

The Australian Cattle Dog – not just a head!

Kath Williamson

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the head of the Australian Cattle Dog. However it must be stressed that **a dog with an average head and body is a better dog than the dog whose head is structurally correct but whose body is poorly inadequate.** Naturally, this is also true of a dog with a poor head and sound body.



Ch Baylogic Boomer was chosen to illustrate the ANKC breed standard, 1998, for the Australian Cattle Dog.

The head is still important and some points to note include shape, length and depth of muzzle, eye shape and colour, ear size and placement and dentition. A wedge shape is a common term used to describe the shape of an Australian Cattle Dog's head. Remember, this wedge shape should be three dimensional.

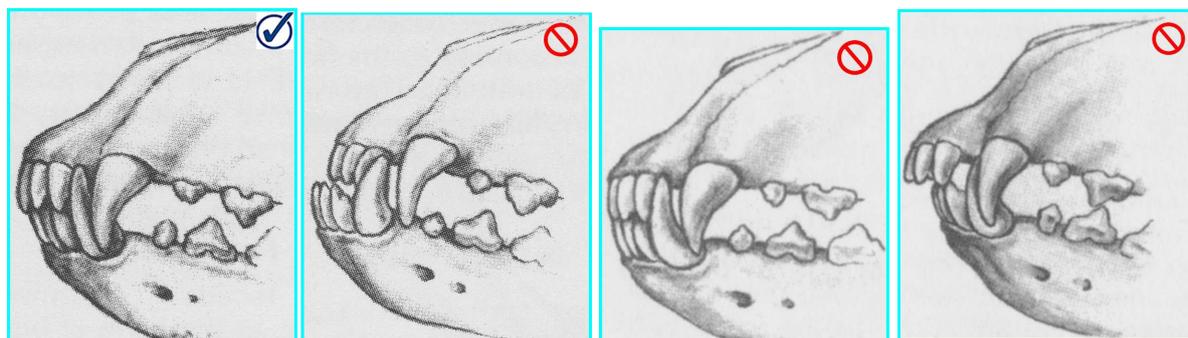
The standard calls for a "slight but definite stop". SLIGHT is the key word here. A steer's kick at the head will glance off the head of a dog with a slight stop. If the stop is prominent or strong, such as a Rottweiler's or Staffordshire Bull Terrier's, a kick from a steer is likely to take the top of the skull right off. This is worth recalling when appraising the head of an Australian Cattle Dog.

A few years ago, there seemed to be a trend towards breeding a dog with a shorter muzzle (perhaps this was because of a judging trend). We now appear to be swinging away from this and breeding an older style of dog whose muzzle is approximately the same length or fractionally shorter as from the occiput to the stop. This is similar to the dogs of earlier decades. It is believed a muzzle of approximately the same length as the skull aids in filtration of dust while working. In addition, a theory abounds that an "older style" muzzle is much more likely to have a correct jaw shape and scissor bite. Another point to note is that a short muzzle will increase the chances of overcrowding of the teeth.

Eye shape is oval, not round. It is similar in shape to that of a dingo. The colour of the eyes should always be dark brown. Some variance will occur but a light or yellow eye is highly undesirable.

The ears have good leather, are pricked and have plenty of hair protecting the inners from dirt, burrs, etc. They should not be set too close together, nor should they be too wide apart, nor noticeably large. Stockmen and drovers used to specify a measurement of just under five inches (or approximately one quarter of the dog's height) as an ideal distance between the ears.

A correct bite is of paramount importance for a dog such as the Australian Cattle Dog. Level or undershot bites, apart from being incorrect, will contribute towards the teeth wearing down prematurely. In the last few years, particular notice has been taken of missing premolars – a problem which will have to be monitored closely to prevent it spreading widely throughout the breed.



Correct scissor bite

Incorrect undershot bite.

Incorrect level bite

Incorrect overshot bite.

In a working dog, extremities of height, weight and substance are undesirable. There is no place in this breed for gross or oversized dogs—how can a dog like this be agile, quick and work all day if necessary? Basically, it comes down to endurance (a form of strength) as opposed to brute power (another form of strength) – not unlike Rob de Castella versus Dean Lukin! Obviously, an undersized, weedy dog is just as unsuitable.

When assessing the Australian Cattle Dog, judges should ask of themselves, "Which dog would move tirelessly all day?" Naturally, from this question it can be seen why soundness is so very important in this breed. Good muscle tone, correct angulation in both the shoulders and the hindquarters, a chest with plenty of heart and lung room, strong neck coupled with a strong back and low set tail, powerful loins and tightly knit feet all go into making the ideal body of the "good looking Australian".

In much the same way as an Australian Cattle Dog is not just a head, he is not any type of dog without his incredible temperament.

Firstly and foremostly, Australian Cattle Dogs are not naturally aggressive. They are, however, very protective of anyone they consider their family or anything belonging to their family. Whether it be the front gate, the family members young and old, or the family car, "Red" or "Bluey" is ever alert and vigilant, and his presence is usually enough to deter most unwelcome intruders.

A dog who has trust and faith in his owner and a correct temperament will not react with fear or aggression at home or in the show ring. Poor breeding, lack of training or "back yard" guard dog training are the main causes of aggression.

Being excellent judges of character, strangers are often "hazed" or treated to thorough inspections, from a distance if the dog is on unfamiliar territory, but often at close quarters if in their own environment.

It must be remembered that, as with all breeds, each Australian Cattle Dog has his or her own personality traits. When on their home turf, they are exuberant, affectionate, brassy, comical and strong willed. Life is occasionally a frustrating battle of wits, especially when a cunning puppy is "pushing" you to test your authority. Establishing yourself as the pack leader early in the puppy's life is essential, as is at least basic obedience lessons when a little older.

Being such intelligent dogs, Australian Cattle Dogs become bored very quickly. Regular exercise and training will keep them fit and happy and prevent the destruction and havoc that a bored Australian Cattle Dog can create in a very short period of time.

With his gentle yet protective nature, the Australian Cattle Dog is an ideal family pet, however his boundless energy and very active mind are not suited for the elderly, the infirm or those who unkindly leave their pets

alone in the back yard for long periods of time.

With so many attributes, this is an Australian which we should have pride in and hold in the highest esteem, for whether red or blue, he truly is "True Blue".

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Acknowledgments. All the illustrations were drawn by the Davidson sisters, Marion and Margaret, and, except for Boomer, illustrate Harold H. Spira's 'Canine terminology'. Harper & Row, Sydney, 1982.

Originally published in *Queensland Dog World* May 1991 but without illustrations; otherwise unchanged. The Davidson drawings have been added to illustrate this post.