing from a registered litter means the pedigree can be seen, inbreeding would be obvious, and questions can be asked about the ancestors. It is advisable to choose a puppy from a person who is known for breeding quality stock but be aware that what one hander may find easy to train another may find difficult so do some research into the background of the parents and grandparents. Were they easy to train? Did they mature early or late? Were they gentle on stock or hard? All questions that don't have to be asked or points that don't have to be raised, but doing as much research as possible into the

background of a future working partner and soulmate is small price to pay for the years of loyalty received from the right dog.

## **Appearance**

It doesn't matter if a dog is not endowed with stunning good looks. The beauty of a collie lies within its grace, speed, and stamina, which together can produce a vision that can take the breath away. However, appearance can often be relative to character and temperament, so when choosing a puppy or a young dog it is worth taking into account its coat length and texture, its ears and the colour of its eyes. For although there is an exception to every rule, the appearance of a dog can often be a guide to its personality and to any little foibles it may have inherited.

## **Coat**

A short-coated dog often has a high energy level: a dog bred for long hours of hard work on wet ground. A short-coated dog with a naturally greasy skin can be higher again in energy and will usually be a strong dog. A dog with a very long coat is usually born of a lesser working strain (not very practical for wet work and often a show line).

## **Eyes**

A medium hazel brown colour usually denotes a dog with a good eye, plenty of power and not afraid of eye contact. This dog does not usually display too much 'eye' on sheep. A light amber eyed dog usually 'eyes on' to its sheep, often standing and staring as if hypnotized, this dog needs to be kept moving during training. A very dark brown eye is often lacking in

power and if faced with a stubborn sheep will often turn away rather than stand its ground.

A blue-eyed dog (wall-eyed) may not seem as easy to assess but if only one eye is blue then take notice of the colour of the other eye. If both eyes are blue the coat will tell its story as the dog will more than likely be, or be of, merle descent.

### **Ears**

Pricked ears often partner the short coat, a dog bred for work and for hearing over a great distance. Medium ears, neither pricked or dropped, will partner the temperament of the hazel eyed dog. Drop ears (spaniel type) will denote the similar characteristics of the very dark brown eyed dog.

### **Colour**

Colour genetics often pass down with temperament. If tri-coloured and black and white collies are mated the tri pups will often carry the temperament of the tri parent and the black and white pups the temperament of the black and white parent. The Border Collie is a popular breed as a companion and also in many of the canine disciplines with traditional black and white markings being the most popular. Over a period of years this has resulted in many of the farmer and shepherd's breeding lines being the tri-coloured puppies remaining in the litters, so tri to tri has bred more tri-colours of a strong working strain. Blue merle dogs are usually very high in energy and often earn the reputation of being difficult or too unreliable for consistent work, but once again the breed lines will explain the background of the merle and explain what ancestors are in the pedigree to influence its

potential.

These are only guidelines and are not always accurate; however, they can help to give some background information on a dog, how it will respond to training and how best to feed it to gain optimum potential. If the above information is studied carefully a pattern begins to emerge which, although not always accurate, is usually a reliable guide.

Energy levels will be higher in a short coated, greasy skinned dog with prick ears and amber eyes than in a medium coated dog with hazel eyes and medium ears. A short coat with prick ears will be higher than a medium coat with medium ears, but a medium coat with prick ears could be higher than a short coat with drop ears. If I were selling a puppy from short-coated prick eared parents, I would be dubious of a first-time collie owner being able to train it without difficulty. If someone were looking for a dog to do a lot of work, I would advise against a long-coated dog or one with drop ears. Collies have been bred to work and the criterion for a good dog is keen hearing plenty of stamina and able to work in all weathers. The nearer to this standard a dog is bred the more equipped it will be to do the work it was originally intended for, the more removed it is from this standard the less equipped it will be.

### **Amber eyes**

An amber-eyed dog is often protective of its personal space and resents direct eye contact. Some amber-eyed dogs will become aggressive if their space is not protected. For example, the dog stares at a stranger, the stranger stares back, the dog stiffens in resentment, the stranger is nervous, the dog growls and suddenly there is potential for aggression. These

dogs need protecting from such situations (i.e. the handler standing in front of the dog) until such time as they have matured enough to be able to cope with the situation without resentment.

A dog's body language is its silent form of communication and just as humans communicate in the same manner but with different dialects so is it beneficial to listen to what the dogs' body is telling by its appearance before it actually begins to 'speak'.

## Feeding

Correct diet is important for growth, and later for maintenance, the *intake* of protein must be kept in balance with the *output* of energy.

A puppy will treble in height during the first three months of its life and then slow down to *double* in height for the next two to three months, from then on filling out and maybe another inch of growth will take the dog through adolescence to maturity. So the protein needs reducing at three months and then again at approximately five to six months, I prefer to feed 27% down to 24% and then to a maintenance of 20%.

A dog needs to be able to work out situations, a working dog literally thinks on its feet, and it cannot do this efficiently if it is 'drunk' on protein. Energy should be the result of stamina not high protein, if a dog is high on protein, it will soon run itself out of energy and can injure itself whilst doing so. If a dog has stamina and is sober it will learn to pace itself and not to act without thinking.

If a young dog in training is proving a handful try altering the protein level of its food but be aware that a dog can become 'high' in a week and take a month to come back down. The higher the dog the further down the protein must drop in order to create a balance, a drunken person will not sober up on a glass of alcohol a day!

By using the information in the first section a diet can be worked out to suit individual dogs. For example, the short coated, prick eared dog may need lower protein as a maintenance diet than its medium coated medium eared cousin. Once again, a pattern is emerging forming useful guidelines.

Raw meat is high in protein; colourants and preservatives can cause hyperactivity;

flaked maize can cause coughing; and an all-maize diet can result in vitamin B deficiency. A very expensive diet is not necessary and is not always the best, but food that appears economical can often prove expensive. I have twice tested an average priced food with a cheaper product by carefully weighing the food and the dogs I was feeding; I kept a record over a period of three months and in each case the cheaper food worked out at two pence a feed more expensive. It may not seem a great deal but over a period of time the extra pennies would become a substantial outlay for a food that was more bulk than goodness. It is worth the time and effort of learning to understand the ingredients in the various foods on offer and selecting carefully for your dog's energy requirements.

## Housing and Welfare

A dog is entitled to its own space; it deserves good clean accommodation where it can seek peace and rest at the end of each working day. A place where it can eat, chew a bone or simply enjoy its own company away from the intrusion of other dogs. Whether this is in the home, a barn, kennel or dog is a matter for personal preference.

### **Kenneled**

If a dog is not expected to be engaged in a lot of work and the handler is unable to provide much free time for the dog then a kennel may not be a good choice. Being on a chain is not a bad thing for a dog, in fact most young dogs will benefit from spending some time tethered. However, to be on a chain every day and night without the freedom to run and graze, in my opinion, is restrictive of body and therefore of mind. Not all dogs can be given an option, restricted building space, need for a dog in the yard, or even the dog itself being destructive or badly behaved when unchained (but what happened to make it like this).

The kennel and surrounding area must be kept clean and dry, ample shelter should be provided against wind and rain. The kennel itself must be completely draught and rain proof and the dog must be allowed ample opportunity to stretch its legs and have some free time at least twice a day. A good supply of clean dry bedding should be available each night with a 'digging strip' across the inside of the kennel; this prevents the bedding being scattered outside when the dog digs its bed.

**For** - the dog is readily available, acts as yard protection and has always has something to

see.

**Against** - being on a chain and unable to get to what it sees can cause frustration and barking, sharp dogs can become aggressive, constant exposure to the elements can cause arthritis.

### **Outbuilding**

An empty stable or a barn will provide the previous accommodation plus room for exercise and freedom for the dog to move around without the restriction of a chain. However, dogs like a small and compact sleeping area where they can feel safe and can easily generate warmth so provide a small box or straw kennel for the dog's sleeping quarters. It may choose not to use it or it may prefer to find its own quarters but to not provide one is supplying only half accommodation to a dog whom you expect to provide full commitment to duty.

**For:** The dog has freedom to move around and is protected from the elements.

**Against:** Has nothing to see and can start chewing or barking from boredom although a wire door can provide good vision.

*If not practicable to provide a wire door the two can be combined, with the kennel for dry days and the building/or nights and wet days.*

### **Purpose built run**

Expensive unless you are good at D.I.Y. but it can combine both of the previous methods of housing with the advantage of the dog being able to see sit out with adequate vision and shelter and still have a snug dry sleeping area. Once it is made or purchased it will be too late for alterations so make sure it is planned carefully, a covered run is essential as wet paws make wet beds and this is an ongoing problem with kenneled dogs. A solid floor for the run is essential for cleanliness and to prevent digging, also for ease of cleaning out it should be high enough to stand inside it. This height will mean the sleeping quarters will need a small box or bed inside for the dog to sleep in, an oversight in many ready-made dog runs.

**For:** Provides the benefits of the outbuilding and kennel under one roof

**Against:** As with the kennel if the dog gets wet so will the bedding and seeing farm yard action can cause pacing if it is not situated in a quite area.

### **In the home**

If a dog is expected to be doing a lot of wet and dirty work, it will not be an option for it to live in the house but a warm utility or boiler-room can serve as good canine housing. I have never agreed with the theory that a working dog must live outside, when I was in full time shepherding my bitch, Meg, worked with 2,000 sheep, was in the English team in the international trials and slept on my bed. However, I was aware I had to make sure she did not take advantage of either myself or the home and the evening before a trial she was

confined to sitting quietly in her own area in the house and was not given the concession of wandering around at will. I have had several dogs that this method has worked with, and I have had several who were not taken into the house until they were older and had lost the youthful enthusiasm of 'I know best'. Each method of housing will be suited to one dog and person and not to another so be honest about your relationship with your dog before you give it the concession of the house. If it takes advantage of you outside the house, there is a danger of it becoming willful if you move it in.

**For:** Ideal for getting to know your dog and creating a bond, also provides a good family companion.

**Against:** The dog needs to be house trained and the handler must work hard at keeping the dog's respect for it will not be looking forward to the handler's company as an outside dog would, the dog could begin to take the handler for granted.

Just as too much restriction of freedom can cause frustration and barking so can too much freedom cause contempt of mental and physical boundaries. A dog allowed the run of a farm or of an acre paddock will assume ownership of that allotment. Take care that a dog understands it owns only its own space, be it any of the previous or a comer in the house, the rest of the property whether a garden or hundreds of acres belongs to the handler. This will ensure respect from the dog towards the handler and to the mental and physical boundaries the handler designates to the dog.

## Health

All dogs should be wormed regularly. Worms and fleas are two parasites that will be found together and should be avoided at all costs. Regular administration of garlic on the feed will greatly help reduce the risk of either and a regular worming program of a good veterinary product several times a year will ensure a clean healthy dog. Puppies will need to be vaccinated against the main diseases and a vet will advise when and at what age. For those seeking alternative to the orthodox, there is a homeopathic remedy for the same diseases but once again expert advice should be sought before making any final decisions.

Hip Dysplasia (HD) will not usually occur if a careful breeding program has been followed, but even the best and most knowledgeable of breeders can produce a throwback (you can guide genes, but you cannot dictate). Should this occur, most breeders will offer both advice and help. However, HD (Hip Damage) is quite common and the responsibility for this cannot be passed back to the breeder. Too high a protein diet, too much twisting and turning, playing too much with a ball or another dog, working too hard too soon, the list is endless but any of the previous overindulged in, when the dog is young and the bones still soft, can result in damage. A dog will grow, mature, and develop in its own time as nature dictates, to rush this natural process, to force a dog into maturity before it is ready will not gain time. In fact, it will slow the dog's training program as it will revert back to its youth at the time it would normally be maturing. So, what is gained at one end is lost at the other. A youth prematurely promoted can bankrupt a business! Allow a dog to develop slowly and promote only when it is ready, and it will always think before it acts.

## **Eyes and coat**

A puppy, whether registered or otherwise, should be from eye tested parents. Breeders and the ISDS have been vigilant in the past century to ensure that this perfect working partner has vision to last its lifetime. Dogs with Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA) and Collie Eye Anomaly (CEA) are now few and far between but if PRA or CEA is in both maternal and paternal lines of breeding then the chances are that a puppy from the line will either carry or be affected the disease. Both these eye diseases need thoroughly understanding to ensure that a sound puppy or young dog is purchased, and also to ensure that any future breeding stock will not pass either of these eye problems on to their progeny. As this booklet is only touching the tip of the iceberg and both eye diseases need in-depth explanations I strongly recommend that each student does separate research on both PRA and CEA in order to ensure a comprehensive knowledge of the subject.

## **Coat**

Most dogs will keep themselves clean but a dog constantly working in mud should be washed or hosed down before the mud dries, please take into consideration the weather for standing under a cold hosepipe in summer may be welcomed but would you like it in winter? Keep the ears clean and free from tangles and regularly check the body, coat and pads for thorns. A long-coated dog may seem hot in summer but clipping the coat is not the answer, the coat is long for a reason and when removed the dog will suffer in extremes of heat, cold or wet. A healthy dog with a clean coat is a happy dog.

## **Empathy**

To expect a dog to give out one hundred percent without putting one hundred percent in is selfish. A handler with a good dog will be saved from needless running, from worrying if a sheep is hiding behind a wall, from being driven to exasperation when trying to pen wayward ewes and lambs. A shepherd asks a lot from a dog and always receives, a dog asks for nothing but a kind word a loving touch and a best friend. If it is too much trouble for one person to spend time getting to know that dog, to understand its needs, to create a bond with it, then perhaps there isn't really time to have a dog.

Quality time is essential, it can be a quiet moment when checking fences, a walk home on an evening, a shared lunch but that little bit of effort can be so rewarding and the look in a dog's eyes when you walk towards it will say it all.

**Happy training to all!**

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## Useful contacts

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### **International Sheep Dog Society (ISDS)**

+44 (0)1234 352672

### **American Border Collie Association**

[www.americanbordercollie.org/](http://www.americanbordercollie.org/)

### **American Border Collie Association Health and Education Foundation**

[www.bordercolliefoundation.org/](http://www.bordercolliefoundation.org/)

## Useful reading

*Training The Sheep Dog*

Longton/Sykes

*Understanding Border Collies*

Sykes

*Basic Training for Sheepwork*

Carpenter

*Dog Owner's Veterinary Handbook*

Bower and Young

*Old Working Dogs*

Hancock