

The Search for Moderation in the Herding Dog

by Dana Hasemeier



There is often a difference between the show-type of herding breed dog and the non-show type. In my breed, the Cardigan Welsh Corgi, the big winners in the conformation ring are often extreme examples of the breed and their exaggerated features lead me to believe they wouldn't be capable of doing a day's work. This situation isn't limited to just one breed however.

The Cardigan was developed to assist the small farmer with his myriad tasks. As with any multi-purpose breed, the Cardi was responsible for several jobs, from childcare and ridding to clearing common graze land for his master's cattle, sheep, ducks and chickens. The farmers who developed the Cardigan breed had small graze areas to manage, not the wide, open spaces that would require a larger, farther-ranging dog. With the British Crown owning the open grazing land, (the farmers only owned their little garden lot and barn or if they possessed a larger area it wasn't fenced) the Cardigan's primary job was to chase the neighbor's animals off the prime grazing areas. At the end of the day he'd gather up his master's livestock and take them home. With knowledge of his job at hand and his limited resources, the Welshman developed a breed of compact, strong dogs that could do what needed to be done within the framework of his circumstances.

The traits that he selected for hold true in today's herding dogs as well: sturdy bone, height that allows the dog to duck below kick level, level or scissor bite to enforce his will, a double coat to repel moisture and shed dirt. Large, round feet to support his weight and for ease of turning, deep chest for lung expansion, short loins to enable the dog to turn quickly, good shoulder and hind leg angulation to allow the dog to work without fatigue or lameness. All of these traits make for a sound herding dog.

The lack of moderation seen in today's conformation dogs is an overall increase in substance, length-to-height ratios being governed by style rather than purpose - in my breed, if long and low is good then longer and lower must be better! Size has also snuck up - to be 'seen' in the Group ring the Cardigan needs to be able to run with the big dogs. Changes to breeds take place over many years; larger size is often attributed to better nutrition, but shorter legs are strictly a stylistic item. For the original Welsh farmer, if he needed a different type of dog and one couldn't be traded for or purchased he'd make his own, mating his good bitch to the neighbor's dog to increase size or aggression or desire to gather. With the move to fenced grazing areas, the job of the Cardigan gradually was phased out and he moved into the house as a pet.

The Cardigan standard states that 'oversize and undersize are serious faults' yet group winners are commonly at least an inch or two over the allowable maximum for their gender and sometimes 10 pounds over the limits! Undersize is rarely seen. Having shown a 45 pound male I know just how hard it was for him to propel his bulk on his short legs. He had lots of herding instinct and want-to but would fatigue easily and was clumsy so he never got to do much herding.

Today's stockman or hobbyist still needs a moderate dog for his purposes. Bigger isn't better, nor is more coat, shorter legs or longer backs. Speed and agility are prime assets when working livestock and a heavily-boned dog is less agile than a moderately-boned one. More coat, either longer or thicker, won't help the dog work in brush better, nor will it insulate him

from heat or cold better than the correct amount of coat. Longer backs might make for bigger strides but that conformation style risks injury when asked to do an honest day's work.



It might sound like I'm making a case for the generic stock dog, but I'm not. I believe that dogs should conform to their appropriate standards. They were selected in different locales for certain traits and one breed does not fit all needs. In my case, I have a small place for my hobby sheep, about 5 acres, cross-fenced into 2 paddocks and 2 pens. The larger field is around 3 acres and my dog can cover her stock in that sized area even though an outrun is not instinctual in my breed.

She can cover her stock much better in the 100'x200' field and better still in the 50'x50' pen. When I need to worm or trim feet I do it in the pen, not one of the bigger fields. When I load stock I do it in conjunction with a chute, not out in the open field. My breed is most effective when being asked to do jobs that call on the dog's instinctive behaviors - working in confined areas, being forceful and purposeful in their actions. My main requirements when I'm working my stock are balance and push. A gather does me just fine; a large outrun isn't necessary and is a waste of physical assets. If my dog had to scout out and gather sheep out of a 20 acre field I'd be out of dog by the time she got them to me!

A bigger or longer-legged dog (making a Cardigan into a more standard sized and shaped generic-style herding dog) isn't necessary for my requirements either. Though I don't work cattle with my dogs, I follow the standard and breed dogs that are short enough to be under bovine kick height and no heavier than a moderate dog of that size would weigh.

Moderate dogs are out there and they do conform to their AKC Parent Club's written standards. They can also earn their conformation championships while working livestock daily or as a hobby. Without the working component in any breed, we run the risk of falling prey to the fads of the conformation ring and having our beloved breeds changed from sturdy and agile to caricatures of what a working dog should be.

About the Author

Dana Hasemeier lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband Rick, and has been raising Cardigan Welsh Corgis since 1989. Owner and trainer of the breed's first HX titled individual, Ch Winstonwil's Happy Camper, UD, HX, HTDIII, VCX, ROM. "Maggie" is also mother to Ch Dot HX and grandmother to Ch Ingrid HX. Dana is also an AKC and AHBA herding judge.

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