

# Where Would We Be Today Without Interpretation In Our Breed?

by Shelia Ellis  
(Premiere Shelties)

We would all have the ideal dog who fits the *Standard* like a glove, carbon copies of themselves. Is this what we are looking for? If the founders of our breed felt this way, would our Sheltie as we see him today look as he does—or would he be a much smaller dog with much less coat, bone and muzzle? Or would he be a larger dog more like a Collie? Would he have more health issues than today?

The AKC permits parent clubs to alter their breed *Standard* not more frequently than once every five years. When a *Standard* does not address a particular characteristic of the breed, it leaves breeders and judges to their own devices.

The Shetland "Collie," modern show Collie in miniature. This statement was in the *Standard* at one point but was changed. Historically its size was 9 to 12 inches, then 12 to 15 inches, now 13 to 16 inches. Why the change? Are we to say that changes to the *Standard* are detrimental to the breed? If so, then we should revert to the original official *Standard* of ASSA 1929 written by Catherine Coleman. The *Standard* of 1929 states: "Any color except brindle or solid white is permissible, the usual colors being sable, black and blue merle marked with varying amounts of white and tan." The key word is "solid," which refers to the Dilute, not the color-headed white (CHW). Interestingly, I found in my research that there were actually rough and smooth coats in the Scottish Shetland Sheepdog Club *Standard* in 1909. This was left on the English and Scottish *Standards* until 1916, when the smooth coat was barred.

## A time line of changes to the ASSA *Standard* concerning color and size:

- 1929: CHWs allowed by Catherine Coleman.
- 1934: All judges to measure Shelties in the ring for a period of one year.
- 1935: Tried to make anything outside the 12- to 15-inch size a disqualification. The AKC stated that for one year there would be a "Gentleman's Agreement" not to show anything above 16 inches.
- 1936: The ideal size of 13 1/2 inches was added.
- 1952: Size was raised to 13 to 16 inches; more than 50 percent white to be severely penalized. Dorothy Foster played a key role in instituting this change.
- 1959: Monorchid and cryptorchid became a disqualification.
- 1990: The *Standard* was reformatted.

The Sheltie we breed now couldn't compare to the Sheltie of 1952, so why haven't we revamped the *Standard*? "White

specimens are not unknown, with both sable and black head markings and body spots."

An article appearing in 1906 gives an inkling of what the so-called original Shetlands looked like. "The average type was Collie in miniature but there were several points of divergence, notably the ears, which were set very close together like great fluffy wings. The body was long, set low on sturdy, well-feathered short legs and the usual weight varied from six to ten pounds. The prettiest were white or white with rich gold markings, and black and tan or all black were more common place."

Shouldn't the *Standard* be concerned primarily with a dog's working ability as well as conformation to perform the tasks for which he was created? What does this have to do with color? *Standards* are generally based on the principle that form follows function—that is, they encourage breeding and selecting for the specific traits that will best suit the function for which a particular breed was designed, be it hunting, herding, guarding or just being a lap dog.

Or should we continue to move forward? Should color, unless genetically faulty, be such an issue? "As *Standards* are revised, they tend to address problems of the period in which they were written, and if one or two people control the revision process, they certainly reflect those individual views."

The intent, as always, is to benefit breeders in selecting breeding stock and to simplify judging decisions by providing a more complete picture of the ideal, which means addressing concerns about the ideal as in the blue-eyed sable merle and the CHW.

Since the induction of the *Standard*, how many times has it been changed? What was the original size for the Sheltie? If the *Standard* was never changed and refined, then do you think our dogs today would compete with the original *Standard*? I don't think so. There is always room for improvement. People refer to *Sheltie Talk*, a valuable tool, as the Sheltie bible. Well, if that is true, then if we lived our lives exactly as they did in biblical times, where would we be today? Change is inevitable—and in most cases—a good thing.

CHWs should have color predominating around both ears and both eyes, i.e., a normally-colored head with small body spots.

Homogamous merles are the result of merle-to-merle breedings and often produce deafness, missing eyes, microphthalmic

eyes and a number of internal deformities. I have a preference for only allowing a limited registration on homogamous merles. This should discourage the production of defective puppies. The CHW has no more to do with this breeding than any other *Standard* color.

CHWs and blue-eyed, properly-marked sable merles are not genetically faulty. A properly-marked sable merle should have identifiable spots of color darker than the base color, just like blue merles. We have gotten into showing sable merles with almost no spots. The current *Standard* states: "Washed out or degenerate colors, such as pale and faded blue, self color in the case of blue merle, that is, without any merling or mottling and generally appearing as a faded or dilute tri color." Apply this to a faded or self-colored sable merle.

Why do sable merles have to have dark eyes? That's the question you should ask yourself when merling in the eye is a normal condition, as it is in blues. Would we have these breedings that people seem to worry about? For example, breeding sable merle to sable merle without the breeder realizing it because he can't tell it's a merle? If the merles were marked and registered properly, then wouldn't this serve to educate these breeders?

The dog's health is not impaired by being a CHW or sable merle, so why are they penalized as such and not seen on an equal basis? We do show them in some venues with great acceptance. They are seen for what they are—Shelties—and judged as such.

We all interpret the *Standard* differently. That's one of the things that make being a breeder so exciting—the challenge. So allowing the already existing colors to be added, *and in the CHWs' case reinstated*, to the *Standard* only creates an even more interesting palette for us as breeders. It doesn't change the conformation of the dog or how well he can do his job. That is done by the breeder's ability, or lack thereof, to pick the appropriate mate.

Why is it such a threat?

We have more pressing issues than keeping the CHW and sable merle out of the ring. We should worry about dermatomyositis, preretinal atrophy, Collie eye anomaly, Sheltie eye syndrome, von Willebrand's disease, epilepsy, lance canines, missing teeth, cryptorchidism, dysplastic hips and thyroid. We are seeing more instances of Legg-Calvé-Perthes disease. These are the things people should be fighting against, not the color of a hair shaft or eye. Since there is, in my opinion, no medical or genetic reason for not allowing the CHW or blue-eyed properly-marked sable merle to show, then the *Standard* should be revised similar to the United Kennel Club's.

#### **SHETLAND SHEEPDOG**

**Official UKC Breed Standard**

**Revised May 20, 2000, regarding color**

Acceptable colors include: black, blue merle, sable, sable merle, and predominantly white. The black, blue merle, sable, and sable merle are marked with varying amounts of white, tan,

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or white and tan trim. Sable ranges from golden through mahogany. The predominantly white has a sable, black, blue merle or sable merle head, with or without tan trim, and the body has small amounts of like-colored markings. White should never predominate on the head and should never surround the eyes. The ears should also be predominately colored. When evaluating the relative merit of dogs, faults and merits of color and markings are always secondary to those of physical soundness and gait, except that a dog with the serious color faults described below should never be considered for awards in Conformation competition.

**Faults:** Rustiness in a black or blue merle coat; washed-out colors, such as pale sable or faded blue; self-colored blue or sable merle with no merling or mottling.

**Serious fault:** Predominately white head.

**Disqualification:** Albinism; brindle; white surrounding one or both eyes; one or both ears predominately white.

<sup>1</sup>Catherine E. Coleman, *The Shetland Sheepdog*, copyright 1943.

<sup>2</sup>Charlotte Clem McGowan, *The Shetland Sheepdog In America*, copyright 1999.

*Shelia Ellis began Premiere Shelties in 1987. She also owns her own grooming business and is a master groomer. Shelia has a great husband of 20 years and they have two daughters. □*