

JUDGING THE AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD: BEYOND THE BASICS

By Nannette L. Newbury
Illustrations courtesy of author

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The Australian Shepherd is not a cookie-cutter breed. Sixteen color combinations; individuality with no two animals marked alike; any eye color accepted with any flecks and marbling allowed; two ear sets accepted (one dog can have one of each); and—the “cryptic” merle—a dog that might look like a solid black or red in your ring, but genotypically is a merle (you may have to ask the handler where the merling is, or the merling could have been on the tail that was removed at birth). It is safe to say that the Australian Shepherd can be a challenging breed to get right in the breed ring.

The breed standard provides a basic guide for judges, clearly and simplistically describing form and function, gait, proportions, color, but it does not provide much enlightenment in terms of the nuances of this breed; that which we are truly looking to preserve and promote as breeders.

I have had the privilege of conducting numerous judging and breeding seminars worldwide. Judges clearly state what they find particularly challenging for them in judging this breed. These topics, which go beyond the basics of the breed standard, will be the focus of this article.

THE BASICS

Our body proportions are clearly defined and support our purpose as a working dog that is lithe, agile and has the stamina to work all day. We are an extremely versatile dog whose jobs range from moving sheep in pastures to babysitting the kids to guarding the truck.

Frank Baylis of Bayshore Kennel and Farms notes, “Judges should focus on our silhouette. This outline will tell you if a dog



Photo by Valerie Yates

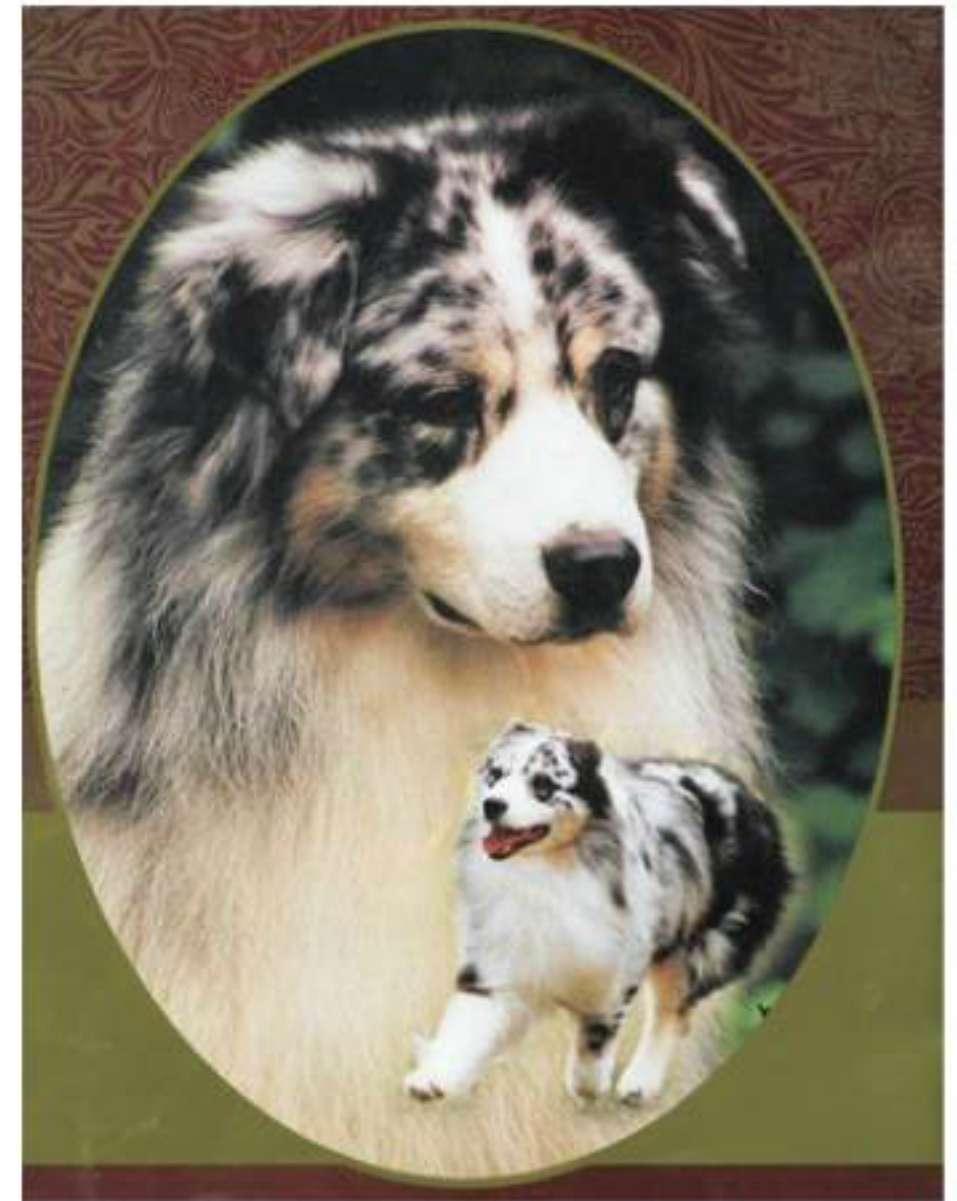
is built with the proper proportions. We are ‘slightly’ longer than tall. The profile will help you find dogs with the correct legginess ratio (1:1) and avoid rewarding dogs that have incorrect proportions and movement.”

There is a trend in the breed for a “long and low” specimen whose profile is easily recognizable by a lack of leg length in an otherwise acceptable exhibit. The animals with the shorter legs may move correctly, however balance front to rear may be affected, incorrect foot timing (feet may not meet in the middle of the dog) and an increase in side gait can be observed (excessive or flying). Suitability to original form and function would be negatively impacted as this would negatively affect stamina. However appealing the movement or this proportion, these are not correct for our breed.

Head proportions are defined with the muzzle equal in length or slightly shorter than the back skull and the length and width of the top skull equal.

MOVEMENT

We have a smooth, free and easy gait, well balanced with a ground covering stride.



BIS/BISS Ch. Bayshore's Flapjack was the breed's first number-one rated Australian Shepherd in the American Kennel Club, an honor he kept for three years (1993, 1994, and 1996).



Primarily a ranch dog bred to work sheep and cattle in the western United States. The breed dramatically grew in popularity after WWII. Photo by Shelly Hollen.



BIS/BISS Ch. Oprah Winfree of Heatherhill pictured winning one of the first AKC best of breed competitions for Australian Shepherds, January 1993.

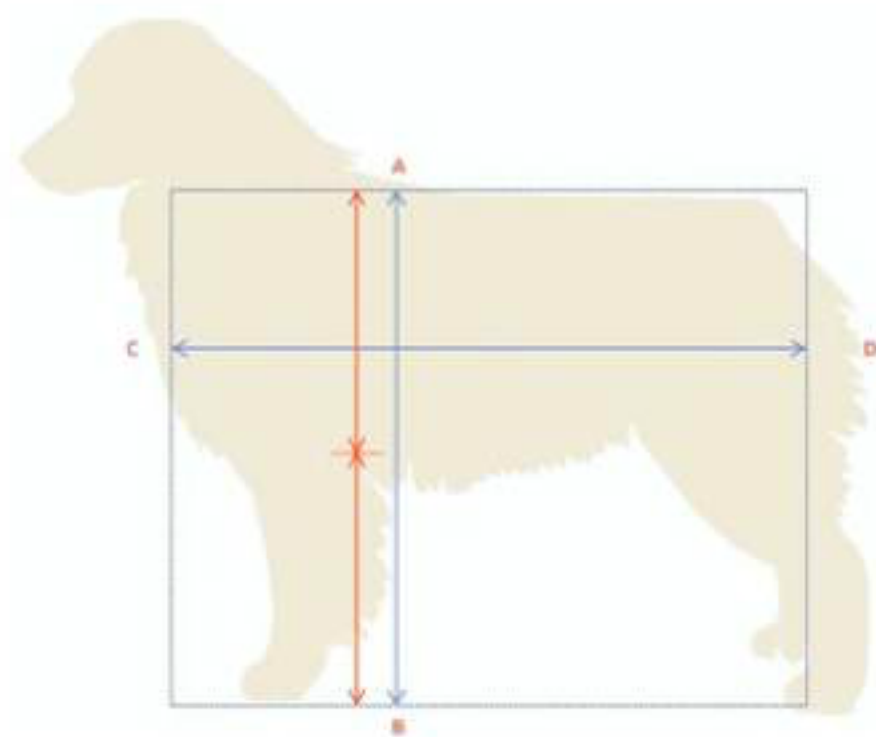


Figure 1: From the standard, "Measuring from the breastbone to rear of thigh and from top of the withers to the ground the Australian Shepherd is slightly longer than tall." Our standard also calls for stamina which would indicate a legginess ratio (withers to elbow and elbow to ground) of 1:1 or equidistant.

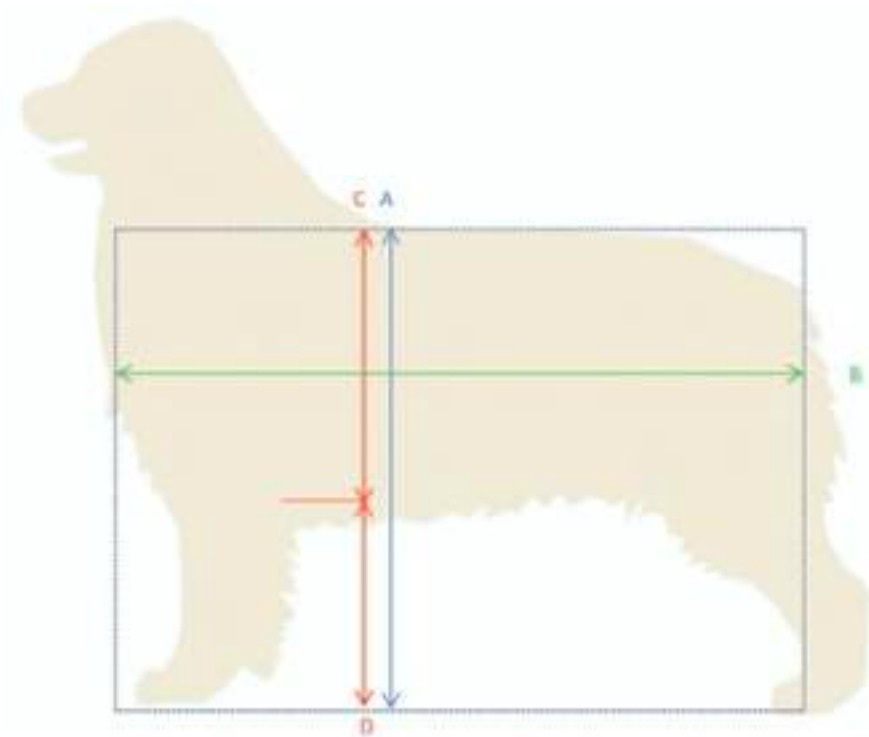


Figure 2: An example of "long and low." The profile outline shows a more definitive rectangle rather than slightly longer than tall (Lines A and B). In addition the legginess ratio (Lines C and D) are not equal. The body of the dog is noticeable longer, Line C, than the length of the leg, Line D.

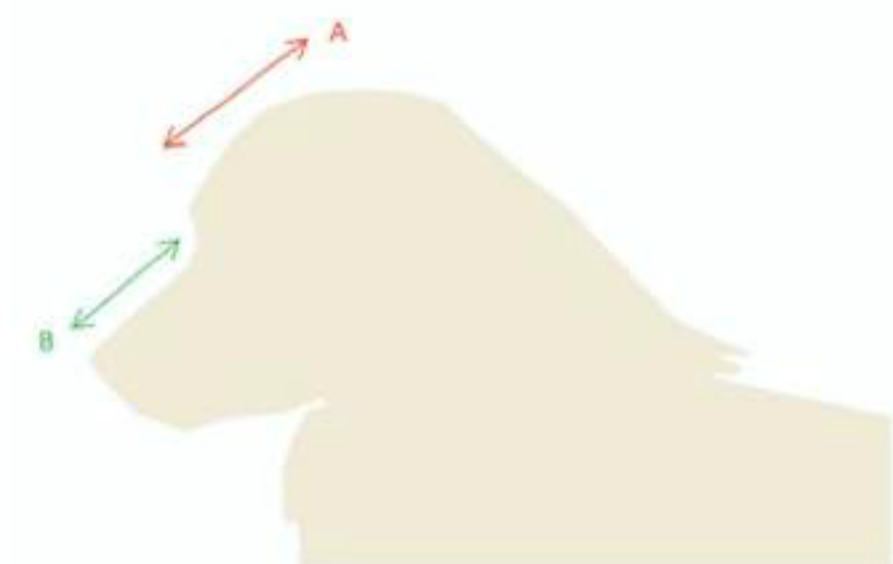


Figure 3: Line B is equal to or slightly shorter than Line A. Line A and Line B should ideally form parallel planes. The length and width of the top skull are also equal.

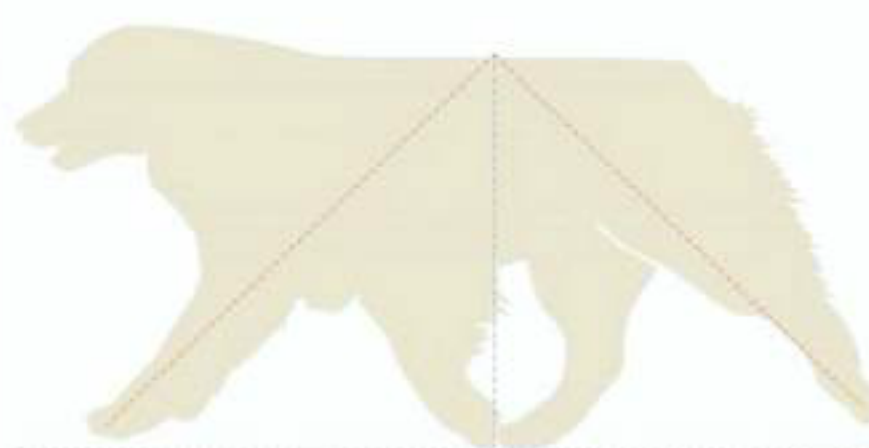


Figure 4: When viewed from the side the gait is balanced front to rear. The legs meet under the body at the midpoint of the dog. The front paw should not reach past the nose. We do not call for a flying trot which would detract from stamina as would tremendous reach and drive (TRAD).



Black tri male side gait.
Photo by Amber Aanensen.



Red merle female side gait.
Photo by Amber Aanensen.

Dogs that move this way often appear to be "kissing the ground," light on their feet without pounding, exhibiting little or no effort. Superior foot timing, location of foot fall and balance are key when judging our side gait. Long-time breeder Linda Wilson of Briarbrook Kennels states, "Balance takes forever to get and to keep."

Focusing on or giving undue attention to side gait alone is not a correct assessment of the breed. Alan McCorkle of Heatherhill Australian Shepherds adds, "We are a breed that is bred to move and work. When you are judging, give equal weight to coming and going as well as side gait. For our breed these ALL matter."

We do have examples of dogs in the breed ring that appear balanced in their

front to rear movement, but closer inspection of their foot fall illustrates dogs whose feet actually meet towards the rear of the dog or feet are actually placed obliquely to accommodate the lack of balance. Good foot timing and the location of where the feet meet under the body are critical.

When judging movement, focus on the animal that could move and work all day long. Cloddy, cumbersome, rolling, or pounding are not words that are associated with this lithe and agile dog. Athleticism is key. You should look for physically fit dogs in good weight and muscle tone. An overweight, flabby dog is not acceptable.

When viewed from the front and rear, the feet track to a center line as speed increases. The forelegs are to be straight

and perpendicular to the ground and should move in a straight line, converging to a center line as speed increases. From the front, loose or longer pasterns may give an effect of paddling when the dog comes towards you and are not the ideal. Our founders determined that we are not a single tracking breed.

As the speed of the dog increases the neck can/will lower to the level of the topline. Lower than the level of the topline would be considered a fault most likely related to improper structure. "A dog gaiting with a head placed high in the air and floating around the ring like an Afghan is not correct," notes Alan McCorkle.

The back is straight and strong, level and firm from withers to hip joints with a moderately sloped croup. Dogs with rolling topline, due either to lack of condition or improper structure are to be faulted. You may see loose, rolling topline and dogs that are higher in the rear in the puppy classes as this occurs sometimes during their development. We do not however recognize these development stages in the standard so both would be considered faults in the breed ring.

The dogs should be moved at the correct speed for each animal, preferably on a loose lead. Excessive speed, or stringing up of dogs while gaiting should not be rewarded.

BEYOND THE BASICS

SIZE: With the induction of the AKC Miniature American Shepherd (smaller offshoots of the Australian Shepherd) there will be even more emphasis on what is the correct size for this breed. I have overheard judges state, "this breed is getting too big," or "your bitch is too small." Both statements are incorrect. While we do specify standard size variations, our founders were clear in not limiting the breed to specific sizes. This breed should never be measured for the simple reason that the standard states, "quality is not to be sacrificed in favor of size." While you may personally prefer a smaller or larger animal, neither is to be faulted. When judging an animal whose size may bother you, pay attention to the proportions. If the animal is slightly longer than tall, with equidistant wither-to-elbow, elbow-to-ground measurement, then size does not matter in a specimen



Red tri female stacked.
Photo by Amber Aanensen.



Blue merle male stacked.
Photo by Amber Aanensen.

that is otherwise correct and of quality. As breeders we require the variation.

MODERATION: The term is used frequently throughout the standard. Moderation for our breed means an overall lack of exaggeration. Founding breed club member Georgjean Hertzwig of Gefion Australian Shepherds notes, "Moderate does not mean mediocre."

When it comes to substance or bone and moderation, a 24" male dog is going to have more bone than its 18" female counterpart. What is important is if the bone is moderate and in proportion for the size of the animal. Many dogs "appear" to have more bone than called for in the standard due to their "show" coats. This is easy for you to check by hand. A perfect example of the affect of coat would be to compare and contrast the bone of animals in and out of coat. What is even more remarkable is to view these dogs when they are wet. Many are much more moderate than they may appear. It is critical for you to go over these animals with your hands to feel the actual structure and substance.

Moderation when it comes to gait also refers to lack of exaggeration. This is a dog

that needs to be able to work all day long. While they have to be extremely agile and lithe with quick bursts of speed they also have to be able to conserve their strength and work from dawn to dusk. Extremes of gait would not suit this purpose. Conversely gait hampered by structural deficiencies are equally detrimental.

When talking about size, moderation is not a consideration. We clearly state that we have a size range (the difference between an 18" and 23" animal is quite remarkable), but the term moderate should not be used to determine if an animal's size is faulty.

HANDS ON: It is imperative to get your hands on these dogs and thoroughly examine them. Coat and colors can interfere with a correct visual assessment. Many an Australian Shepherd can "appear" to be quite different than reality due to illusions that the color and markings give. The color and markings can be different on each side of the dog, so it is also important to view both sides of the exhibit.

While our standard calls for specific angles that are ideal to a working, agile breed that requires stamina as well, it is important to note that while emphasis can be placed on shoulder layback, if the angles in the front do not match the rear, you will not have a sound moving dog. Frank Baylis states, "Ideal shoulder layback does not ensure good movement. Just because a dog has the ideal shoulder angulation does not mean it can move. I have had dogs with a straighter shoulder and the same straight angles in the rear be the better moving dog. Focus on the balance front to rear."

COAT: When it comes to coat, the issue of moderation is more complex. The amount and length of our double coat is not only based on genetics, but greatly influenced by climate. You would not expect to see local heavily coated dogs when judging in Arizona in the summer, but you could easily see dense coats on dogs from the northern climates. The length of the coat should be moderate to the size of the dog. The texture of the coat is probably as important as it is meant to protect the animal, repel and be weather resistant.

Show dogs by definition are going to be presented to you with a fluffier, more maintained and groomed coat than their solely working counterparts or companion

animals. Judging this breed out of coat can sometimes be easier and far more illuminating for judges. We would hope that you would not penalize an animal based solely on the amount or lack of coat.

GROOMING: While an animal should be presented to you clean and neat, over-sculpting or over-grooming this breed are not to be rewarded. We expect that ears, feet, hocks, tail area, be neatened. We do not wish to encourage the excessive scissoring of the coat to give a stylistic, unnatural look to the dog. If you can see scissor marks or straight cut lines on the hair coat it is too much. You can see evidence of undesirable grooming in the current trend of severely trimming the hair of the underline; or hand plucking coats to remove longer top coat and give an impression of all hairs being the same length. Excessive use of grooming products or substances in the coat is not appropriate for this natural breed. We would expect you not to assume that an animal presented to you well- or over-groomed is necessarily the best specimen.

EXPRESSION: As a herding breed, the Australian Shepherd is incredibly aware of its surroundings. They can be spatially and sound sensitive. While we call for a keen, alert and eager expression we do not expect the dog to give it to "you" as a judge. Be particularly aware of how you approach an animal for examination. Coming up from behind or looming over them is not desired. Squeaky toys, keys in the pocket or loose change jangled to get the dog to show you expression are not called for. You can just as easily walk down the line and see the gaze and expression of the dog without distracting the animal from its handler.

The dogs can and will react to sunglasses, loose, flowing clothing, open jackets brushing their backs during exam, hats, or heavy hands during examination. This is not to offer an excuse for lack of training, improper socialization or a poor temperament.

You can observe examples of spatial and sound sensitivity in the ring evidenced by the dog moving its ears. When these dogs are nervous, unsettled or experiencing loud or strange noises their ears can easily be pinned back to their head. Or a dog might flip their ears from front to rear. Some can even have one ear in the rose



ANY eye color, eye color combination with flecks and marbling allowed.
Photo by Valerie Yates.



Four colors, sixteen color combinations; no preference for white and/or copper trim or lack thereof. Photo by Valerie Yates.

position while the other is a triangle... and they can change these at will.

If you cannot examine a dog, excuse it. Oftentimes pushing a sensitive or unsettled animal will result in permanent damage to the dog.

EARS: Another unique aspect to the breed is the variety of ear sets we allow. We accept a rose ear, a triangle ear and one dog can have both. I personally showed a dog that could freely change her ear set while in the ring. At any one time the left ear could be rose and the right ear could be a triangle. She easily would switch the triangle and rose ears during judging and could even end up with two rose ears or two triangle ears. This variety of ear set is not to be faulted.

STYLES: We do have style differences within the breed. I often compare our breed styles to the differences between a Quarter horse and the Thoroughbred horse breeds. Some dogs are elegant, others stockier with ranges in between. Our standard does not address these variations (often these are personal preferences within breeding programs). As such we allow for the variation.

EYES: ANY color is acceptable. ANY marbling or flecks are fine. There are no faults associated with eye color. There are optical illusions that can be created by the flecks and marbling of color in the eyes. Do not be distracted by a look that is created by marbling of flecks. What is important about the eye is the almond shape and that the eyes do not protrude or are not sunken.

COLOR: We have four acceptable colors: blue merle, black, red merle and red, all with or without white markings and/or tan (copper) points. This gives us potentially sixteen (16) color combinations. As a breed we celebrate the unique individuality and variety that our color and markings allow us.

We do not prefer or reward one color over another. We do not recognize or prefer

a bi-colored dog over a tri-colored dog. A solid black dog (no white or copper trim) is to be judged equally against a red merle dog with white markings and copper points. A red dog with white markings and no copper points is equally acceptable (red bi). A dog with split-face markings is to be judged no differently than a dog with no white on its face or a dog with symmetrical white markings on the face. Some breeding programs favor symmetrical markings (white muzzle and blaze and color and/or white front legs); other breeding programs prefer minimal white trim; still others prefer asymmetrical, unique color patterns. We do not prefer, nor do we wish you to favor one color or style of markings over another. We celebrate this unique quality in our breed

MERLING: We do not distinguish between the amount of merling and/or color spots on the red and blue merles. A merle with large-sized or a large number of solid color spots and little merling is equally acceptable as a heavily merled dog with little or no spots of color.

WHITE: Here you will find one of our few disqualifications: white body splashes located between the withers and tail, on the sides between the elbows and back of the hindquarters. Color faults would encompass a white collar exceeding the point of the withers (at the base of the hair). In addition white should not predominate on the head and the eye should be fully surrounded by color and pigment. White may extend up from the belly into the body. As long as it does not go past four inches above the elbow it is acceptable. You may have to lift the hair to see this fault. You may see dogs with white on their stifles. This is acceptable.

JUDGING TIPS:

- Get your hands on each dog. Between the double coat and unique color patterns of the merles and variety of

markings and points, many optical illusions can be created.

- Current grooming practices favor a completely level topline which hides the angle of the croup. Get your hands on the croup to feel the angle.
- The angle of a white collar may give the perception of a straight shoulder. Conversely the edge of a white collar may give a straight-shouldered dog the appearance of great shoulder layback. One white foreleg and one solidly colored foreleg may give an impression of incorrect movement coming towards you. From the rear, dogs with different colored hocks can be deceiving when judging rear movement.
- Each side of every dog can be marked differently. Be sure to look at both sides of each animal.
- While your initial view of the dog should focus on our silhouette, we would encourage you to make your final selections based on our movement; correct, balanced, free and easy, lithe and agile, and able to work all day long. The Australian Shepherd is a wonderfully engaging, unique, individualistic breed that offers variety within the standard. This makes judging the breed more complex and will truly test your skills as a judge. Their fun, dedicated and charming demeanor make this breed a favorite all over the world. Our goal is to preserve these traits and this breed for future generations. ■

BIO

Nannette L. Newbury has competed and titled dogs in conformation, agility, obedience and stock/herding, including winning the coveted Most Versatile Australian Shepherd title at the National Specialty (1997) having owned the breed since 1973. She is an approved AKC judge, and has served as the Judge's Education Coordinator for the United States Australian Shepherd Association (USASA). She judges the breed (AKC and ASCA) and conducts seminars worldwide. In addition she was the longtime editor of the national breed club magazine, "The Australian Shepherd Journal," and breed column editor for the "American Kennel Club Gazette."

