

# UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

## JUDGING THE AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD & THE MINIATURE AMERICAN SHEPHERD

by NANNETTE L. NEWBURY

**A**s the Miniature American Shepherd (MAS) enjoys its first year of full AKC recognition, it appears that the anticipated breed “split” has—and will continue to have—some interesting and definitely unintended consequences and pressures on the Australian Shepherd. The first hint of this is occurring in the AKC group ring today.

I received a call from a disgruntled owner whose handler had been asked to put their Australian Shepherd on the table in the group ring. The handler, upset that the judge did not know the difference between the Aussie and the MAS, was firm in her reply clearly stating that this was an Australian Shepherd and the breed was not to be judged on the table. The judge quickly realized his or her mistake and was potentially embarrassed and/or confused at the situation. Herding group judges having difficulty discerning whether it is an Aussie or a MAS being presented to them in the group ring is an issue that is



Left: Miniature American Shepherd. Right: Australian Shepherd.

going to persist. It should be dealt with professionally, accurately and now.

It is not specifically the all-breed judge's problem if they are confused as to the identity of these two breeds in the group ring. Ideally both breeds should look almost identical with very few differences outlined in the breed standards. The first time I saw both breeds in the group ring together, I did a double-take and it took me a moment and some quick internal processing to determine which breed was what.

It caught me by surprise. They were both blue merles and both were the same size. They are not always that easy to tell apart, even for a breed specialist.

If one reads and compares both breed standards, there are some subtle differences, but none of those differences would help one differentiate between the two breeds. So this new and potentially confusing situation in the group ring is not unexpected. The problem arises because the Australian Shepherd has no size disqualification,



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only stated preferred sizes, that are further explained as not set in stone by the “quality is not to be sacrificed in favor of size” statement. This basically implies that any size Australian Shepherd that is of quality is allowed—any size.

Supposedly, the most obvious difference is the size of the exhibits, but is this truly the way to determine a breed in the group ring? No!

The MAS has a specific size range and size disqualifications for males and females:

- Size: Height for dogs is 14 inches up to and including 18 inches at the top of the withers. Height for bitches is 13 inches up to and including 17 inches at the top of withers.
- Disqualification: under 14 inches and over 18 inches for dogs; under 13 inches and over 17 inches for bitches. The minimum heights set forth in this breed standard shall not apply to dogs or bitches under six months of age.

The Australian Shepherd breed standard states:

- Size: The preferred height for males is 20-23 inches and females 18-21 inches. Quality is not to be sacrificed in favor of size.

At first glance one might assume that this is clearly the way to identify and distinguish between the two breeds in the group ring. The Australian Shepherd is obviously the larger of the two, right? Not necessarily.

It is entirely possible to have an Australian Shepherd in the group ring

that is smaller than the MAS in the same group ring. So how are Herding group judges going to be able to determine which animal is the MAS (with a size disqualification and judged on the table) and which animal is the Australian Shepherd with NO size disqualification and not to be judged on the table? Relying solely on size is not going to solve the issue.

There is no one answer to this incredibly interesting question. I can tell you that if we do nothing as a breed to help these judges, the most obvious solution is to impose breed size ranges and disqualifications on the Australian Shepherd. The long-term and disastrous consequences of this potential solution should be avoided at all costs. However the pressure to do so will mount in years to come—an unintended and predicted consequence of the breed split.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

In light of the fact that an AKC judge cannot ask an exhibitor what breed they are showing in the group ring, what can we do to help ensure that this does not become an out-of-control issue between the two breeds in the group ring?

A judge can check the judge’s book prior to the group entering the ring. Each exhibit is listed by breed and armband number. This will work up to a point; however, when both the MAS and the Aussie have the same armband number, this solution will not work.

The group ring steward can assist somewhat in helping if both exhibits

are presented. If the ring steward is proactive with the table this might help determine which dog/breed should be judged on the table.

As handlers there are also potential, yet subtle and creative solutions. If you think that there will be an issue for the judge determining which breed is which, agree to have the Aussie go in first in all of these instances. While it is an informal solution, if adopted and practiced, it has potential to assist in the issue.

As exhibitors we can also assist, by being knowledgeable about this issue and assisting a judge whenever possible and appropriate. If you are ringside and notice that there might be an issue for the group judge, take positive steps to assist. Quietly informing the handlers and/or the ring steward ahead of time might help.

If we choose other less solution-oriented and pro-active options, additional unintended consequences and potentially detrimental results will be felt by the Australian Shepherd and MAS breeds in the future. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Breeder/owner/handler Nannette Newbury is currently approved in AKC to judge the Australian Shepherd and has provisional status in AKC to judge the Miniature American Shepherd. Nannette is the former editor of the Australian Shepherd Journal and former Judge’s Education Coordinator for USASA.*

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Left: Miniature American Shepherd. Right: Australian Shepherd.