In What Environment Does the Australian Shepherd Thrive and Can I Provide This?

*By Nannette Newbury*

Let’s take an in-depth look at this breed to answer this question properly. Historically the breed was developed exclusively in the American West. Earliest records and photographs document the breed, or ancestors of the breed, surface around the mid-1800s. These accounts describe in words or pictures a working stock dog with traits of loyalty, intelligence, versatility combined with stamina and athleticism. Not many of those traits have changed, but what has dramatically changed is the primary environment where this breed now resides.

In dog evolution terms this is a “new” breed that a mere fifty or sixty years ago was a tough working ranch dog with oft times harsh temperaments that lived primarily outdoors working all day on a variety of stock. This held true until the late 1950s or the early 1960s.

With the advent of rodeo as a spectator sport, the Australian Shepherd was introduced to the general public via several famous rodeo acts and several movies. Their unique colors and markings combined with their incredible talent caught the eyes of the general public and their popularity as a family pet has grown ever since.

This new-found popularity, combined with a continual decline in the single-owned farm or family ranching nationwide, has put pressure on this breed to adapt to a dramatically different lifestyle in order to survive. While the breed is still used on working ranches, their major fans and owners are now families who by and large do not live on acreage, but rather is the suburbs and sometimes urban environments.

How has the dog adapted to make this transition? Well in many cases, remarkably well, largely in part to incredibly dedicated owners and diligent breeders that educate potential buyers and screen new owners in painstaking detail.

One of the first things early breeders did was to focus on improving the temperament on some of the more cantankerous ranch dogs. They downplayed the “guardian” instincts of the breed, as a focus on this trait can provide an aggressive and possessive dog. They developed a creed standard which is designed as a blueprint for the breed to preserve and protect the way the breed looks, moves, and acts for future generations.

This is a breed that requires a great deal of physical and mental stimulation. And, “no,” walking an Australian Shepherd around your neighborhood two times a day is NOT physical exercise for the breed.

What is the ideal environment for this breed? Obviously, a working ranch with livestock, which is where and why the breed was developed. How can we provide a rich environment where this breed thrives not merely survives the transition to devoted family companion?

One of the events beloved by Aussies is mad cap rough and tumble off leash running…with abandon and for great periods of time. They can play rather recklessly and oftentimes their “play” has been mislabeled as aggressive by pet owners with little knowledge of dog behavior and play styles.

This is likely going to be one of the most difficult events for you to provide as a modern-day owner. I do not advocate dog parks any longer for a myriad of reasons that you likely already are aware of or can research yourselves. As a potential Aussie owner, you will need to go out of your way to provided regular off-leash running for your dog.

This is a breed whose traits include loyalty. In simple terms this breed wants to be with you at all times. They were developed to work in conjunction with their owners. Herding is a “team” sport! Many owners call this a “Velcro” breed. Some call it “needy.” I prefer to interpet the behaviors as adoring.

Can you get an Aussie and leave it in your backyard all day while the entire family is a work or school…of course. It is done all the time, unfortunately. Is this a “happy, fulfilled and thriving” Aussie. NO. When I receive requests for puppies, one of the first comments people make is, “We are active family, so we can provide and active home for our new puppy.”

When asked what activities the family does, the answers generally include baseball, soccer, dance, swimming, etc. How many of these activities can the dog participate in? Likely none. The activities that Aussies can participate in are hiking, camping, driving with you in the car while you do errands, joining you at an outdoor restaurant, and even going to work with you.

And if you work long hours all week and only exercise or interact with the dog on the weekends, this is not the ideal situation for this breed. Living in a city environment like San Francisco is not conducive to a dog that thrives. Are there people who make it work? There are always exceptions, however for the most part those individuals are few and far between. Just because you are seeing the breed in the City more and more does not mean it is in the best interest of the dog.

Meeting the physical requirements of the Australian Shepherd (many of these activites must be delayed until the puppy matures and the bone growth plates are closed). Some of these sports also engage the dog’s mental acuities as well. Keep in mind that these sports are with you and the dog, just where an Aussie wants to be.

* Off leash running
* Hiking
* Bicycle riding
* Running/Jogging
* Dock Diving
* Agility training
* Outdoor off-leash play dates
* Coursing Ability Test (CAT)
* Swimming
* Camping
* Geocaching
* Swimming
* Tracking

We have addressed some of the physical needs this breed requires, let’s take a look at the mental needs. This is a highly intelligent breed, with tremendous abilities to think on their own or intuitively. This trait was likely highly sought after in their original development as a working ranch dog.

So, owning an intelligent dog sounds appealing to you? It is a double-edged sword. They get bored easily and just as easily create games to occupy the boring times. This could include re-arranging the landscaping in your backyard, stripping the vinyl siding off of your house, jumping out of the yard to join in the fun elsewhere in the neighborhood, digging deep and numerous holes in the lawn, barking incessantly at squirrels and cats running the fence line.

While they are known for ease of training, combined with their intelligence and activity needs make this a puppy that can be incredibly challenging for the pet owner. I do not personally recommend this breed for a “first-time” dog owner. This is an adult owner who has never owned a dog…on their own. Family pets when you were a kid does not count.

Obedience class is a must, and not just one 8-week class. I recommend a formal professional obedience class with a trainer that is well versed in the training methods best suited for the breed. I do not count “positive only” training as recommended for this breed. That is an entirely different topic and discussion. The class is more for you than for the dog. They will make you look like a rock star dog trainer as they sail with each class level with ease. It is more about socialization and learning how to make consistent and fair corrections and rewards. Shy and/or aggressive behavior are not acceptable in this breed.

The Aussie will also need basic to advance commands in order to participate in most canine sports activities. A rock-solid “recall on command” can also save your dog’s life in an urban environment including the dangers of being hit by a car.

How do we avoid destructive and costly behaviors? By keeping the dog mentally stimulated. Unlike the physical needs of the dog, this can be accomplished in the smallest of places. The key is to make these activities part of the daily/hourly routine.

* Teaching tricks
* Playing Hide N Seek
* Fetching your newspaper, keys, slippers, generally tasks that give the dog a job to do hopefully on a routine basis
* Scentwork
* Canine “puzzles”
* Tracking
* Nosework
* Boating

While the Australian Shepherd is making the transition from hardy working ranch dog to joyous thriving companions, we must do all we can on their behalf to ensure that the dogs live fulfilling and joyous lives. It may well be that you cannot provide all that this breed needs to thrive. You may well be that unique owner that recognizes the specifics that this breed needs to thrive. Be thoughtful of the dog’s needs in your pursuit of the Australian Shepherd as your new pet. Put their needs in front on your desire.

When speaking with a preservation breeder they may point out the “good news” as well as the “bad news” about the breed with you. Their questions may appear to be invasive, perhaps even personal. These questions are designed to determine suitability of you to the breed.

Many times, the questions will center around future events, like marriage, babies, old age, divorce, renting your home versus owning your home; where will the dog sleep, where will the dog be during the day. These questions are meant to stimulate you to work out these details BEFORE you get your new dog. Addressing these tough questions after you have the dog can lead to disaster.

For those of you who have been told that your current situation may not provide the best environment for the breed, I know that this can be disappointing feedback, especially if you have “researched” the breed and fallen in love with them. Especially when ‘you’ have decided that this is the breed for you, sometime with little or no first-hand experience of the breed. I would encourage you to listen to the responsible breeder with years of experience. Their job is to ensure the health and longevity of their puppies; to ensure that no puppy ends up in a shelter; to place their puppies in the best permanent homes that they can…and sometimes this involves saying “no.”