

# Long Coat German Shepherd Dogs

A brief history and comment on  
Long Coated German Shepherd Dogs  
By Louis Donald

Louis has been involved in German Shepherd Dogs for over 50 years. He was President of the German Shepherd Dog Council of Australia [GSDCA] for 20 years, is a Working Dog Judge and Australia's only fully licenced SV Breed Judge.



Records show that the immediate forebears of the German Shepherd Dog first came into recognition as show exhibits in 1882 and were catalogued as 'German Sheepdogs'. The name 'German Shepherd Dog' came into existence in 1892 with the formation of the first club dedicated to the creation of a standardized sheepherding dog; this was the Phylax Society (Greek for guardsman). Ironically, given today's ever widening show dog versus working dog environment, the club was bogged down with constant factional bickering, disagreements and arguments related to the pursuit of show dog attributes versus working dog attributes. The constant acrimonious arguments regarding the direction in which the breed should be developed eventually led to the Phylax Society being disbanded in 1894.

The Phylax Society was replaced in 1899 by a club called the 'Verein für Deutsche Schäferhunde' (Club for the German Shepherd Dog and generally referred to by the acronym "SV"). 1899 was also

the year of the publication by the SV of the first written German Shepherd Dog breed standard. The SV today is the largest single breed club in the world with 65,000 members and, whilst it is a member of the FCI, it is totally autonomous. The SV controls all matters associated with the breed in Germany and has an enormous influence over the breed in most countries via the 'World Union of German Shepherd Dog Associations' and generally referred to by the acronym 'WUSV'. The WUSV currently has 350,000 members through 85 member clubs in 76 countries.

The first President of the SV was Captain Max von Stephanitz. Captain von Stephanitz had a very strong interest in the Phylax Society, attended many of its dog shows and corresponded frequently with its members. The initial and continued success of the SV can be attributed to von Stephanitz very strong autocratic style and clear, unswerving and determined opinion in regard to the form and direction the breed should take. He was never interested in a dog's beauty for its own sake, and lived by his family's coat of arms motto '***Do right and fear no one***' and his mantra for the breed '***utility comes before appearance***'. Max von Stephanitz saw beauty in a German Shepherd Dog as being anything that reflected fundamental working dog ideals and in his eyes the better the working attribute the more beautiful the dog. Admirable ideals that in effect made the German Shepherd Dog extraordinarily popular at every level of society and in many utilitarian pursuits but since his time and that of his immediate predecessors these ideals have become often preached but in a number of areas watered down rhetoric.

For the reader's interest, Max von Stephanitz was a Cavalry Captain and when he became President of the SV in 1901 he was 37 years of age. He remained President until 1935 when the Nazi party which had by then virtually taken over the SV literally gave him no choice but to resign. Sadly he died a year later.

At this point the reader might ask 'what does the early history of the breed have to do with the recent acceptance of long coats and the acceptance of only very specific long coat hair?' Further reading of my short historical overview will answer that question.

The first 'German Shepherd Dog' to be registered with the SV was an approaching 5 year old Thüringen type sheepdog purchased by Captain von Stephanitz in April 1899 at an all breeds dog show in Karlsruhe called Hektor Linksrhein. Already a very popular stud dog with wolf like features and by sheep dog standards of the day a medium sized dog (according to von Stephanitz he was 62.3 cm high and one would imagine this influenced the mid-size measurement for the standard). He was bred by Friedrich Sparwasser of Sparwasser kennels and whilst it seems to me his original name would have been 'Hektor vom Sparwasser (and there is some historical material available both inferring and stating that this is the case) *the vast majority of material that has been written states that* that his name was always '*Hektor Linksrhein*'. Regardless, when purchased by von Stephanitz he was renamed '*Horand vom Grafrath*'; Grafrath being the kennel name of von Stephanitz and all German Shepherd Dogs are descended from him.

The earliest registered German Shepherd Dogs came via an ancestry of a diverse range of German shepherding dogs that existed right across Germany and whilst there was great disparity in their type and certainly great disparity in their coat hair, coat colour and even their undercoat in a broad geographical context, there was similarity between one another based on the region they came from. For example, not all but many dogs from Saxony were long coated, very similar to what we now call long stock coat, colour varied indeed some were blue brindle in colour like a blue merle collie. Other regions provided an equal array of features; height and foreleg length varied relative to

flatter pastures versus steep hillsides and mountains and the size of the sheep in that region. Ears went from high set to low set, erect to semi-erect to pendulous, but in relation to the topic at hand, like colour there were a great many variations in coat hair. There was normal length harsh smooth close lying coat, long soft silky coat, short wiry harsh coat, long harsh smooth close lying coat, short smooth coat, long soft and long harsh wavy coat, long shaggy coat – think Bearded Collie, rough curly coat, and worthy of mention were early banned non albino black pigmented white normal and white shaggy coats. Horand von Grafrath's maternal grandfather Greif vom Sparwasser was a non-albino white normal coat (dark eyed white) and all non-albino white coats descend from him. There are many opinions on whites, some factual and some spurious. For further information on the history of non albino white coats ref. '*Berger Blanc Suisse*'

From this great diversity the German Sheepdogs that had the greatest influence on the breed's early development came primarily from two regions, Thuringia and Württemberg and whilst these sheepdogs were quite different to one another, in the visionary eyes of von Stephanitz they were complimentary. Dogs from Thuringia had a general conformation somewhat like today's German Shepherd Dogs, that is they were wolf like but by sheepherding dog standards relatively small and stocky, a little on the coarse side, had good length of coat hair that was straight dense harsh smooth close lying and tended to be wolf grey in colour. They were very vigorous, highly energetic, had low set erect ears and shortish tails that had a tendency to curl. Wurttemberg dogs were larger, heavier boned, more diverse in coat length, had longer well carried tails that were quite bushy. They had a tendency to soft semi erect and even pendulous ears and on this latter point it is interesting to know that erect upright ears were relatively uncommon with sheepherding dogs of that time. On a final note, according to von Stephanitz unlike the very vigorous and highly energetic Thuringian dogs, Württemberg dogs were not bubbling over with 'joie de vivre'.

I am sometimes asked, "Did the long hair come from the wolf?" Putting aside the evolutionary development of the dog it has been speculated, and indeed in my mind highly probable, that wolf blood was incorporated into some of the very early German wolf like Sheepdogs and possibly even into a very small number of the 'very early' German Shepherd Dogs but my opinion and therefore my response to that question is; straight harsh normal length hair with a dense undercoat would be a genetic connection to wolves, not soft and or silky long hair, be it with or without undercoat, and most definitely it would not be the latter.

Whilst they were not German, other breeds being used to work sheep in Germany at that time included the then very popular imported Smooth and Rough Coated Collies and although this will upset owners of Rough Coated Collies, it is interesting and in the context of this paper perhaps even insightful to know that von Stephanitz greatly admired the Smooth Coated Collie but abhorred the Rough Coated Collie which he referred to as the 'Long Haired Collie'. In written breed standard terms the structure/skeleton of a Smooth Coated Collie is the same as a Rough Coated Collie but he referred to the Rough Coated Collie as being an unnatural caricature, he said it was the Collie of the fancy breeder, that with its long silky coat it was only bred for beauty's sake and was kept for luxury and showing. He said it had a narrow small head, weak teeth and an overbred face drawn into an overlong nose, he said its head looked like the head of an anteater and that the long coat hid their slender bones and weak body build thereby giving a false outward handsome appearance. He went on to say that the daily beauty treatment of a Rough Coated Collie takes hours to perform and they lacked the necessary strength to stop and round up stubborn sheep. I have never read any specific reference by him in relation to the impact of the long profuse coat of the Rough Coated Collie in

regard to its suitability in a working environment. When he makes reference to how the Rough Coated Collie's coat masked the dog's structure and created an illusion of strength, in my mind possibly wrongly, given his admiration for the smooth coated collie there seems to be a hint of a suggestion that he believed the rough coated collies 'long silky coat' had a genetic attachment to bone strength, that is, it was a 'linked trait'.

In 1903 von Stephanitz was obviously focused enough on the Rough Coated Collie that he had the SV publish a report on their performance at SV sheep tending competitions and that report concluded they were quite unsatisfactory in fulfilling the sheep tending function. Incidentally, if you are a German Shepherd Dog judge and don't know what sheep tending is as opposed to sheep herding, then I recommend you make yourself familiar with the term.

From his early writings von Stephanitz made it very clear that long silky hair 'with or without undercoat' was totally unsuitable for a German Shepherd Dog. He said that long silky hair quite often had no undercoat and when it is associated with a part along the back the part forms a rain channel that holds water and drenches the skin. He said long shaggy hair in wet weather will collect lumps of earth when the dog is in the field and frozen lumps of snow during the winter. He also stated that long silky or long shaggy hair is inferior to smooth straight hair with suitable hardness and length because it does not offer suitable protection against heat, cold and wet. Everything is relative especially in regard to the dogs 'normal environment' but I am sure there would be people in some other breeds who would care to differ on this latter point. My personal observation is that long hair, particularly long hair that lacks density tends to break open slightly when it is wet and therefore the undercoat in a cold climate becomes all the more vital.

Putting aside von Stephanitz very strong opinion of 'long silky hair' and 'long shaggy hair' and the operative but ambiguous word is long, both types of coat hair will by their length and ensuing falling weight create a natural part along the back (the part has absolutely nothing to do with lack of undercoat ) it is important to be aware that von Stephanitz was just as concerned about hair that was too short as he was about hair that was too long and in effect his opinion here was the same; *'undesirable for breeding with undercoat' - 'not suitable for breeding without undercoat'.*

When making an assessment of coat, his following comments are of great significance; ***'coats must be judged simply from the point of view of serviceability because otherwise such dogs are not of importance for the breed.'***

There is considerable focus in Australia by Specialist Judges and Breed Surveyors on the undercoat. Attention to undercoat is obviously very important but like everything it needs to be kept in context and kept in balance. It also needs to be kept in mind particularly at Breed Survey level that we are talking about 'inherent undercoat'. A comment I hear quite a bit is that it is not uncommon for long haired dogs not to have undercoat. This stems from von Stephanitz stating that long soft hair, long silky hair and long shaggy hair 'often appeared' with little to no undercoat. The fact that like the outer coat there are inherent degrees of density of undercoat makes an assessment and judgement all the more harder especially for someone who is not experienced in the breed. One accepts that what von Stephanitz said about linked outercoat/undercoat was the case back in those early days but it is important to keep in mind there was far greater diversity in dogs, the blood pool and the coat type back at that early period. My observation is that today there are only a relatively small percentage of long haired German Shepherd Dogs who totally lack inherent body undercoat and I make the following comment even though it is stating the obvious; dogs who have undercoat shed

their undercoat annually therefore if after checking for undercoat and there is some doubt, as with all matters associated with judging dogs I recommend that you give the benefit of doubt to the dog.

The person who first made the decision that German Shepherd Dogs with long coat without undercoat were 'unsuitable for breeding' and dogs with a long coat with undercoat were 'less suitable for breeding' was von Stephanitz and therefore any judgement of coats should be done with as best an understanding as we can of his reasoning.

Many people would be unaware that with the implementation of the Breed Survey Scheme in Germany in 1922, by the specific instructions of von Stephanitz, rough coated and shaggy coated German Shepherd Dogs were removed from the SV breeding pool and that 'long coats with undercoat' were allowed to be breed surveyed and exhibited and continued to be allowed to be exhibited and breed surveyed right up until the late sixties. Whilst the long coats with undercoat could be exhibited at shows, the highest grading permitted was 'Good' and the highest breed survey classification permitted was Class 2. I could not find a record of the actual date when this was brought to an end but it was brought to an end and a new rule was introduced by the SV that disallowed long coats with undercoat being exhibited and breed surveyed. As surveys and breeding are officially linked in Germany, in effect the SV moved 'long coats with undercoat' from being 'less suitable for breeding' to 'unacceptable for breeding'.

Then to the surprise of many the SV amended the Standard, effective 23 December 2010, reversing this 40 odd year old rule and allowing 'long coats with undercoat' to be exhibited and breed surveyed commencing with the SV 2011 breed survey year but kept at arm's length from 'normal coats' in so far as not allowing the mating of a normal coat to a long coat. Why this decision was made by the SV, which was automatically endorsed by the FCI, is open to some conjecture but most likely it was to incorporate a very substantial number of dogs onto the SV register and into its declining membership and then beneficially on to the sport at large.

So what are the exact requirements, definitions, and differences between the two outer coats?

For judges who are not involved in the breed it is important to be aware that like many breeds with both short and long coat the structure/skeleton is required to be identical to the long coat

It is important to keep in mind too that with normal coated dogs there are varying coat lengths, texture and density, all be it in relatively small degrees. Density determines a coat's flatness to the body but with long coats, as can be seen in the photographs of the two long coated German Shepherd Dogs provided in this article, the range is far greater and this will cause considerable confusion for the inexperienced especially when it becomes borderline long coat/normal coat, coat that is too long and or too profuse and even in rarer cases that I have seen where the coat is a throwback mix of normal coat/ long coat.

Normal coat (*stock coat*) is short, straight, harsh (as in hard and strong) and close lying whereas long coat (*long stock coat*) is long, soft as opposed to harsh and not so close fitting. This last point is where there can be ambiguity and it is important to understand and evaluate, as this is one of the reasons/arguments as to why long coat is not desirable and therefore this variable factor, all be it in a micro sense, determines its degree of undesirability. Both types of coat should have short hair on their head and inside their ears. The long coats have slightly longer hair on the back side of their forelegs, on their feet, on their toes, longish in the front and side of the ears and on the back of their hocks. The coat around the neck is longer and heavier on the long coats and the softer coat gives the

end of the hair wispieness. They have substantially more breeching and fullness of hair to the back of their thighs and again you can see this in the two long hair photographs. The guard hairs under the underchest tend to finish with wisps that are often carried just forward of the forelegs onto the lower part of the fore chest. The long coats have a much bushier tail that should be flattish when viewed from the side rather than roundish with flagging hanging down and often these hairs end in wisps.

What are the key elements of concern that should be observed with the long coats?

Interpretation in any written standard always creates some degree of ambiguity and even disagreement especially in relation to degrees of latitude e.g. words such as moderately, slightly etc. but the big standout which you won't see very often and probably never in the show ring is distinctly long silky hanging wispy coat. This coat will be associated with a distinct open part along the back which may or may not be associated with little to no undercoat and this coat is associated with refined bone structure that is clearly manifested in the head. The head, skull and foreface are relatively narrow and whereas a correct head has an equal length of skull to foreface (muzzle) the foreface will tend to be disproportionately longer. There will be a tendency to be slab sided therefore narrow chested and as a consequence when viewed from the front they will be standing with the elbows pinched in and the feet turned out. Whilst typical this refinement of bone is not just associated with dogs with this type of coat; whilst not an associated characteristic, it can to varying degrees, be seen in the normal coats as well. The following characteristics are all relative to the 'normal long coat' and therefore experience is required to make an exact determination. But it is undesirable to have excessive hair such as wispy tufts of hair sticking out and up from the top of the ears, excessively long wispy pronounced feathering coming away from the back of the forelegs and having a tail that is too bushy or too round with very long open and hanging hair feathering. The issue of undercoat is very important and I have tried to explain the background, historical rationale, issues and vagaries of this and to make the point that undercoat is very important to a working dog especially one working in very cold climates but the degree of weighting applied to it in a judging sense needs to be done after taking into account the detailed structure of the outer coat, that is, its ability or otherwise to act as a first defence against the various extremes of weather. In other words the outer coat and the undercoat should not be treated as totally separate and unconnected elements. In the context of judging and breed surveying one has a bearing on the other.

In genetic terms the short hair gene is dominant to the long hair gene and this in itself tells you a great deal or at least it should! The long coat is a recessive gene and for those not familiar with basic genetics this means that a normal to normal coat mating where neither parent carries the recessive gene will not produce any long coats but where both parents are normal coats and both carry the long coat recessive gene there will be long coats. In mathematical terms a dog carrying the recessive gene will pass on the long hair allele 50% of the time. To my knowledge, not a lot of research has been done in regard to long coat German Shepherd Dogs but the percentage of long coats relative to the German Shepherd Dog population is proportionately quite high, in the region of 25% (Willis) and I was told that in Germany it is about 23%. I have no idea what the percentage of those might be that are 'genuinely inherently devoid of undercoat' and contrary to some expert opinion I suggest it is small and this fact needs to be kept in mind when assessing the undercoat.

To conclude and playing '*devil's advocate*', is a German Shepherd Dog that has a long coat, be it soft or harsh with undercoat, less suitable than a dog with a normal coat for use as a sheep herding / tending dog?

If you agree with what von Stephanitz said in regard to the impact of weather on long coats one could argue that whilst this may be an impediment in countries like Germany that have severe winters and snow, it would not be an impediment in countries that do not have severe winters with snow and I say this with full appreciation of the implications in regard to countries that have the opposite extreme of severe summers and sun. To qualify; undercoat is a cold weather protection, that's why dogs shed undercoat in summer so in hot climates we are only talking about the outer coat, effectively the reflective coat. Just keep in mind that there are many breeds that have long and or profuse and even shaggy coats that work in the open in severe winters with snow and in such conditions even work in freezing water and 'providing they have suitable density of undercoat' they don't have a problem, indeed some even relish the conditions. The Canadian originated Newfoundland comes to mind but much closer to home and for a broad range of reasons are Border Collies. Descendants of Roman/Viking- introduced herding dogs, prior to being officially named Border Collies, they were not nearly as diverse in their type as with the 'German Sheepdogs' because unlike Germany the development of specific sheepdog breeds from the broad population was well advanced in the UK. In regard to the Collie, there was variability in type as with the early 'German sheepdogs' and this was also influenced by the terrain in which they worked. This breed in the 'collie' name was first acknowledged around 1893 and eventually through the primary influence and direction of one man and the formation of a club to develop the breed they were officially named Border Collie in 1915. Like Hektor, aka Horand, most modern day Border Collies descend from one outstanding sheepdog and his name was 'Old Hemp' who for historical chronological interest was born just 4 months before Horand. At that time there were also variations in coat length depending on region. There were longish rough coats and normal shorter smooth coats and interestingly there were two types of ears, erect and semi erect. Although the creators of the Border Collie standard recognised that the longer coat took longer to dry, attracted dirt, snow balls, grass burrs and the like, they did not consider the long coat to be a weather issue nor to be of such detriment to the dog working stock as to disregard the long coats from the breed. As a side interest, because ears are an aesthetic/beauty related issue and their focus was uncompromisingly placing working attributes ahead of show attributes they did not have a problem with the variation in ears. Their permissible coats are short and moderately long coat and in that breed the long coat whilst acknowledged as needing more regular grooming is not considered to be a fault nor a hindrance to the dog working sheep. This is in a climate equal to Germany.

My final comment is this, putting aside ears, Captain von Stephanitz placed eye pleasing aesthetics at the bottom of his priority list in regard to his vision for the ideal German Shepherd Dog however there are many long coats born and there are many people who for reasons related to aesthetics prefer long coats to normal coats. In years gone by many long coats were put down in Australia by breeders *'simply because they were told it was a disqualifying fault'* and incidentally the long hair/undercoat connection was never mentioned back then! Because of the SV determination long coats were considered to be inferior to normal coats. Long coated German Shepherd Dogs were considered by breeders to be a sub breed and other than in the area of being a pet or used for obedience they did not really have a place within the dog sport and as a consequence, in various books on the breed, there were many suggestions on how they should be dealt with. As an example, Winifred Strickland in her book *'The German Shepherd Today'* suggested that long coats should be clipped, castrated and sold as pets and of course many were culled. Looking back, for many people including me, that past extreme rationale doesn't stack up nor sit too well. There are many opinions on long coats and personally I would rather they had been left as they were pre the 1960's rule change with the amendment that 'good' be lifted to 'very good' to reflect the broader utilitarian



uses that the dog now serves. Putting aside the very significant administrative and cost aspects for clubs to run dual events, this personal opinion relates only to the fact that long hair, particular excessive profuse long hair in an active sheep dog if not regularly groomed will matt and in cold climates and as von Stephanitz said it will collect snow which will turn into frozen lumps of ice, collect twigs, grass burrs, dirt and the like. There are many utilitarian functions that long coat German Shepherd Dogs carry out with great and admirable effect in environments where their long hair does not represent an impediment and regular grooming is not impractical. My lesser opinion of long hair relative to short hair is related to one of fundamental practicality relative to the dogs inherent reason for being and that reason for being was not just to be an average German sheepherding dog but an innately self-reliant and independent superior German sheepherding dog, tending sheep in open fields and very often doing so in adverse weather.

In concluding this brief article and in the context that the new regulations are in effect, I have to say that for reasons based on fundamental contradiction long coated dogs should not compete against normal coated dogs at Specialist Shows and I would be happy to give very good odds that if von Stephanitz were alive today he would enthusiastically agree with me. I understand the logic behind Kennel Controls having a tradition and process where there should ultimately be one dog awarded best exhibit in show and in that context I have absolutely no argument but the Kennel Controls, as they have done in the past need to respect and accommodate the needs and opinions of the breed clubs and German Shepherd Dog specialist judges.

Regardless of my opinion or anyone else's likeminded opinion, what is important is now that the long coated German Shepherd Dogs are officially accepted within the sport they are provided with a positive and supportive environment by clubs and that people who judge them have a very clear understanding of where they came from, why their coat in all its variables has such a strong mode of inheritance and, without intending at all to put a negative connotation to it, why their coat was and arguably still is considered to be less desirable than a normal coat.

They say a photo (one that isn't digitally manipulated) is worth a thousand words. In the context of the complete dog and in the context of 'world standard' the following photos are the best examples I can provide to the reader of an excellent long coated German Shepherd Dog and an excellent normal coated German Shepherd Dog. If you are a judge and happen to judge a German Shepherd Dog as good as either of these two dogs consider yourself very fortunate.





Should a reader have a question to ask in regard to this article Louis can be contacted at the following email address: [louis@ozmeridian.com](mailto:louis@ozmeridian.com)

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