

So What is a Beardie Temperament? Copyright – Lynne Sharpe

Ask any proud Beardie owner about his dog's temperament and he is likely to answer at once, "Oh, he has a *wonderful* temperament." But his idea of a 'wonderful temperament' may not be yours. And since the Beardie's temperament is his most important characteristic, it is worth looking more closely at what it is - or should be.

The Kennel Club Standard describes the Beardie as "alert, lively, self-confident and active" and as a "steady, intelligent working dog, with no signs of nervousness or aggression."

All of these are important in the Beardie but the description could equally well fit many of the working breeds, from terrier to gundog. It says nothing about the particular qualities that the Beardie needs to do his particular work. Nor does the standard describe the characteristics that make the Beardie different, not only from the terrier and gundog but from the other herding breeds as well. After all, if the Beardie were just a poor relation to the much more numerous Border Collie he would not have survived as he has, as a highly-prized worker on hill farms in England, Scotland and Wales.

My family had a Border Collie when I was a child and as a twelve-year-old I joined the local dog-training club with him. Most of the members were serious competitors in obedience and almost all of the dogs were Border Collies or German Shepherds. With the help of the trainers my Collie and I were soon competing too and winning some novice competitions but I had already fallen in love with Mrs Willison's Bothkennar Beardies, who also trained at the club. And what I loved about the Beardies was their *difference*. The workaholic, robotic Border Collies, and the serious-minded German Shepherds who seemed to have no sense of fun, might win competitions but I knew that the laughing, loving Beardie was the breed for me.

I especially loved the way that the Beardies watched their owners so intently, eager to pick up any signal as to what was required but were also delighted to talk to their other admirers - including me. I was delighted, too, by the sense of *fun* with which they worked - as if the whole thing was a bit of a joke - but a joke they were happy to share. I heard the Collie and Shepherd trainers shout commands like drill-sergeants and saw their dogs obey with military precision but I didn't want to shout orders at my dog. I wanted him to be my friend and partner, not my slave.

In 1962 I bought a Beardie puppy of my own and I trained him at the same club. We competed very successfully against the other breeds but what we enjoyed most was thinking up new games and tricks for ourselves. The incident that made me decide to give up obedience competitions is a good illustration of the Beardie character. We were competing in an obedience test on a very hot day in July. In spite of the

heat, Brett had worked well and we had only the 'stay' left to do. All the dogs had to be left in a line in the ring, in the full heat of the sun, while the handlers disappeared out of sight. I felt very guilty about asking my dog to lie in the hot sun - winning the competition suddenly seemed a very silly goal..... When we returned to the ring I was overjoyed to find that Brett had solved the problem himself. He was still lying in the ring but he had moved a few yards to occupy the only patch of shade - under the judge's table! No marks from the judge but top marks from me for using the Beardie ability to understand what is required and to use his own initiative to do it in the best way as a true partner.

More than forty years later I was reminded of this incident when Elan Jim (a working Beardie from a farm in mid-Wales) came to stay with us in order to mate my bitch Nan. On Jim's first morning with us I went to attend to my horses, accompanied as always by the Beardies. Since Jim was a newcomer I was anxious not to let him out of my sight, so when I went into the stables I tied him on a rope in the yard. Having finished in the stables, I went to untie Jim, who was still sitting exactly where I had left him - only to find that the rope had been bitten in half. Jim understood that I wanted him to wait in the yard and he was happy to do so - but he didn't see any need for the rope! Of course he had his freedom after that and although he had never been away from his home before he was the perfect guest.

This ability to think and act as a real partner is one of the qualities that I most value in my present family of Beardies - all of them descended from Brett and five of them daughters of Jim as well.

It is this same quality that makes the Beardie so valuable to the hill shepherd whose sheep are scattered over large areas of mountainous land and often hidden among bracken and gorse. What is needed here is not the trials-winning Border Collie whose every move is controlled by a whistle or call but a dog who understands what is needed and can take control of the situation himself, searching out the hidden sheep far beyond the shepherd's sight and coping with any problems as they arise.

Let me now try to analyse the ideal Beardie character. Of course he must have all the traits listed in the K.C. Standard: he must be 'alert, lively, self-confident and active' as well as being a 'steady, intelligent working dog, with no signs of nervousness or aggression.' But in addition to all this, what makes the Beardie character special is a combination of two crucial elements. Firstly he has a great desire to be approved of and accepted as a member of a partnership, family or group and he achieves this by being extremely sensitive to the moods, actions and demands of his people and doing his best to conform. But his ability to be a good companion or working partner goes beyond a mere willingness to conform because the second element of his character is his

extraordinary ability to think for himself, to solve problems and to work independently.

It is essential that the Beardie has *both* these characteristics. Sensitivity and a desire for approval without intelligence and self-confidence result in an over-anxious dog, too dependent on his people. On the other hand, intelligence and self-confidence without sensitivity and a desire for approval result in a headstrong dog who is difficult to train or even to control. There are many Beardies who fall into one or other of these categories.

Since the ideal Beardie temperament is so complex and depends on the co-existence of so many different traits, its preservation can obviously not be left to chance but must be selectively bred for. For me it is by far the most important consideration in my breeding programme - followed by good health, longevity, sound conformation and correct coat, which will help to ensure that my ideal companion enjoys a long life that is healthy, happy and active.

Some will argue that behaviour is influenced more by training than by genetic inheritance but this has not been my experience. When, some years ago, I started to find undesirable traits, such as nervousness and lack of intelligence, appearing in some of my puppies, I could not blame environmental factors since I was rearing them in just the same way as before. The problem was that the traditional Beardie temperament was becoming rare among KC registered dogs bred mainly for show and I could no longer find stud dogs with the character I wanted. The answer was to turn to the unregistered working Beardies and for my last three generations I have used only stud dogs chosen from these lines. The result is that I have firmly re-established my ideal temperament in my Brambledale line.

The special character that makes the Beardie so valuable to the hill shepherd also makes him ideal as an intelligent, active, devoted companion and family member. But he deserves an intelligent, active, devoted owner who appreciates his special character and will let him express it. Sadly this is not the case with many modern Beardie owners - especially those involved in the show world, whose dogs seem to spend most of their time either on a grooming table or in a cage. These are the people who objected so strongly to my suggestion that the show Beardies could benefit from the introduction of working blood into the KC registered lines. The committee of the Bearded Collie Club even wrote to the KC claiming that "Working Beardies have many undesirable traits" including "temperaments that do not make them good family pets."

Yet the development of the Beardie as a popular show dog and companion, started by Mrs. Willison in the 1940s and '50s, resulted from her enthusiasm for the *character* of the farm-bred dogs that became the nucleus of her breeding programme. She wrote of her first Beardie that "...Jeannie was not only more lovable than any dog I had ever known but she had an

uncanny intelligence....." When I, as a child, had the privilege of getting to know those first Bothkennars, it was this special character that won my heart too.

So if working-bred Beardies made wonderful family companions fifty years ago, why should they now be regarded as unsuitable for this role? The answer, I think, is quite simple: it is not the character of the working Beardie that has changed but the character of modern family life. Growing up near Mrs Willison in the 1940s and '50s, my siblings and I were typical of our time. We spent most of our spare time exploring the local woods and fields, building 'camps', climbing trees and fishing in streams - always accompanied by the family dogs, of course. Importantly, our mother was at home all day and happy to have the company of the animals when we were at school.

By contrast, most modern families seem to live indoors, occupied with computers or television. With both parents working and children at school the pet dog is left alone all day, often confined to a small house or even a cage. This is not an adequate life for any dog: for an active, intelligent and loving working breed it is serious cruelty.

If dogs are to be condemned to live like this, perhaps it is better that they should be selectively bred for dull minds and idle bodies. Their owners might assure us of their "wonderful temperaments" - but let no one pretend that they are anything but a travesty of the real Beardie.

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(This article was previously published in the Beardie Revue in German, March 2008).

Note from E. Sell. In correspondence with Lynne I came across another example of her working-Beardies' manners. She wrote about visiting a veterinary ophthalmologist. The trip was especially pleasing because of the reaction of the examiner who met the Beardies for the first time. Lynne says one of her eccentricities is a refusal to put leads on her Beardies in the belief that if the temperament is right, a lead is superfluous. They arrived to a busy waiting room and caused a bit of a stir because all six bitches tramped politely in behind her and settled themselves quietly around her chair. Then they went into the exam room and each of the girls greeted the examiner before hopping up on the table as requested. My thought is - wow: could I do that with my group of Beardie girls? Could you?

I have also learned that another accomplishment of her breeding program has been the elimination of over-sensitivity to noise (published in an article titled "Changing Times" in the SCBCC Beardie Times spring 2005). That is known to be a common problem for Beardies as reported to BeaCon's open health registry. So some may wish to mull over the fact that temperament is malleable and influenced in part by the

selection of sire and dam. There are other variables to also consider; we'll address another of those in the spring newsletter.

Lynne participates in BeaCon's open health registry and provides copies of the veterinary exam results for documentation. You may search for the information in the registry or visit Lynne's new web site where the Changing Times article is to be found - <http://www.spanglefish.com/brambledalebeardedcollies/>