

The Australian Shepherd is *not* a Trotting Breed

By Jeanne Joy Hartnagle-Taylor



"When we stop looking at the dogs
through the lens of its original purpose, be it herding,
hunting, retrieving, etc., we will have created in time a
distinctly different breed."

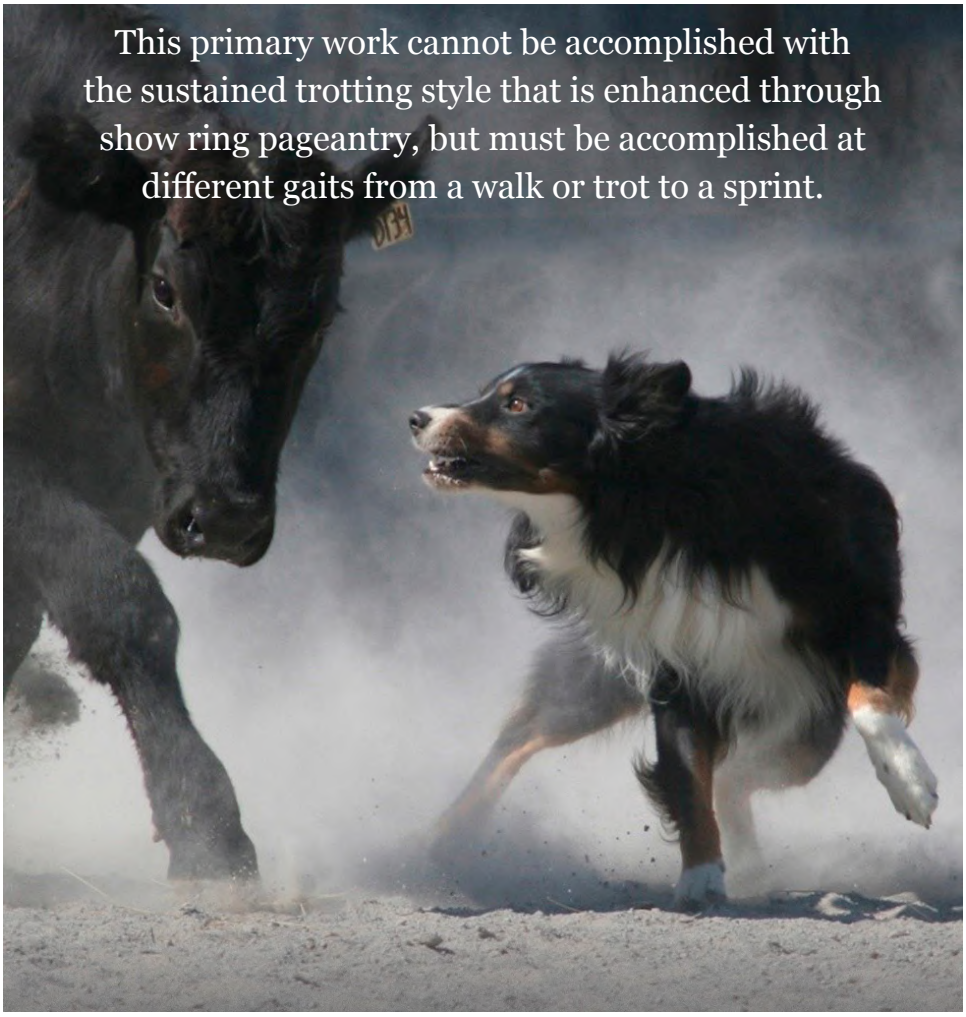
Form Follows Function

A breed standard is the blueprint, a written description for breeders and judges to evaluate against. Is the dog fit for the function?

In the beginning, the authors of breed standards tried to describe the type of dog ideally suited for the job description as it then existed. At the same time understanding the only real method of testing the form is the function which further reveals the character and determination needed for the work.

A breed's foundation—its original purpose—is thought to be the baseline for their structure and temperament. For example, the original purpose as a racing greyhound or working stockdog is reflected in its over-all type.

Sorting, penning, and turning back livestock often requires rapid accelerations, sharp turns, abrupt stops at full speed. Also required are roll backs and simultaneous lead changes. After which the dog must return to a “flat out” run again in two strides in a different direction. All the while dodging flying hooves and lethal horns.



Trotting or Sprinting?

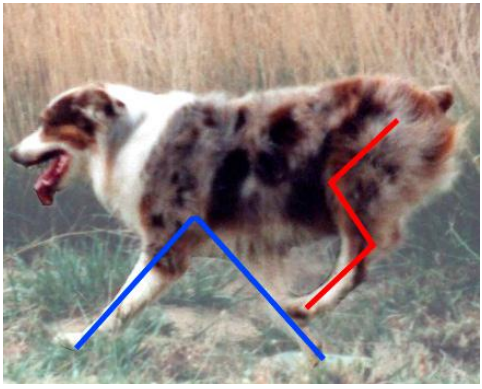
It is **theoretical** in certain breed standards and books that herding and droving dogs are long-distance trotters that need to be able to cover as much ground as possible with as few strides as necessary. Therefore, they require a *sustained trotting assembly.*

In the days before motorized transport and railways, herding dogs were essential to move any number of cattle, sheep, pigs, and even geese for great distances over untamed land. Droving required stamina and force with the temperament to move stubborn or anxious animals along the wild countryside and through crowded towns. The work required flexibility. The dog had to be able to work any position relative to the stock—pushing from the rear, going to the head to turn the group, and thwarting breakaway attempts from any point in the herd or flock.

The job description required a dog to use many gaits from a walk to a sprint. They may trot for certain distances as well as make instantaneous gait changes, quick and sudden turns, and abrupt stops over varied terrain.

In order for herding dogs to perform this type of work, dogs must be built to sprint suddenly. In other words, they must be able to transition from a trot to a sprint automatically.

Why, then are Aussies judged at a trot in the conformation show ring? Because "The trot is the gait which best shows balance and scope or reveals aspects which are less desirable." *Canine Chronicle*



An Aussie with a sprinting drivetrain transitioning in midair from a trot (marked by blue) to a sprint (marked by red).

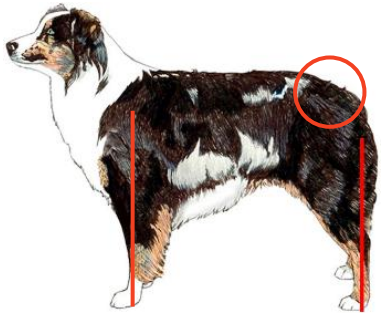
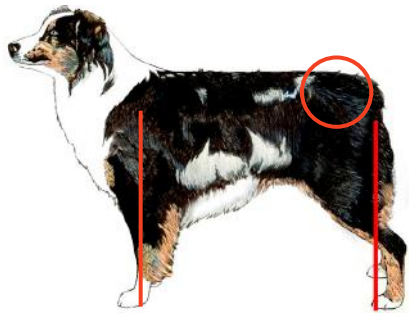
Walk-Jog-Trot-Run

The biggest misunderstanding about herding breeds like the Australian Shepherd, Australian Cattle Dog, or Kelpie is they are sustained trotting specialists. This **could not be further from the truth.** On farms and ranches in the real-world, Australian Shepherds, Australian Cattle Dogs, Border Collies, Kelpies and similar breeds have to negotiate uneven and sometimes rocky terrain, through heavy snow and deep sand or thick mud, which is very different than trotting across the level surface of a conformation ring.

When livestock is moved in large numbers over long distances across varied terrain, dogs are required to use all gaits from a walk to a slow jog to a trot to a flat out run. When all the animals are under control and settled, the dogs alternate from a walk to an average jog, and then may sprint to turn back any sheep that stray off the trail.

The trotting style of the sprinter is not choppy or stilted, but not long and flowing either. The trotting style is moderate. Thus, trotting dogs with the sprinting drivetrain move their feet faster at a given stride length than dogs built for sustained trotting. A dog with a sound, balanced trot should translate into the ability to outmaneuver livestock and travel all day.

The trotting dog spends more time in the air due to the longer stride, which produces a slower reaction time. The sprinter, however, with his shorter stride is more agile and can make abrupt changes in direction much quicker.

Sprinting Drivetrain	**Trotting Drivetrain**
Moderate shoulder with a seemingly shorter upper arm. A little less slope to front pasterns.	More shoulder layback and return of upper arm with more slope to the front pasterns.
More fast twitch muscles, (heavier muscles).	More slow twitch muscles, (longer, leaner muscles).
	
Hind legs are more under the pelvis.	Hind legs are out behind pelvis.
Steeper croup.	Flatter croup.
Longer hocks (Metatarsi).	Shorter hocks (Metatarsi).
Shorter, quicker strides at the trot.	Longer strides at the trot.
Aussies with the sprinting drivetrain are more exact when placing their feet and are able to turn more sharply than Aussies with greater angulation.	Aussies with the trotting drivetrain are able to take longer strides with their legs covering more ground but are slower making gait changes.
Forward, ground covering running style.	Up and down running style like a rocking horse.

Advantages of the Sprinting Drivetrain

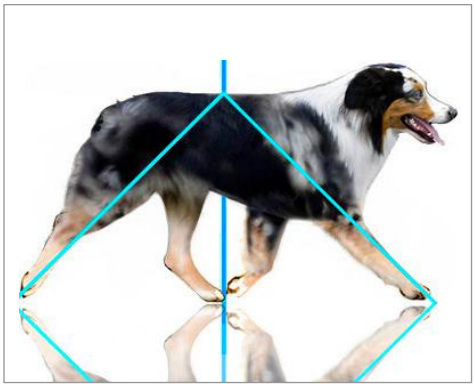
Although most Aussies have the same basic appearance that sets them apart from other breeds, there is a distinct difference between the basic structure and trotting style of the working bloodlines and those bred for the conformation ring. A comparison can be drawn between the differences of the quick turning Quarter Horse and the Standardbred able to trot or pace at a high speed without breaking gait.

Ernest Hartnagle, one of the drafters of the original ASCA 1977 Breed Standard said, “The development of the trotting Aussie produced a dog that could move effortlessly for long distances. The trade-off for this development was paid for with the sacrifice of supreme agility necessary to outrun and turn sheep and cattle. The longer extension of gait naturally produces a slower reaction time to negotiate changes of direction.” A dog with the trotting drive train requires an extra stride to alter gaits or change direction.

That is to say, the greater angulation of the drivetrain built for sustained trotting produces fewer strides per 100 feet than the sprinting drivetrain does

at the same gait. Simply put, while the trotter is in the process of completing the first stride, the sprinter is in its second stride. The trotting dog spends more time in the air due to the longer stride, which produces a slower reaction time. The sprinter, however with his shorter stride is more agile and can make abrupt changes in direction much quicker.

Athletes also depend on the sprinting drivetrain for maximum efficiency to function as a herder or hunter. The trot to sprint transition is significant in a dog's ability to function as a hunter or herder and excel in performance events such as Agility, Flyball or Frisbee that require quickness, good jumping ability, and turn around efficiency.

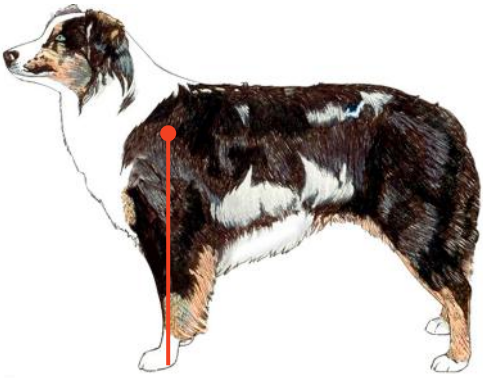


Balanced Movement

The gait will be balanced when the angulation of the front assembly complements the angulation of the hindquarters and there is flawless coordination between the supporting and propelling ends of the body. As the weight-bearing front foot leaves the ground, the hind foot moves to “fill” its place.

Shoulder Angulation

Aussies made for sustained trotting have more shoulder layback and a little more slope to the front pastern than their sprinting cousins. Aussies built for agility have slightly steeper shoulders (less slope) and a **seemingly** shorter upper arm. There is also less slope to the pasterns.



For static, standing balance, the legs need to drop with a column of support beneath the weight bearing point of the front assembly. The slight angle of the pastern places the weight of the animal on the metacarpal (palmar) pad. The foot is more likely to break down when the majority of weight is carried on the toes rather than carried by the metacarpal pad and then distributed to the forward supporting digital pads.

Rear Angulation

The rear is the engine. It provides power and enables quick turns and ability to rollback and run in the opposite direction. The moderately bent stifle allows for sufficient length of both upper and lower thighs for good leg action. Longer metatarsi and well-developed rearing muscles of the loin and back legs are necessary for jumping high into the air to catch an airborne Frisbee disc or turn a heifer.

Moderate angulation is the most practical for Aussies for two reasons. There's a huge risk for injury with more angulation. Hindquarters with greater angulation are less stable because they lack vertical support. The rear assembly requires much more muscular strength especially when twisting and turning in deep sand, heavy snow, thick mud and on uneven terrain.

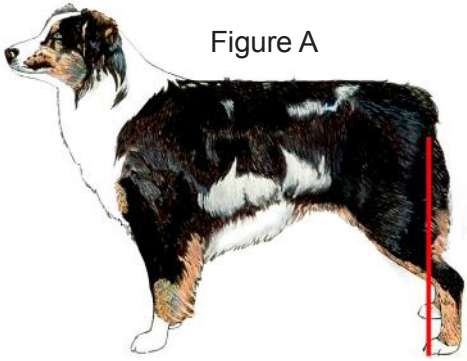


Figure A

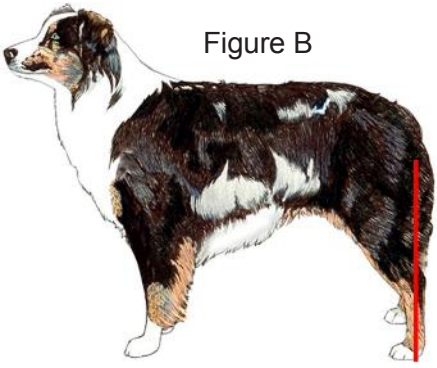


Figure B

To check the balance of the rear assembly, drop a plumb line from the rearmost point of the dog's buttocks (ischium) to the ground.

The **misconception** is the line will drop *in front of the toes* of a well-structured dog (Figure A). In the breed ring, breeders and judges mistakenly believe this is the balance point required for proper movement.

Furthermore, they believe when the plumb line drops through the vertical line of support *behind the toes* to the metacarpal pad, the dog lacks angulation and will have restricted movement. (Figure B).

Form Follows Function

In biology, "form follows function" means that the form and shape of a body structure goes hand in hand to the purpose or function of that structure. The dog's skull, pelvis shape, ribcage, and the position of their limbs indicate whether a dog is built for speed or strength. From heading to heeling to dodging a kick, the Australian Shepherd breed was developed as a working stockdog able to handle a variety of livestock. The Aussie should convey the impression at a glance that he is capable of enduring long periods of active duty as a stockdog, which is attributed to his strength and stamina.

> First and foremost, the Australian Shepherd is a true working stockdog, and anything that detracts from his usefulness as such is undesirable. The most important breed characteristics are overall moderation in size and bone, balance with correct proportions, and sound movement.
>
> *ASCA Breed Standard Introduction*

Did you enjoy this e-book? There's even more!

This e-book contains just a small part of the knowledge that Jeanne Joy Hartnagle-Taylor shares in her newly published book:

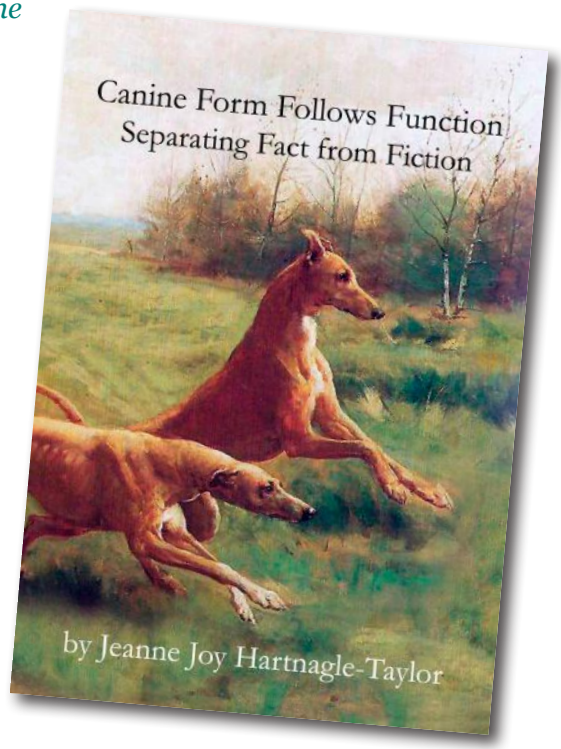
Canine Form Follows Function, Separating Fact from Fiction

"An in-depth discussion of the anatomy and structure that enable all breeds of working and performance dogs to excel. Photos and illustrations throughout make the concepts easy to understand."

A few of the many questions that are answered:

- How do muscles affect movement?
- What is correct bone structure?
- Why do dogs trot, pace, or overdrive?
- What causes bad bites?
- How long should dogs live?
- and much, much more!

137 pages
First printing 2021

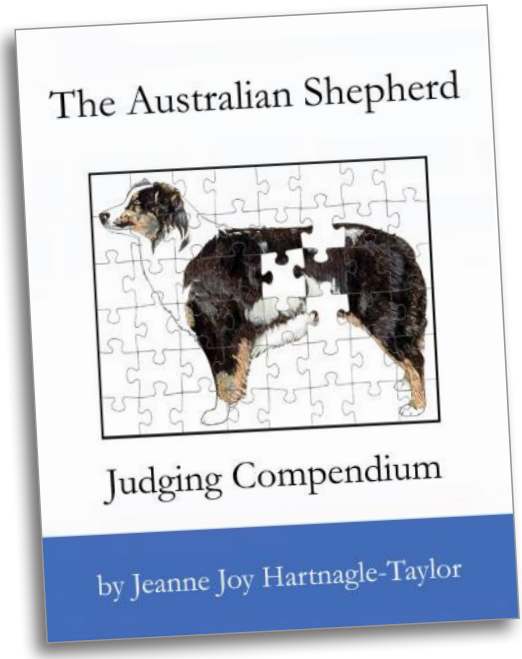


BUY NOW! ***Just released and available only on Amazon.***
CLICK THIS BOX TO PURCHASE
Canine Form Follows Function, Separating Fact from Fiction

Jeanne Joy Hartnagle-Taylor's guide to interpreting the breed standard

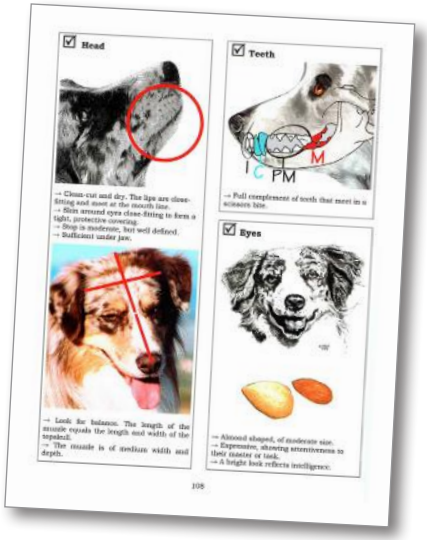
The Australian Shepherd Judging Compendium

An Illustrated Workbook



This comprehensive workbook is for all judges and breeders who want to understand the Australian Shepherd Breed Standard in fine detail. The author explains each section of the standard and clearly illustrates virtues and faults with photos and drawings.

118 pages, 2018.



"Critical reading for anyone who takes the breeding and showing of the Australian Shepherd seriously."

- Michael J. Ryan, Senior Conformation Breeder Judge

BUY NOW!

CLICK THIS BOX TO PURCHASE

The Australian Shepherd Judging Compendium