

## **HOW TO JUDGE THE SHETLAND SHEEPDOG**

How often do I hear from judges, who do not come from the working group, that their bogus breed in this group is The Shetland Sheepdog. The Sheltie breeders find this hard to comprehend, but if we sit back and look at the results and look at the wide variance in our breeds' champions, this statement has to have a high degree of truth to it.

To judge this breed you simply have to, in your mind, strip away the coat and the ears, and take yourself back to the origins of the breed, its original functions and the form that that dictates.

The Shetland Islands are a quite rugged and unforgiving homeland. The terrain is mostly hilly, it is windswept but it is the birthplace of the Shetland Sheepdog. Like all breeds, their ancestry is a little shrouded, but fair to say that they came from the northern sheepherding dogs of the region and small rough coated collies, there is the King Charles Spaniel in there as well, primarily because that breed was the breed associated with the nobility, and why not have some noble breeding in our shelties.

The rugged windswept terrain dictated that the sheltie must be agile and nimble, the bigger rough coated collie simply didn't cut the mustard here, also the shepherds and flock minders of the time were poor and their sheepdogs had to do a man's job on a boy's wage. Hence the backdrop for an agile sheepherding dog, with a waterproof coat, keen and loyal to work, constructed to work tirelessly with a calming influence on the stock, saw the Sheltie evolve.

As there were no boundary fences and the flock moved on every few days, the Sheltie had to quickly learn those boundaries, had to keep the flock contained in a calm and soothing manner, and treated every stranger as an enemy. They bonded to the Shepherd and his family quickly in a loving and biddable way...that was their whole world.

With that backdrop of the breed let us put those parameters and characteristics into judging the Shetland Sheepdog. Whilst the Sheltie is a graceful breed with great beauty, none the less first and foremost it is a working dog...that is why it in that group. The first impression comes from the beauty and grace of its outline, it is from its nose to its toes a line of graceful curves and sweeps, never angles and bumps. Whilst it has a size restriction; it has to be agile and nimble, never cloddy or coarse, it should give that impression.

The head description is simple enough, wedge shaped with the skull and muzzle on parallel planes separated by a slight but definite stop. Don't ever be afraid of flattening the ears with your hands and looking at that head in profile. Almond eyes are simply that...almond, we all know the shape of almond nuts, and we all know the round shape of M&M's. The coat has to

be waterproof and warm, at times living almost continuously in light rain or mist and harsh winds. Profuse coat is nice in the show ring, but profuse and correct are not necessarily the same thing. The harsh outer coat is easily felt, as is the softer dense undercoat. They often received far away commands from their shepherd owners; they listened with tipped ears, but only momentarily as they then carried out those instructions.

One of their prime attributes was to be able to softly, calmly and continuously circulate the flock, keep them contained and to let them graze quietly whatever the terrain. That ability in movement to circulate on and off all day in all conditions is paramount. Only the correct front and rear construction in balance will deliver this. Upper arm must be of equal length to the shoulder blade, with the withers positioned at the start of the back, not half way up the neck. Place your hands on the wither, visualize a plumb-bob perpendicular line from your hand to the ground, a correct front will see that line dissect the bones of the lower leg. If the “toes are under the nose” instead of just forward of the withers, then the upper arm and its angulation is simply not correct. Moving effortlessly and smoothly gives rise to what I have described as having a calming effect on the flock. A good measure of their angulation and balance is their ability to handle all show-ring conditions and just power through it. Under undulating conditions incorrect fronts are often found out with breaking gait, choppy front movement and tails carried high. Don’t blame the length of the grass...they didn’t close mow the flock area in the Shetland Islands!

The correct top line rises slightly over the loins with a low set tail on a sloping croup acting as the perfect rudder. A tail curled up over the back is usually set way too high, and is carried high to act as a rudder to an out of balance Sheltie. Short rear hocks add the finishing touches to a powerful yet beautiful dog.

So I ask judges of our lovely breed to take note of their background and what they were bred for. Yes they have a lovely coat, and yes that can be shaped, but they are first and foremost a working dog. Strip away that exterior glamor, on the move look at the front foot fall, consider if the movement is far reaching, effortless and “soft”, consider the outline, is it continuous and sweeping, does it have the look of agility, does it give the impression of having great jumping power for its size. This is the true sheltie.

There will be some advocates that will say that it is the show ring, and that profuse coat and continuous showing are important ingredients, to which I respond. This approach gives rise to a generic Sheltie, and if this approach was correct in this breed and many others we will lose breed type for ever. The generic Sheltie was never in the minds of the Shetland islanders, they had a job to do, a man’s job at that, to which a boy’s wage was recompense enough.

I have refrained from delving into the breed standard in detail; everyone is capable of reading that in its entirety. The aim has been to show you how to judge the Sheltie, and to point out with good reasons the more important breed characteristics.

Ray Greer