

GERMAN SHEPHERD DOG

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

by Susan Sullivan

Legend has it that the late eighteenth century, German Army officer, Max Von Stephanitz, sat upon his horse watching Horand, a local sheep dog, tending sheep. It was the beginning of the great breed we know today as the German Shepherd Dog. A dog that was developed not for its beauty, but for its ability to perform necessary functions unique to the time and environment of the late 1800's.

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The German Shepherd Dog is first and foremost a herding dog. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, flocks were small and the dogs were more of a mastiff-type guardian to protect the flock and the shepherd. As most of Europe went under the plow through the mechanized tractor, sheep herding changed; requiring faster, more athletic dogs to act as a living fence to contain flocks of vast numbers. There were no fences between fields and crops, electric fencing was non-existent and permanent fencing that would contain sheep was too expensive. The dog was required to trot in the outermost furrow of a field to allow the flock to graze the entire area field



and not trespass into the adjacent growing crops. (The dog also could not be in the adjacent planted area.) The dogs permitted a very efficient agricultural technique to develop. Vast flocks of sheep were able to graze in designated areas without any fencing, crops could be rotated, usable meat and fiber produced with minimal investment. It was through this function that the German Shepherd Dog developed its physical form, its movement and its character.

The basis of the form following function is an incredible, economical gait. First, the trotting gait is non-startling to the sheep. The dog acts as a living fence, moving back and forth on the edge of the grazing area. The sheep see the dog calmly going back and forth, are not startled and can graze undisturbed. Secondly, the trot is the safest gait. It is a two-beat gait with either two feet or no feet on the ground at any given time. Having two diagonal feet supporting the body at any given time significantly reduces the potential for injury. Lastly, the trot allows the dog to speed up and slow down by lengthening his stride. This flexibility in stride length is very

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important in herding. This allows the sheep to stay settled. Dropping his head, the dog can lengthen his frame, permit his center of balance to shift rearward, engage a more powerful thrust off his rear, and lengthen his front step to maximize his stride length. He can cover the most amount of ground in the least amount of steps without the flock panicking.

While the gait is the foundation of form, the work greatly influenced the dog's appearance. The ideal coat is a harsh, double coat as the dog must work in all types of weather. The movable, prick ears hear the shepherd's voice from tremendous distances without the use of a whistle. The head has strong, well-formed teeth and jaws meeting in a scissors bite to permit the dog to grip the sheep using a full-mouth grip to control, but not injure an escaping sheep.

Tending sheep requires unbelievable stamina. The ribs are well-sprung and the chest capacious, allowing the circulatory and pulmonary systems to function optimally. The back is strong and without sway, the area of the loin short and thick. A long, weak back seriously limits the dog's ability to work without tiring and to transmit the power from the well-developed hindquarters.

The hindquarters are the engine of this efficient animal. A long, slightly sloping croup gives maximum muscle attachment. The upper thighs are also wide when viewed from the side both producing the energy necessary to not only gait for hours, but also enough force to handle a large ewe that has gone astray. The well-angulated hind leg acts much like a spring to create more powerful energy as needed. The thrust of the engine is then transmitted through the back and into the exceptional shock absorbing front assembly.

Tending dogs have well laid-back shoulders and long upper arms that are conjoined at an angle that allows the dog to extend his reach as he lengthens his stride. This gives the dog much greater capacity to absorb energy and work tirelessly. A slightly sloping pastern cushions the impact of the stride. However, pasterns too sloping, too long or too upright and short result in damage to the ligaments in the lower leg from repeated concussion. A well-developed foot with arched toes and thick pads is essential in maintaining the soundness of a tending dog.

Sheep are large in Europe. The dog must be of enough size to influence possibly 1000 hungry sheep. However, oversize dogs lack the stamina to work all day, every day. A tending dog must also have enough substance and bone to be able to correct a 200 pound ewe. Heavy boned dogs will not have the endurance and agility required of the work while dogs with very light bone and little substance will not have the presence and the strength to manage large sheep.

According to the legend, the young officer tested the dog's character by having the owner place him in a down. Von Stephanitz then directed his horse in ever decreasing circles around the dog. The dog stayed in his position until just before the horse stepped on him, where upon the dog leaped up and gripped the horse on the neck just in front of the saddle. Totally surprised, Von Stephanitz promptly brought his riding crop down on the dog. The dog released his grip and returned to his position without cringing or showing malice. Von Stephanitz marveled at Horand's courage, calmness and intelligence, recognizing the dog's impeccable character. He chose Horand to become the foundation of our noble breed based on that temperament. It is the character of the German Shepherd Dog that is most defined by active sheepherding.

The temperament required of the work is complex. The dog must have very high prey drive and work ethic to continue patrolling for hours. He must be incredibly obedient, not only to the border he is working but also to the shepherd. He must stand steadfast as hundreds of sheep pass him on a corner, making certain none cut across the corner trespassing into a forbidden crop. He must be courageous and confident when disciplining wayward sheep. While sheep are often portrayed as defenseless, they will readily butt a dog and cause serious injury. They read dogs very well and quickly determine an unconfident dog. In a matter of minutes, the dog has lost control of the flock as they realize he is powerless in his fear.



Shepherding was dangerous in the late 1800's. Shepherds were vulnerable to being not only robbed but beaten up by the local rowdies. Shepherding was not considered a particularly honorable profession and shepherds were treated much like gypsies and vagabonds. Wolves were still preying on the traveling flocks. The dogs developed into tremendous protectors, aloof with strangers, suspicious yet not fearful, willing to defend the shepherd with their lives. While the dogs demonstrated incredible willingness to please and obedience, a deep sense of intelligence was also developed. The best dogs worked independently, handling situations without command. The most useful dogs were calm and thoughtful as well as energetic.

In Germany, the SV continues to value working herding dogs. The German herding title, HGH, is considered an equivalent working title to schutzhund titles. Dogs earning an HGH need not complete the endurance test, AD, as tending sheep requires exceptional endurance. The scoring of a German herding dog includes 30 out of 100 points devoted to his character. The dog's diligence, obedience and intelligence are assessed throughout the test. His ability to protect is also evaluated. At the end of the trial when a suited helper confronts the dog and the shepherd. The SV recognizes that the original function of the German Shepherd Dog continues to influence the standard by which the physical and mental attributes are assessed.

Form follows function. Recognizing the function the dog was developed to fulfill allows one to understand the form the standard describes. As sheepherding changed in the 1800's, the dogs that were bred were the animals that worked the best on the flocks. The dogs transitioned from a heavy guardian to the athletic, energetic, intelligent dog we value today. Our standard illustrates a dog that could tend large flocks of sheep all day, every day. When you have the opportunity to witness a German Shepherd Dog working sheep, you will see the standard come to life.

Title Dog:

*American-bred **HC Hillside Von Weiden's Eclipse UD, HXC**s Owned and bred by Karen Weidenbener and Vivian Snook, is an example of a show bred dog able to perform the breed's "most noble vocation" according to Von Stephanitz. Eclipse was sired by Sel. Ch. Omega's Chief Cochise and a Ch. Covy Tucker Hill's Mazarati ROM great grand daughter.*

Author:

***Susan Sullivan**, a GSDCA member since 1982, competes in obedience, breed and herding with German Shepherd Dogs. She is an AKC herding judge, coaches sheep tending in New England and in clinics around the US and Canada. Professionally an educator, Susan teaches sixth grade in Scotland, CT. Her dogs have won High in Trial at numerous National Herding events, She handled her dog HC Indian Ledge Lex O'Firethorn to first place in the first SV sanctioned HGH competition in North America. A year later, the same dog was awarded the first GSDCA Herding Victor.*