

The White Sheltie: To Create or Cull?

by
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The white Sheltie. He is a purebred Sheltie, as pure as any other that many have used in their breeding programs. He is registered. He has a history, a foundation; he has a purpose. Yet, he is banned from recognition.

There are six classifications of Sheltie colors that can be registered with the AKC for breeding and exhibition, one of which is no longer in existence, to the best of my knowledge, in its accepted form.

- 018—black and tan (no longer in existence);
- 019—black and white;
- 034—black, white and tan;
- 051—blue merle and white;
- 052—blue merle, white and tan; and
- 165—sable and white.

There are seven classifications of Sheltie color that can be registered for breeding but are heavily penalized to the point of elimination in AKC Conformation competition. These colors are:

- 277—sable merle and white;
- 199—white;
- 202—white and black;
- 215—white and sable;
- 296—white and sable merle;
- 219—white, black and tan;
- 266—white blue merle; and
- 265—white blue merle and tan.

As you can see, only six out of 14 possible colors are accepted for exhibition and technically only five colors are currently benched.

I shall focus on the eight colors held in prejudices. Although the debate of sable merle shall not be covered here extensively, suffice it to say that merling dilutes the pigment, resulting in sometimes a blue eye or blue merle flecks in the eye. While acceptable in the blue merle, this is unacceptable in the sable merle; yet the merling and its effects are from the same gene. This makes little sense along the order of what one would expect out of a breed *Standard*: fairness and consistency with respect to the breed.

The remaining seven colors form a group of Shelties many refer to as CHWs (color-headed whites) or HMWs (heavily-marked whites). Their exclusion from the 1952 *Standard* revision

has brought with it many rumors and dissention, and in some instances, hostility amongst Shetland Sheepdog breeders.

Some have rumored that the change was, in part, put in place against a rival breeder known at the time for producing color headed whites. While I personally believe there is truth in ever the most outlandish of statements, I find little evidence to support this claim. In fact, I am under the impression the change was brought on by outside pressures and those responsible for the change were tormented over a decision that would change not only the course of this breed's history but relationships within the breed both near and far.

There were other concerns as well. As quoted from Ms. Dorothy Allen Foster in the 1977-1978 *ASSA Handbook*, "The question has been raised as to why the more than 50 percent white Sheltie has been penalized so heavily as to eliminate him from competition. Your committee found several reasons and the vote of the membership confirmed them. Among them—the indiscriminate use of animals carrying the white factor in order to produce white Shelties and the further distribution of this factor in the breed, which would give rise to a much greater percentage of white-headed or splashed individuals than we now have."

Although the story has been told to me in brief detail, I had previously discovered the biggest clue on my own accord. One does not need to look far, if one is looking. While dissecting the English *Standard* of the past and discussing the mystery of whites to the English of current day, it became very apparent to me where the root of the problem began.

"The general appearance of the Shetland Sheepdog is approximately that of a show Collie in miniature. Ideal height 12 inches." You just read the *Standard* of the Shetland Sheepdog in its entirety, as it was in its day, 1914, England.

In its next change, 1916, line 14 of the English *Standard* reads: "Any colour except brindle is permissible."

The *Standard* clearly stated any color was permissible. It was argued that the color was not known during this period and that is why its exclusion was not written into the *Standard*, yet I discovered that the color was indeed known in this day, for there is a photograph of a color-headed white in Beryl Thynne's 1916 book, the first book on the Breed.

In 1920, the English revised the *Standard*. In fact, the 1920

English *Standard* was written so precisely against white, that obvious white-factoring would have been considered a fault: "White markings may be shown in the blaze, collar, frill, legs, feet and brush tip: all or some. Tan markings may be shown on eyebrows, cheeks, legs, stifles and under tail: all or some." In other words, white or obvious white-factoring would have been considered undesirable (white along the stifle). Alas, this proved difficult and in 1965 the English revised the *Standard* again, this time allowing white-factoring along the stifle: "White markings may be shown in the blaze, collar, chest, frill, legs, stifle and tip of tail...All or some tan markings may be shown on eyebrows, cheeks, legs, stifles and under tail."

The current English *Standard*, 1986 (relative to white and white-factoring) reads: "White markings may appear (except on black and tan) in blaze, collar and chest, frill, legs and tip of tail." The word "stifle" is omitted and the only mention of tan reads: "Rich tan markings preferred."

Shelties were registered in America as early as 1911, before the official 1929 American adaptation of the *English Shetland Sheepdog*, written by Catherine Coleman Moore and used until 1952. The first registered color-headed white was Connie Hubbard's Astolat Snowbird. An influential bitch, Astolat Lady Harlequin, is behind many modern Shelties in America. Undoubtedly, Ms. Moore met with the British Breeders Association and in 1929 (published in 1930) the resolutions between the English and Scottish clubs were reached: that in the future, the Shetland Sheepdog "should resemble a Collie (Rough) in miniature."

It is argued that the English never intended Americans to allow color-headed whites; yet, it is a curious matter that the English would have freely accepted Ms. Moore's adaptation if they were indeed against this color, for whites were known and whites were known in Collies, too. Nonetheless, the issue was pushed by English breeders and continues to this day, pressuring the 1952 change against heavily-marked white-factored animals. But what of the Collie, which the Sheltie breeders of the day wished to portray in their little mongrel-type Toonie dogs? *The Collie Club (English) Standard of Excellence*, 1890, under color, reads exactly, "Colour immaterial." The Scottish Collie Club *Standard* reads, "Colour—any."

There were other areas of dissent aside from color. For instance, at the onset of breed recognition, *Our Friends The Old English And Shetland Sheepdogs* (1935) tells us that "One party supported what they regarded as the original type, and the other favoured a *Standard* which approximated to a miniature reproduction of the Scotch Collie. The differences of opinion soon became so acute that they resulted in a definite cleavage between the two schools of thought, which resulted in the formation of separate specialist clubs, each holding its own ideas. Gradually, however, the supporters of the old school began to lean more towards the Collie type." For if not, the breed was to suffer much ridicule. Comments such as "the breed was by far the worst mongrels alive" was commonplace opinion.

And so the type of the Scotch Collie had to become popular favor, and even those who initially supported the original type soon had little choice but to breed to improve these little mongrels, even against those who regarded the attempts as a joke. Because of this ridicule the name was changed from Shetland Collie to Shetland Sheepdog, as Collie fanciers regarded any use of the word "Collie" a "glaring misnomer." I find it important to mention here that Scotch Collies were also pure white and were advertised as such not only in America, but in London, as "The Queen's Dogs."

So why then would Europe be against this color, as suggested by so many? Against the color so greatly, in fact, that supposed threats were made against American breeders in regards to the certification of imports that were of great importance in this day. This would have been a great impediment to breeders in these early decades, i.e., Catherine Coleman Moore of Sheltieland Kennels imported between the 1920s and 1940s; Frederika Fry Del Guercio of Far Sea Kennels, 1920s through 1930s; Mrs. W. F. Dreer of Anahassitt, 1920s through 1930s; Mr. William Gallagher and J. Nate Levine of Page's Hill, 1930s through 1940s; Mr. and Mrs. H. Willis Nichols, Jr. of Walnut Hall in the 1930s; Elizabeth Whelen of Pocono, 1930s and many other prominent breeders between the 1920s and 1950s.

If it is said that the *Standard* was changed to satisfy European contempt, then what is with the general lack of communication with English and American breeders as suggested in Charlotte Clem McGowan's *The Shetland Sheepdog In America?* Was it all for naught? In the '50s the communications and imports broke down quite dramatically. When Ms. McGowan released her book, even this was wrought in controversy, for she is a brave author: "Failure to resolve the white question has led to the formation of a divisive White Sheltie Club in the United States. The white question is such a hot issue, and has been for so long, that ASSA Boards for the last twenty years have failed to seriously attempt to revise the *Standard* for fear that the white question would rip the club apart. As a result the 1952-1990 American *Standard* has not been seriously examined since it was written and the breed in America has progressed from something not far from the breed in England to a vastly different and extraordinarily diverse one...A general lack of communication with English breeders from the late 1950s and the failure of the ASSA to even attempt to discuss the *Standard* and work for consensus on the world scene has contributed to the problem."

To note: In the mid 1990s Joyce Hansen and WSSA engineered another petition to force a vote on CHWs. Some sources suspect the wording was too limiting while others questioned the validity of the vote itself. When the vote was tallied, only 30 percent voted "yes" and only about 20 percent of the members voted. Some modern-day authors have suggested that the color white was a deficit to great shepherders, yet the learned Roman writer Varro (82-27 B.C.) wrote in *De Rustica* that white dogs were preferred shepherd dogs because they were more easily

seen.

It is a great mystery to me exactly what happened in 1952. Could it be as simple as putting a rival kennel out of business? Pressure from Europe? Threats to abandon the color or threats that imports would no longer be possible or acknowledged in pedigrees? Or, the most common of theories, the confusion of double merles and color-headed whites? Or is it because of the old color prejudice of sables vs. AOACs or, in this case, sables and AOACs vs. CHWs and HMWs? Or because, as white herding dogs, it "confuses" the sheep? I don't know the answer. I only know it is unfair. And for certain, I know the Breed's best interest is not at heart.

For if it were, in our advanced present-day knowledge regarding the importance of diversification, it would ultimately be taken into great consideration. Jerold S. Bell writes, "Purebred dog breeds have closed studbooks. No new genes are available to the breed, except from infrequent mutations that are usually not desirable. Considering a breed as a whole, genes cannot be gained through selective breeding; they can only be lost."

The source I used for most of the data below comes from an article by Dr. Jeffrey Bragg, *Purebred Dog Breeds into the Twenty-First Century: Achieving Genetic Health For Our Dogs*. In this article, Jeffrey outlines four essential characteristics to distinguish the origin, in a genetic sense, of a new breed:

1. The founding event—in which a finite number of individual canines is chosen to found the new breed;
2. Isolation—genetic isolation of the new founder group;
3. Inbreeding—a strong degree of incest breeding, or inbreeding, to facilitate the weeding-out of undesired characteristics and the fixation of desired traits; and
4. Artificial selection—animals selected for desired characteristics or to improve a desired trait.

"Without the four factors of the founder event, isolation, inbreeding and artificial selection, new breeds ordinarily do not come into existence."

Because Shelties have a diverse founding event, modern-day breeders find littermates born with marked differences in regards to conformation, temperament and finally, differences in the types they reproduce. I would venture further to state that because Shelties are not so homozygous to reproduce themselves identically, this breed lies somewhere between inbreeding and artificial selection, and dare I venture further to guess this breed is not as homozygous as one might suppose. We are most fortunate in this regard.

It is known that inbreeding cannot continue for many generations before an inbreeding depression would occur, caused from the effects of deleterious recessive alleles, which compromises the genetic vitality of any given breed and contributes to the rising number of defects in the gene pool when it is homozygous—the product of genetically inferior stock. It is also well known that many pure breeds today are in a crisis with regards to declining genetic health. Europe has taken great

strides in this regard and has introduced, in some breeds, crossbreeding to diversify a sickly gene pool and introduce new genetic inflow.

Although I do not suggest such drastic measures for our breed at the present time, I think it is important to consider diversity to some degree. It is said that most American champions are traced to Chestnut Rainbow (line CHE) and six females. However, keep in mind the diversity of the founding event, say, over a hundred foundation dogs. Still, I believe this breed is closing in on the gene pool with all male champions tracing back on line CHE and basically only six female tails as we continue to close in on the gaps between family lines as the future unfolds.

"Today the concept of a species in a satisfactory state of genetic health invokes a state of 'dynamic balance' in which the species genome contains an array of genotypes with a high degree of heterozygosity, with multiple alleles at many gene loci. Natural selection is now thought to favor heterozygotes in a way which tends toward a high state of variability, preserving the greatest variety of possibilities with which a species can meet new environmental challenges. Conversely, species which have lost most of their genetic diversity, often through accidental population 'bottlenecks' similar to those which regularly occur in purebred dogs, are held to be in high risk of extinction through the loss of adaptive capability. (The most notorious example is the cheetah, which is almost totally homozygous and is thought to have undergone at some time a bottleneck, reducing its population to a tiny handful of specimens.)"

Do we really want to further limit our gene pool knowing that most, if not all, champion males can be traced back on line CHE and female tails trace back to only six founding dogs? With this kind of scientific knowledge and evidence before us, why would we register only five colors when eight are available to us? All those lines will end. Is it really worth it?

I've done some checking into this, too: Why are people so afraid of white? The obvious answer was found in Catherine E. Coleman's 1943 book, *The Shetland Sheepdog*. "Breeding blue to blue may throw white with deaf and blind tendencies if the factor for white is present..." Obviously, it was believed the white factor was the cause for deafness, not the doubling of the merling gene.

Unfortunately, this is where the article "should" end, but I have just begun collecting data and would be remiss if I did not mention some real concerns here, too. This is in relation to the marked increase in deaf animals that are white- or heavily-white-splashed individuals, more notably when the ears are white as well, and more so when merling is involved. The following quote is from Dr. George M. Strain as published, in part, from the May 2003 *American Veterinary Journal*:

"Canine deafness is diagnosed with increasing frequency, primarily as a result of heightened awareness about the disorder among owners, breeders and clinicians. The aetiology can be hereditary or acquired. The most commonly seen forms of deafness are (i) congenital sensorineural deafness, seen most

("The White Sheltie: To Create or Cull?" cont.)

often in dogs with white pigmentation, (2) conductive deafness associated with otitis externa and/or media, and (3) later-onset sensorineural deafness associated with otitis interna, chronic otitis media, ototoxicity (i.e., from gentamicin), noise trauma (gun fire), or presbycusis in older dogs (Strain, 1996, 1999).

There is little current dispute that white pigmentation is a risk factor for deafness in the dog and other animal species, but the mechanisms by which this risk ensues are not yet fully understood. "The canine locus or gene designated by the symbol 'S' is perhaps the one most associated with deafness. The 'S' locus affects the distribution pattern of pigmented and white (nonpigmented) areas on the body (Little, 1957; Sponenberg and Rothschild, 2001), while other genes determine the actual colour of the pigmented areas. The 'S' locus has at least four alleles. The dominant allele 'S' is known as self- or non-spotted and produces a completely pigmented body surface, although minor areas of white may be present on the feet or thorax. The 'si' allele produces Irish spotting and presents with only a few white areas that are usually on locations such as the thorax, feet, face or head. The 'sp' allele produces piebald spotting and produces significantly more white on the body surface than Irish spotting, including the limbs, while the 'sw' or extreme-white piebald allele is associated with an even greater extent of white, including the ears and base of the tail."

A second pigmentation locus associated with deafness is that designated by "M," often known by the name associated with the pattern of the dominant allele: merle. Homozygosity of the recessive allele (mm) produces uniform pigmentation, while the heterozygous merle (Mm) produces dappling or alternate body areas of fully-pigmented coat and pale eumelanin or even white coat. Homozygous merles (MM) are usually nearly solid white, and in some breeds may be deaf, blind with microphthalmic eyes, and sterile. Dogs heterozygous for "M" (regular ol' blue merle) are variable in their likelihood of deafness. "Other genes reported to produce white or light coat colour in dogs—flecking, ticking, dilution with fawn—do not appear to be associated with deafness."

It is obvious why so many are concerned. I think it is important to note here that deafness (sensorineural, associated with a white coat) is a problem not only relating to white but can be found on solid-colored individuals, and of course all Shelties are going to contribute an allele from the s-series (white)! The problem occurs when there is loss of pigment in the inner ear (which cannot be seen by the naked eye). "In their absence, the stria vascularis degenerates," wrote Dr. Bruce M. Cattanach. "As this provides the blood supply to the cochlea, damage to this structure occurs and the sensory hair cells necessary for hearing die."



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Therefore, the cause of deafness is not relating to the color of the dog, inasmuch as the loss of pigment cells in the inner ear (undoubtedly caused by a gene in the s-series), but I am sorry to report that all Shelties have the s-series genes! The most troubles relating to deafness have been found in Shelties where there was excessive white on the face, around the eyes or on the ears. Breeders of CHWs do not breed for extreme piebalding in these areas no more than breeders of solid-colored Shelties, as it could happen in either...and does.

So what are some other concerns of those sitting on the fence? For one, little has been done among the white fanciers to clarify the splashes of color and, without this definition or understanding, there lie many concerns. A valid concern, for instance, would be if we allowed white or piebald to creep into the gene pool, that it may be conceivable that we would have more splashed individuals and it would be more difficult to maintain the solid-colored bodies. Many do not want this, and I don't blame them.

I love color-headed whites. I always have; however, I think it is important among the white fanciers to BAER (Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response) test these animals so that a comfort level can be obtained relating to deafness concerns in white-factored or heavily-marked or color-headed white Shelties. I

think it is also important to define the color patterns and the results of breeding these various patterns. Moreover, since there is a parent club for white Shelties, I feel it would be important to hold bench shows to get these animals recognized and titled under the powers of the club. None of these things have been done; yet we expect to earn respect from our peers?

There are clubs rallying in support and favor of the CHWs and HMWs. The United Kennel Club accepts the color, and the IABCA has finished champions—even though the *Standard* is mostly of European influence and the color is considered a fault, it is kept within reason and there are titled whites. And most surprisingly, the CSSA president, Laura Thompson, wrote to me in 2002 validating claim to a draft of a revised *Standard* that would include CHWs and sable merles. The majority of the membership agreed; thus it will be presented to the CKC for membership vote. I anxiously await the formal announcement of this change.

The white Sheltie. He is, and continues to be, registered. We breed him. We continue to make history with him, to build on our foundation and to create new generations. We have given him purpose. He is a wonderful facet of this very diverse and controversial breed. Recognize him—let us please exhibit him. It is what we would expect from our breed *Standard*: fairness and consistency with respect to the Breed. Is it not? □