

· BREED PRIORITIES · MINIATURE AMERICAN SHEPHERD

BY NIKKI RIGGSBEE

The Miniature American Shepherd was developed in California in the late 1960s from smaller dogs thought to be Australian Shepherds. The Australian Shepherd standard calls for dogs to be 20–23 inches tall, bitches 18–21 inches. The Miniature American Shepherd dogs are to be 14–18 inches and bitches 13–17 inches.

The MAS was originally called Miniature Australian Shepherd. Its name was changed when it entered AKC's Foundation Stock Service in 2011. They progressed quickly and joined the herding group in 2015. It has been popular from the beginning, ranking in the mid-thirties early in AKC registrations and was 30th in the 2021 statistics.

We found three breeder-judges and eleven breed mentors plus nineteen other experienced breeders to invite to take a survey on their breed's priorities. Sixteen agreed to do so. Seven completed surveys were received. The respondents have been in the breed

nearly twenty-one years on average. The judges have been approved to judge MAS for an average of nearly seven years, approximately the length of time they have been fully recognized.

Miniature American Shepherd Virtues

The survey included a list of sixteen virtues taken from the MAS AKC standard for the experts to rank on how important they were when evaluating the breed. The list below is in order by the average of the rankings, with one being the most important.

1. Gait: Smooth, free, and easy; ... with well-balanced, ground-covering stride
2. Solidly built with moderate bone in proportion to body height and size
3. Chest full and deep, reaching to elbow, with well-

This discussion is not intended to promote fault or part judging. One should always evaluate a whole dog as a package. One develops and improves his picture of excellence by deciding what to emphasize for each breed. They say that evaluating dogs is a matter of what you will forgive. Having priorities can help with that process.

*Questions, Comments, or Concerns?
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- sprung ribs
- 4. Upper arm equal in length to shoulder blade and meets shoulder blade at approximate right angle
- 4. Back firm and level
- 6. Slightly longer than tall
- 7. Exceptional agility combined with strength and stamina
- 8. Full complement of teeth meet in a scissor bite
- 9. Eyes - eyes set obliquely, almond-shaped, neither protruding nor sunken
- 10. Width of hindquarters approximately equal to width of forequarters at the shoulders
- 11. Intelligent, primarily a working dog of strong herding and guardian instincts
- 12. Highly versatile
- 13. Feet - Oval-shaped, compact, with close-knit, well-arched toes
- 14. Expression - Alert, attentive and intelligent
- 15. Hair of medium texture, straight to wavy, weather resistant, of medium length
- 15. Muzzle...length equal to length of crown

"Gait: Smooth, free, and easy; ... with well-balanced, ground-covering stride" (1st) was clearly most important with six of the group placing it first or second.

Five of the experts agreed on "Solidly built with moderate bone in proportion to body height and size" (2nd), "Feet - Oval-shaped, compact, with close-knit, well-arched toes" (13th), "Expression - Alert, attentive and intelligent" (14th), and "Muzzle... length equal to length of crown" (tied at 15th). The group mostly ranked "Solidly built/bone" (2nd) 4-6, but two placing it first or second improved its average to second.

Four of the group concurred on "Chest full and deep, reaching to elbow, with well-sprung ribs" (3rd), "Upper arm equal in length to shoulder blade and meets shoulder blade at approximate right angle" (tied at 4th), "Back firm and level" (tied at 4th), "Width of hindquarters approximately equal to width of forequarters at the shoulders" (10th), and "Hair of medium texture, straight to wavy, weather resistant, of medium length" (tied at 15th). "Back level" (tied at 4th) was ranked 2-5 by the majority, but three placed it tenth which lowered its placement in the list.

"Slightly longer than tall" (6th) was 2-3 on three surveys, but 10-13 on another three. "Full complement of teeth meet in a scissor bite" (8th) placed 7-9 for three experts, but 11-13 for another three. Three experts had "Eyes - eyes set obliquely, almond shaped, neither protruding nor sunken" (9th) at 8-10, with two higher and two lower.

Three experts ranked "Intelligent, primarily a working dog of strong herding and guardian instincts" (11th) 14-16, with the others all over. Similarly, "Exceptional agility combined with strength and stamina" (7th) was 7-10 for three and all over for the others. "Highly versatile" (12th) was ranked 15th on three surveys and scattered on the rest. I wondered if the variation was the result of these characteristics being hard to determine in the show ring.

Additional input would break the ties at fourth and fifteenth.

"Expression" (14th) had an average close to the bottom two virtues, so that, too, might rearrange with more surveys.

"Gait" (1st) averaged two points ahead of "Solidly built/bone" (2nd), confirming it as most important. "Solidly built/bone" (2nd) was two-and-one-half points ahead of "Chest" (3rd).

Miniature American Shepherd Faults

The experts were also asked to prioritize a list of faults taken from or derived from the Miniature American Shepherd AKC standard. Below is the list in sequence by the average rankings, from most serious to least serious.

1. Lacking well-balanced, ground covering stride
2. Shoulder blades not fairly close set at the withers or not well laid back
3. Back not firm or level...standing or moving
4. As speed increases, the feet do not converge
5. Neck not of medium length, not slightly arched at crest, or not fitting well into shoulders
6. White markings covering over 25 percent of an ear
7. Prick ears or ears that hang with no lift
8. Not slightly longer than tall (too long or not long enough)
9. Stifles not clearly defined
10. 25 to 50 percent un-pigmented nose leather
11. Eyes protruding or sunken
12. Elbow joint not equidistant from ground to withers
13. Shyness
14. Muzzle heavy, square, snipy, or loose
15. Non-typical coats
16. Hairline of white collar exceeds the withers at the skin

Six of the experts agreed on the seriousness of "Lacking well-balanced, ground covering stride (1st)", "Back not firm or level... standing or moving" (3rd), and "Stifles not clearly defined" (9th). Five of the group concurred on "Muzzle heavy, square, snipy, or loose" (14th) and "Hairline of white collar exceeds the withers at the skin" (16th).

The smallest majorities similarly valued "Neck not of medium length, not slightly arched at crest, or not fitting well into shoulders" (5th), "Eyes protruding or sunken" (11th), "Elbow joint not equidistant from ground to withers" (12th), and "Non-typical coats" (15th). Four ranked "Shoulder blades not fairly close set at the withers or not well laid back" (2nd) 2-4, while three others put it sixth or seventh.

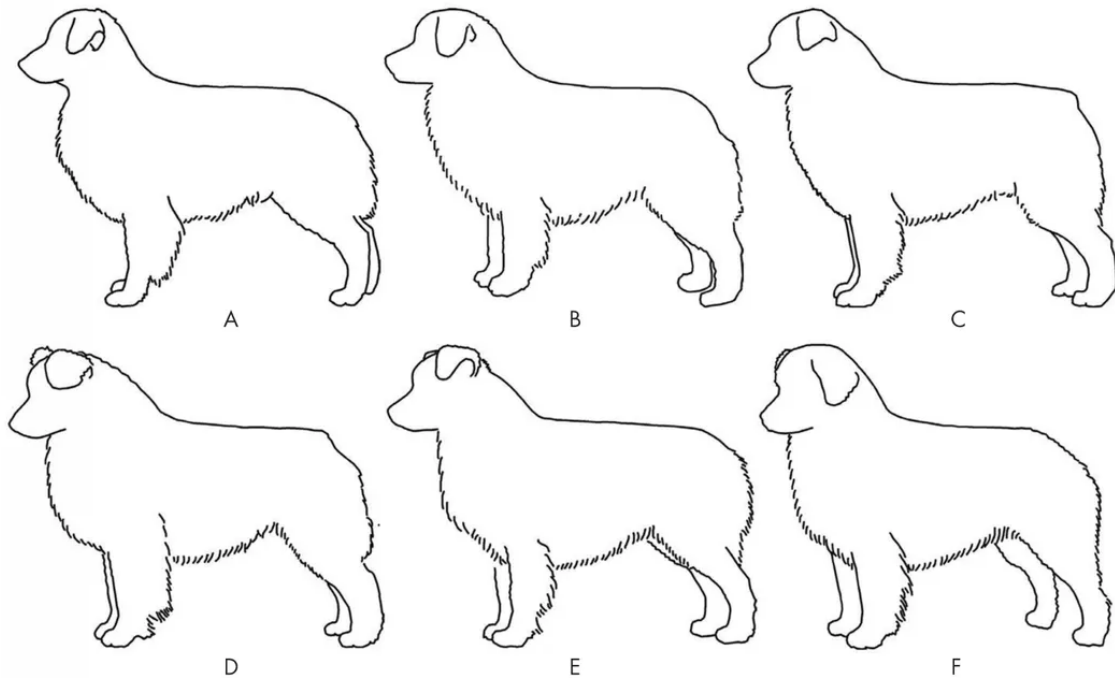
Several faults had a three-three split. "As speed increases, the feet do not converge" (4th) was 2-4 on three surveys, but 8-11 on another three. Similarly, "White markings covering over 25 percent of an ear" (6th) was 2-4 for four experts and 8-11 on another three. Three experts ranked "Not slightly longer than tall (too long or not long enough)" (8th) 4-6 and three others 8-10. Three put "25 to 50 percent un-pigmented nose leather" (10th) 2-5, with another three 11-14. "Shyness" (13th) was 10-12 for three experts and 14-16 for three others. "Prick ears or ears that hang with no lift" (7th) had three agree on 12-14, but the rest were all over.

"Poor gait" (1st) averaged two points ahead of "Poor shoul-

Miniature American Shepherd Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

DOGS



ders" (2nd), confirming it as the worst fault. More than two-and-one-half points separated the averages of "Elbow not at half the height" (12th) and "Shyness" (13th), corroborating the less seriousness of the bottom four faults. The same spread existed between the averages of "Non-typical coats" (15th) and "Slight white past withers" (16th), settling the latter as the least serious problem. No fault averages were unusually close to the adjacent ones.

There were ten majorities on each list. The group was quite consistent on features on both lists: gait, height-to-length proportion, shoulders, topline, eyes, coat, and muzzle. Height-to-length proportion was more important than length of leg-to-height proportion. The importance of pigment had mixed opinions.

Outlines

The survey included two sets of outlines, six of dogs and six of bitches, of Miniature American Shepherds. The experts were asked to place each set first through fourth as they would a class at a dog show, based on outline alone. The outlines were made from photos of real dogs, so none is ideal. Understand that if

the experts had seen the dogs in person, gone over them, and seen them move, that the placements might change.

The male with the best average placement score was dog "F." Those who placed him first said "best balance and proportion, although at a difficult angle," "correct neck into shoulder, proper front assembly balanced with rear assembly, slightly longer than tall, correct chest, solidly built," "balanced, equidistant, medium bone, could use slightly more hock length," and "easily recognized as an MAS/Aussie."

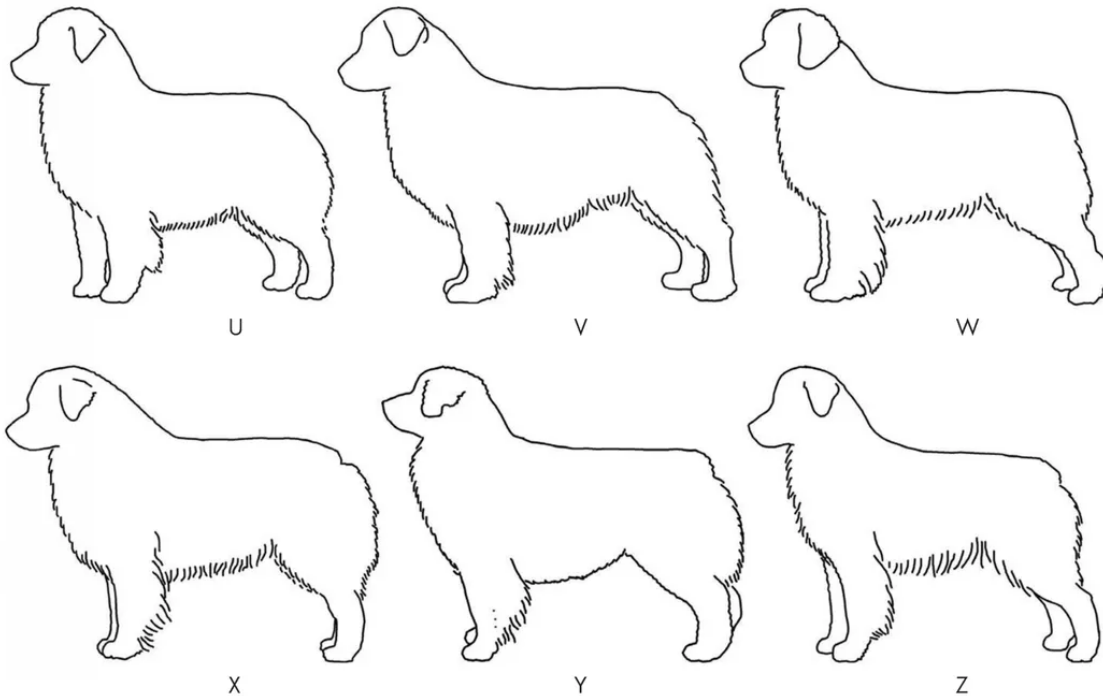
The second place dog based on average placements was dog "C." Those who liked him commented "balanced and in proportion" and "could use more neck." "C" was not placed first on any survey, but he was also never out of the ribbons which produced is second place score.

Dog "B" placed third based on average placement scores and was placed first twice, which placed him second if counting first placements. Only "F" was first more often. But "B" was unplaced by three experts which gave him a worse average placement score than "C." Those who liked "B" said he was balanced and had good structure, but didn't like his ears. Dog "E" was also hurt by his ears.

Miniature American Shepherd Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

BITCHES



The female with the best average placement score was bitch "Z." Those who liked her noted "most balanced, feminine, moderate, with triangular ears," "athletic, good structure, didn't like rounded top skull," and "most balanced, with correct proportions, correct neck set into shoulder, correct front assembly."

Bitches "U" and "W" tied for second place on the same number of first placements and the same average placement scores. Comments on "U" included "slightly longer than tall, correct head set, well-angulated rear, stifle well-defined, feminine, muzzle matches crown with proper stop" and "feminine with nice bone." Those who placed "W" first said she had "nice neck and balance, front assembly and rear angles, nice short hocks" and "structure, neck, topline, angles."

Best Of Breed with the best overall placement average and twice as many first placements (four) as any other is dog "F." Dog "B" and bitches "U," "W," and "Z" placed first on two surveys. Dogs "F" and "C" and bitch "W" were never unplaced.

Dogs "A," "C," and "E" and bitches "V" and "X" were never placed first. Dog "A" and bitch "V" were out of the ribbons for six of the experts and bitch "X" for five.

Essential Characteristics

The survey asked the experts to list those four to six essential characteristics a Miniature American Shepherd must have to be a good one. Movement was named most often, including coming and going, reach and drive, balance, converging, and foot placement and timing. Ears, head, and expression were named next, including head proportions and almond eyes. Next were chest depth and prosternum and strong topline.

On face and expression, almond eyes and broad top skull were important, as was ear size and set, shape and lift.

They wanted judges to pay attention to size and to measure rather than assume too big which might be a result of coat. Movement must be of prime importance. The breed is longer than tall, so square dogs should not be awarded.

Additional Notes

The survey invited the MAS experts to offer suggestions to students of their breed.

BREED PRIORITIES - MINIATURE AMERICAN SHEPHERD

- Balance and movement are key to this breed, so develop an eye for these.
- The national breed club has judges education on their website; take advantage of it.
- Don't make incorrect assumptions from the word "miniature" in the breed name; this is a balanced, well-muscled dog capable of doing the job it was bred for.
- Dogs are to be shown naturally—not scissored, chalked, back combed, or sculpted.
- Correct head set on the topline (skull to withers) is as important as a strong level back; how the head is set on the neck allows further range of motion if the animal is kicked, allowing the kick to graze the head instead of direct impact.
- Foot placement and timing allows the dog to move at whatever pace needed for extended periods and to avoid kicks and to turn on a dime.
- Look for a balanced dog with equal reach and drive, ground covering stride, effortless movement—solidly built with proper neck set into shoulder, correct front with balanced rear.
- The MAS is a herding dog so it must be able to move.
- This breed has too many inconsistencies; it should be a smaller version of the Australian Shepherd with very few differences.
- Look at the whole picture—don't award color and cuteness.
- Please wicket. Too many oversized entries are placing when they should DQ. But don't discount the dog you think is over – wicket [that dog].

Thanks to the Miniature American Shepherd experts who shared their knowledge with this survey.