Congratulations on Your New Australian Cattle Dog

The Australian Cattle Dog

Those who have shared their lives with Australian Cattle Dogs (ACDs) are passionate about this breed. They are among the most intelligent, loyal, tenacious, and versatile of dogs, making life with them a challenge at times and an adventure always. ACD owners must be willing to train their dogs and establish themselves as the "leader."

ACDs are often called "Velcro dogs." They bond closely to their people and want to be involved in everything they do. Your dog will be a true companion while you work the ranch, run, hike, bike, or go about your daily activities. ACDs do not thrive if left constantly unattended in the back yard.

Overview

The breed is known by several names—Blue Heeler, Red Heeler, and Queensland Heeler—but, when purebred, they are all the same dog. "Australian Cattle Dog" is the name recognized in Australia as well as by the American Kennel Club and the Australian Cattle Dog Club of America, Inc.®, the breed's U.S. parent club. These compact, symmetrically built working dogs are born white and darken to their adult color over time. To clear up some misconceptions, a red ACD is not a Dingo and there is no difference in temperament between blue and red dogs. ACDs do not have a merle gene; the distinctive coat color probably results from the roaning and ticking genes. Ideally, adult males are 18"-20" at the withers (shoulders), and bitches are 17"-19".

Contrary to common belief in some communities, the ACD is supposed to have a tail. A tail is described in both the American and Australian breed standards. These dogs are true athletes and use their tail as a rudder when making sudden changes of direction, whether while herding cattle, doing agility, or playing in the back yard. Grooming is minimal—just periodic baths, occasional brushing to remove dead hair and nail trimming for dogs that don't naturally wear them down.

Photo by Tien Tran

Origins

The ACD was developed in Australian in the 1800's by immigrants and their descendants from the British Isles. It is a true Australian dog bred to deal with unfenced, harsh scrub range, large herds of cattle and an often difficult climate, all of which differed from the transplants' homeland.

The precise history of breed development was not well documented. Imported working, farm and herding dogs were likely bred based on working ability and may have intentionally or unintentionally been bred with Dingoes. Along the way, other breeds were infused. DNA analysis may one day give us a clearer idea of the breed's genetic makeup.

Herding

The herding ACD works independently and often has to think for itself. It moves stubborn cattle by coming in low from behind, biting the hock of the weight-bearing leg, and ducking to avoid the kick that often follows. An uncooperative bovine doesn't discourage the dog; rather the ACD just becomes more determined to get its job done.

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Training and Exercise

It is not surprising, considering its original purpose, that the ACD is a very high-energy dog as well as an extremely intelligent one. This means that your ACD needs a job or a purpose in life in order for them (and you) to be happy. Many owners train their dogs for work or performance events—herding (cattle, sheep, or ducks), agility, tracking, rally, obedience and scent work. Find an activity that provides an outlet for physical and mental energy. Mental exercise and training is good for both the ACD and its owner.

Puppies and Young Cattle Dogs

In the case of puppies and young dogs, it is up to the owner to use common sense and adjust activity levels. Until a dog has stopped growing and its joints are mature, extremes of physical activity (very long daily hikes, leaping and twisting in the air, repetitive jumping, etc.) can lead to permanent injury.

Young puppies need to be taught not to nip inappropriately. Some bite inhibition is learned from littermates, which is why it is especially important for ACD puppies to remain in their litter until they are at least 7-8 weeks old. Puppy classes are an excellent way to begin training your ACD. Socialization and exposure to different dogs, people, places, and situations is an important aspect of raising an ACD that will be living in a community of people and other dogs. In general, positive training methods work best with this breed and make training more fun for the owner as well. These are smart dogs and if you make learning enjoyable, they will want to learn. They excel at clicker training in particular. Time-outs, training an incompatible behavior, and preventing unwanted behaviors from happening in the first place generally solve many problems.

Physically harsh training methods are often seen as a challenge by a dog that is bred to be kicked by a cow and not be deterred from their intended task. There are better ways to establish respect. Teaching your dog to obey basic commands and then making them earn what they want (a "Nothing in Life is Free" approach) helps establish the pack order in a kind and safe way.

Genetics, Health and Longevity

In general, ACDs are sturdy, healthy dogs with an average life span of about 12-16 years. However, there are some health concerns that owners and breeders should be aware of.

1. Breeding stock should have their hips and elbows x-rayed to rule out dysplasia. OFA and PennHip provide these evaluation services.
2. Blindness is a problem in ACDs. A DNA test can detect various types of progressive retinal atrophy and other eye deseases before dogs are bred so that no affected puppies need be produced. Prior to development of these test, prcd-PRA was responsible for blindness in 25% of the ACDs that lived long enough for it to develop. It usually is diagnosed at 5-8 years.
3. CAER testing is done by veterinary ophthalmologists to detect other inherited eye diseases.

4. There is genetic deafness in the breed. Puppies and adults can be tested (BAER) to determine whether they can hear in each ear. ACDs are smart enough that puppies can mimic their littermate's responses and seem to have normal hearing.

Testing and results on several of these disorders can be verified on the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals website at http://www.ofa.org - if submitted by the breeder.

Breeding

Breeding a dog is a great responsibility. Think carefully before using your dog as a stud dog or brood bitch. At a minimum, your dog should be tested for the disorders described above. Your dog should be a good representative of the breed in comparison to the standard and have a sound temperament. You should be ready to spend more money in raising the pups than you will make in selling them. Finally, you should be willing to make a lifetime commitment to the puppies you produce. For most dogs, your voluntary decision to spay or neuter your pet, in consultation with your veterinarian, is one of the best choices you can make.

ACD Resources

There are many resources on the internet for ACD owners. Start with the Australian Cattle Dog Club of America, Inc.® at http://www.acdca.org.

There you will find membership information, breeder referrals, links to regional clubs, a list of books and printed materials and information about club activities. The ACDCA actively supports breed rescue (ACDRI at http://www.acdrescueinc.com) and promotes the breed's health and welfare (ACDHEW, Inc. at http://www.acdhew.org). The official breed standard can also be found on the ACDCA Web site.

Each year, a weeklong ACDCA National Specialty is held in a different part of the USA. The ACDCA website has current and past event information. Anyone is welcome to attend and watch hundreds of ACDs compete in conformation, herding, rally, obedience, agility and more. This is a great chance to see other ACDs and meet breeders and owners.

Go to "https://www.acdca.org/chic-requirements" to review current recommended health testing for the Australian Cattle Dog.