

Judging the Shetland Sheepdog

by Linda C. More

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Many people say they find the Sheltie confusing and hard to judge, and indeed there is a wide range of size and style AND color and markings. The Sheltie standard is well written, thorough and fairly clear, and a full discussion of it is not in the scope of this article. Instead, I will attempt to highlight some things to look for and make a few suggestions on judging technique.

The Sheltie is a relatively recent breed, created from crosses with Border collies and several small and toy breeds -- including some small spaniel type dogs -- and later with Rough Collies. We are still seeing the influence of all these. The breed's original purpose in brief is said to have been to keep sheep and birds out of unfenced garden areas and guard the small farms, and the dog desired was small, hardy, fast, agile and athletic, with a reserved and watchful temperament. It is helpful to keep the breed's origin and purpose in mind when judging it.

The first thing you will look at is overall proportion, balance and outline. This is an off-square dog of moderation and graceful curves. If you want to think of Sheltie proportion on a continuum of Herding breeds, place the Sheltie between the "approximately square" Belgians and the decidedly more rectangular appearing German Shepherd. Like the Shepherd, though, the Sheltie's apparent MODERATE length should be a result of well angulated quarters, front and rear, rather than a long back and/or long loin. The Sheltie should in no way give you the impression of a longish dog with sawed off legs, nor should it be a box on stilts. At present, the desired elegant outline is harder to find than we wish, and you will see dogs with little neck and dogs with long ewe necks springing from forward set, straight fronts.

Next you will want to look at heads and expression, so important to the essence of Sheltie. No matter how well a Sheltie is made and moves, if the head is poor, the dog is not a good Sheltie. You do not need the perfect head and eye, but you need a reasonably good head and expression. (Conversely, the most perfect head ever seen cannot make an otherwise disastrous animal a good Sheltie.) If you do not pay attention to and properly examine the Sheltie's head, the exhibitors will quickly conclude that you don't understand or don't care about heads and may not bother to bring you their best the next time you judge.

The standard provides a good blueprint for the head: "refined.....viewed from top or side, a long blunt wedge tapering slightly (emphasis added) from ears to nose." Breeders prize a flat, smooth topskull with no lumps over the eyes, and clean smooth cheeks without prominent zygomatic arches, blending smoothly into the softly rounded muzzle. You can not determine the finish of the top and sides of the skull without using your hands. Remember that correct parallel head planes affect many other desired details: the placement of the stop, set of eye, fit of foreface to backskull. The head overall must be in balance and MUST fit the dog wearing it - it must not be too long and overdone (that "needing a fifth leg" look), nor too short and cutesy.

Eyes are almond, *not* round or beady. The shape and set of the eye are more important than absolute size. If brown, the eyes are very dark; think of a ripe olive. Blue and merle eyes are perfectly acceptable on blue merles, and can be quite beautiful. Blue and merle eyes are not *permissible in any color other than blue merle.*

The set and carriage of the ears affect expression and the appearance of the head, but keep in mind that ears are easily manipulated -- in other words, what you see in the ring may be at least partly a result of human intervention, not genetics. Don't let relatively minor ear problems be any more than a deciding factor between otherwise equally good dogs. Please remember also that when Shelties look up, the ears may or may not flip upright -- ears that remain tipped are *not* necessarily a sign of cosmetic alteration; some just grow that way. If it is a windy outdoor show, do your exhibitors a favor and let them turn their Shelties away from the wind so that ears won't blow straight up!

Note that while the standard does not specifically call for full dentition, missing teeth are a fault. You may often find a premolar missing, but we are also seeing dogs with many missing teeth, haphazardly crooked teeth, tiny teeth, wry mouths, and other serious problems which should not be encouraged.

While you are examining the dog on the table you may find you have a question as to its size. Please keep in mind that there is no preferred size in our standard nor is there any size difference between the sexes. Thus, a 16 inch bitch, if she is feminine, is just as correct as a smaller one, and a 14 inch dog if masculine is just as correct as a 15 ½ inch dog. In fact, it is more difficult to get a good headed and well made SMALL Sheltie and such a one can be a valuable asset to the breed -- the great majority of the Shelties in the ring are 14 ½" and up. If you have any reason to think a dog may not be in size -- and almost without exception this will be a question of the upper size limit -- do not hesitate to measure! Do NOT simply ignore the dog -- measure it, and if it is in size, place it as far up as you like commensurate with its quality. Sheltie exhibitors quickly learn who will measure, and if you get that reputation you will find few oversize dogs are shown to you, which will make your judging easier.

The Sheltie's structure is well described in the standard. Please take the time to boldly go into the hair to determine the true underlying structure! Profuse coats and artful grooming can camouflage many inadequacies -- shallow chests, slab sides or barrel ribs, long loins, thin thighs, long hocks and more. Lack of artful grooming can hide a quite adequate neck or make a perfectly nice topline look rumpy.

What of substance? Some Shelties in the ring today have too much substance and are heavy boned, cloddy, cumbersome looking dogs. It is true that the standard faults light bone, but nowhere does it require heavy bone. When the standard was written, light bone was seemingly perceived as a common problem -- not so today. Moreover, Shelties now are generally much more heavily coated, on top of which the current fashion is to groom legs to look fat and fluffy. You will have to feel the legs, front and rear, to determine bone.

Sheltie movement is a natural result of correct structure. Again, you can think of it on the same continuum between the gait of the Belgians and that of the German Shepherd. We want efficient and easy motion, adequate reach and drive with good rear follow through, and feet traveling close to the ground. The head is naturally carried somewhat forward, not up in the air or pitched back. The topline is firm and level. Tail carriage in motion is level or slightly raised. The macho male may at times raise the tail almost straight up when posturing, but tails should never curl toward the head or back. The Sheltie is preferably moved on a loose lead at a nice trot -- you need not condone racing!

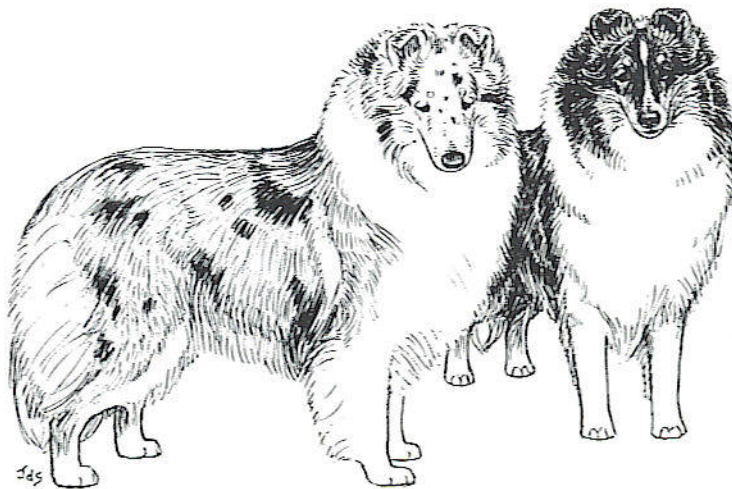
The correct Sheltie coat is a low maintenance, weather resistant one. The outer coat is described as "harsh" but should not be wiry, and at its best the hair feels lively, clean and supple to the touch. The undercoat is soft and lighter in color. The quality of the coat is of greater importance than sheer abundance and does vary seasonably. Bitches frequently carry less.

Remember that it is possible to have too much coat, which not only obscures the outline of the dog but could be a hindrance in a working Sheltie. Exhibitors have become very clever at thinning and barbering body coat, a practice which is not condoned by the parent club, and you may penalize it. Excessive head trimming is also not to be encouraged and as for coloring, or gooey, glued together or stiff starch coats, there is no need to tolerate them.

Markings are not important unless they are faulty, such as prominent body spots or more than 50% white. A full white collar is handsome but no more preferred than no collar or half a collar, and the same goes for white legs or colored legs, blazes or plain faces, or “split” faces on blues and bi-color blues. Here I would suggest that in blues especially, or other colors where distribution of markings may mislead the eye, look at the dog from both sides, both the head in profile and the entire dog. This is simple to do when the dog returns from its gaiting pattern.

Shelties should not be expected to show on the table or to show non-stop on the ground. If you make a small noise to attract the dog’s attention, the Sheltie may ignore you or even look away -- you are a stranger and haven’t been introduced! When assessing expression -- which should be done when the dog is on the ground, not the table -- the best angle may be from slightly behind the exhibitor’s shoulder so that you can see the dog’s face as it responds to its handler.

Unlike Toy breeds, Shelties were for many years always examined on the ground. Over time, and to the general relief of judges and exhibitors, using the table for examination became fairly standard procedure. It allows the judge to gain an eye-level perspective of the Sheltie’s overall balance and proportion – but once again, please remember that you should not try to evaluate expression on the table, nor encourage exhibitors to bait or show their dogs while on the table.



Drawing by Jean D. Simmonds from her book The Sheltie Guide