

The Beardie Temperament
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The BCCA standard devotes a scant couple of sentences to the correct Beardie temperament – it doesn't even merit its own section. Under characteristics we are told "The Bearded Collie is hardy and active, with an aura of strength and agility characteristic of a real working dog. Bred or centuries as a companion and servant of man the Bearded Collie is a devoted and intelligent member of the family. He is stable and self-confident showing no signs of shyness or aggression." General Appearance adds "A bright inquiring expression is a distinctive feature of the breed." One can only hope that a bright inquiring mind lies behind it. Yet, when prospective judges for the national specialty are asked to rank in importance conformation, temperament and coat, temperament usually places first or ties for first with conformation while coat trails in third – although it has its own lengthy paragraph in the standard. So I guess we all know a correct temperament when we meet it. Virtually every Beardie owner says they love the Beardie temperament, yet the temperament some describe isn't one I would want in any dog of mine, and probably vice versa. On top of this the number one "problem" year after year listed in the Open Health Registry is a fear of sharp sounds exhibited by 12.2% of the dogs in the OHR. This beats out autoimmune and all the other health issues we worry over and seek cures for.

Not all dogs exhibit total panic every time a firecracker explodes or thunder claps; for owners whose dogs do it can be devastating. I have had patients – not necessarily Beardies – that have crashed through plate glass windows, eaten their way through solid walls, destroyed property, and urinated and defecated through the house. I even had one that pulled down half the house when tied to the porch. When it comes to such noise phobia the herding breeds are over-represented, oddly enough along with the retrieving breeds. Why is this?

Some have argued that being able to hear well is essential for locating lost sheep scattered across the mountain. I can't prove or deny this. A study being conducted by the Canine Behavioral Genetics Project based in the laboratory of Dr. Steven Hamilton in the Department of Psychiatry and Institute for Human Genetics at the University of California, San Francisco has suggested that noise phobia is more prevalent in successful working lines of border collies than it is in lines developed for conformation. The group is now looking at the phenomenon in Bearded Collies too, and I would encourage those with noise phobic and non-phobic Beardies to participate <http://www.k9behavioralgenetics.com/NoisePhobia.php>

While many owners report that when working their noise phobic Beardies remain focused on the job at hand and ignore the otherwise terrifying noises, other dogs cannot, and are culled or at least removed from working situations. Like so many valuable traits for working dogs it could well be that high auditory acuity has advantages, but that stripped of the work paradigm it can be overly developed in some dogs which as pets are not culled – although in some dogs the fear is so bad owners finally opt for euthanasia to spare the dog its obvious torment. A little is good a lot is a liability. This is true of so many attributes which were originally favored for a real purpose in the development of a breed, and have become exaggerated to the point of being grotesque and life threatening once the original purpose is lost.

Even so, a Beardie that panics when the National Anthem plays over the PA system, or flees the ring when a crate is dropped, probably shouldn't have a future in the whelping box or as a sire. Excusing these little faults only sets them still firmer in the breed, because behavior is genetically determined, even though environment can act on the expression of the behavioral genes, just as it can with most of the other genes our Beardies possess.

Is there a conflict between the smart independent thinker treasured by working shepherds and the pet Beardie? If the apocryphal story of the Beardie that took the flock to market and brought the money back in a purse around his neck is only partly true the terms “clown” and “goofball” (my own particular bêtes noires when folks describe their Beardies) would not be the first that spring to mind. Yet people who use these words to describe their Beardies seem delighted that they have these attributes.

While a quixotic rogue can be very charming, a dog that can't focus on the job at hand isn't of much good when you need an honest day's work. Still, I know that the qualities I value in my dogs aren't going to work for those who just want a couch companion to cuddle up with to watch Dancing with the Stars and amuse them by running around the house bouncing off the walls having a “whack attack”. My dogs have never had one of these, it would appall me. I would hope their minds and bodies had had sufficient stimulation during the day so that this wasn't a required outlet for excess energy.

To me the Beardie is resourceful and a problem solver. I enjoy hearing the ways my pups develop to get out of runs and crates, to open doors, slip through cracks, and create their own versions of the locked room mystery. I feel it stimulates their owners' brains fending off Alzheimer's as they struggle to stay a step ahead of them. For most Beardies the challenge seems to come in doing the impossible, and they will happily wait on the other side of the fence for their owners, or even slip back inside the container when they anticipate their owners coming home. Any dog can take apart an Einstein toy, but a true Beardie can put it back together again. Once he understands a command the Beardie will work on his own repertoire of different ways to execute it. If ever there was a breed born for 100tThings to do with a box, it is the Beardie.

I also don't think Beardies should indiscriminately adore every person they meet. I have come to value their input on the reliability of a person, dog, horse as well as stock. A good dog knows how hard to push. He knows when to stay back and not spook flighty stock, and when to put pressure on stubborn stock. In the absence of stock to herd, that discrimination and the accompanying observational skills can be very valuable. We may judge in different ways, and my reservations may not match theirs, but my Beardies are entitled to take their time and size folks up and not leap in like kissing fools. How often do you hear about a Beardie's uncanny ability to tell which patient on a therapy visit wants or needs their presence? If my dogs are aloof, they generally have their reasons, if they put their bodies between me and somebody, and try and move me away, I listen. Several of the dogs I have bred have alerted their owners and others to impending medical emergency. It's a wonderful ability. Being able to pick out a sickly animal for special attention would be a very valuable trait in a herding dog. Identifying those with less than honorable intentions could be very helpful. Many of us were in awe of Glenn Short's account of his three Beardie boys protecting him from a knife-wielding mental patient. I know my Beardies have protected me or my children on occasion and usually with reason. Sometimes avoiding people or showing aggression is called for, but it has to be appropriate to the circumstances.

So what is proper Beardie temperament? Probably one size will never fit all. Most people now live in cities, parents have taken much of the fun that I had in childhood away in the interests of safety, and yes, my kids could probably accuse me of that too. So if Timmy has not fallen down the well/mineshaft or got himself in some scrape, and there aren't a thousand head of sheep scattered across acres of hills, is the original Beardie temperament still valuable? Can we maintain proper Beardie temperament and should we? As one who gets a real kick out of a thinking dog I do believe we can and should. For those who want their clowns and goofball Beardies they are out there. For the rest of us, first we need to find sires and dams with the

temperament and abilities we want and value, and then we have to nurture their offspring. Be proactive. Even before ears open don't tiptoe around the puppies expose them to everyday household noises, raise them in the heart of family activity. Play recordings of thunderstorms and the Fourth of July. Take them to the mall parking lot on a Saturday; take them to big echoing stores like Home Depot; make sure they get plenty of exposure to people - different ages, sexes, ethnicities, facial hair and outfits (even clowns), places and things, different surfaces to walk on and climb on. Expose them to different breeds of dogs and species of animals. Don't forget to get them used to being alone and amusing themselves. Feed them from puzzle toys, and encourage them to explore. The first 16 weeks of a puppy's life are the most malleable behaviorally, and the better start they get the fewer temperament problems you will experience. However, you need to maintain that good start and continue to provide your companion with the mental and physical stimulation that will keep his temperament tuned and in top working order. Put him to work, give him a job you choose, or he'll pick his own, and odds are you won't like it.

Temperaments are born, but without proper nurture they can be easily destroyed.