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Collie Everybody's All-Star

In 1997 a new version of the *Lassie* television series debuted on the Animal Planet cable television network. You might think the series would be cause for celebration among Lassie's fans. You'd be wrong.



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Through the course of two previous *Lassie* television series and more than ten *Lassie* movies, Lassie was played by eight generations of collies - all male incidentally - owned by California trainer Rudd Weatherwax and his son, Robert Weatherwax. The new series, however, did not feature a Weatherwax-trained dog. To put it mildly, Lassie's most ardent fans were not happy with the change.

"We're sick of losing our heros, seeing them downsized with cheap imitations by corporations that couldn't care less," wrote movement leader Joan Neidhardt on a "Save Lassie" Web page, speaking for fellow Lassie diehards, if not for the nation. "Lassie never let us down, and now we'll be there for her. Lassie lovers will accept nothing less than the real thing, and we'll fight until we get it."

Neidhardt and a small but vocal band of followers waged a media campaign against the three corporations involved in the project: Cinar Films, the Canadian production company that produced the series; Golden Books Family Entertainment, the New York publisher of children's books that shares control with Weatherwax of Lassie's image; and Animal Planet.

Like any good *Lassie* episode, this story has a happy ending. In January 1998, Cinar Films announced that it had reached an agreement with Bob Weatherwax to feature a ninth generation of Weatherwax-trained Lassie on the program.

Lassie's enduring popularity has had a profound effect on the collie. The breed is one of America's favorites and has become synonymous with the virtues that make Lassie such an icon - intelligence, sensitivity and loyalty.

Living up to that image would be difficult for any dog, but the collie pulls it off with flying colors. The collie is typically a loving, loyal dog that gets along with all family members - man or beast. Collies are alert, playful and eager to please. Their sensitivity, both physical and mental, make them generally easy to train, while their handsome, striking appearance is usually the envy of the neighborhood.

Celebrity Status

In truth the collie enjoyed widespread popularity long before Lassie became a superstar. In nineteenth century America, the collie rode the coattails of early breeder and enthusiast J.P. Morgan, one of the era's richest men, to a place of distinction at many of the most prestigious American kennels. The Collie Club of America Inc. was organized in 1886, two years after the establishment of the American Kennel Club (AKC), and was the second breed parent club to join the AKC.

The collie remained a popular show and working dog for several years. The stories and novels of author Albert Payson Terhune, particularly his 1919 book *Lad: A Dog*, first introduced the collie to fame on a large scale. The hero of the book is an extraordinary collie named *Lad*, "a thoroughbred in spirit as well as in blood." In each tale, Lad exhibits his pure strength of character as he fights off burglars, rescues an invalid child from a poisonous snake, wins ribbons in dog shows and otherwise leads a dog-hero's life.

Terhune's books made the collie a hit with the general public, but that popularity climbed into the stratosphere in 1943 with the appearance of the first *Lassie* movie, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Roddy McDowell.

The collie's star has faded somewhat in the retriever-crazed '90s. In 1999 the breed ranked 32nd among 147 breeds in new AKC registrations, down from 31st the previous year. Still, the active promotion of the Collie Club of America - the club now has a membership numbering about 3500, and its annual specialty show attracts more than 400 collies from across the country - and the enthusiasm of Lassie fans such as Joan Neidhardt show the breed continues to hold a special status among America's dogs.

British Accents

Americans may have adopted the collie as its own, but the breed originated on the windswept pastures of Scotland and north Britain. Some sources suggest collies descended from the herding dogs brought to Britain by the Romans. Others believe collie-type herding dogs were indigenous to the north of Britain. Whatever the origin, there is no question the collie developed from the sheep-herding dogs of the Scottish Highlands. These original collies were quite a bit smaller than today's dogs, more of the Border collie-type with a broader head and shorter muzzle.

Eventually two types of collies emerged - the familiar rough collie, featuring a long, distinguished coat; and the less flamboyant smooth collie, whose coat is short and flat. The smooth collie was used primarily as a drover dog to drive livestock to market. The rough collie was used as a sheep-herding dog working directly with the flocks.

Borzoi stock may have been introduced into the early rough collies to give the dog a distinctive appearance. Even today certain borzoi characteristics crop up in rough collie heads. Other sources indicate the Irish setter was used in early breeding - the collie's sable color may be the indirect result of such a cross. Smooth collies may contain a Greyhound influence - smooth collies still occasionally turn up with hound-like traits, and they are much faster than their rough counterparts.

Today's smooth collie has been interbred with the rough collie, eliminating many of the early differences between the breeds, aside from the coat. It is likely the smooth collie, because of the differences in use, developed

along distinct lines in the early years of the breed.

The rough collie remained a utilitarian sheepdog until the 1860s. In 1861, when the young Queen Victoria made her first trip to Balmoral, Scotland's royal castle, she admired the rough collies she saw there and accepted one as a present. She brought the dog back with her to London, where the breed soon became fashionable among the English. News of the Queen's patronage carried across the Atlantic, where it caught the attention of J.P. Morgan and other high society dog enthusiasts.

Tending the Flocks

Today's collie rarely spends its day tending to flocks of sheep. Flocks of children, however, are another matter. The collie is often referred to as the ideal family dog, and in truth, many collies are extremely loyal, loving and protective of the children in their charge. One Scottish writer has even suggested employing collies in that country's schools to keep rowdy school children in order during recess.

Although the collie is often an ideal family dog that enjoys the company of humans, owners should bear in mind the dog was bred to work and enjoys both mental and physical challenge. Exercise is mandatory, especially when young. A good walk or jog on leash or a fun play session is needed every day. As herding dogs, collies can be chasers and should be exercised in safe areas.

Sensitive, alert and eager to please, the collie is often more easily trained than other herding breeds. It is typically outgoing and will happily get along with other dogs. Aggressive or nervous rough collies are untypical, but not unheard of - rampant and indiscriminate breeding has created some neurotic collies. Perhaps not as gregarious as their rough cousins, the smooth collie is also a naturally outgoing breed that should be happy and friendly toward other dogs and people. Its temperament should be rock-steady, never displaying aggression or nervousness.

Physically, both varieties of collies are extremely similar. They share the same official breed standard, with the exception of their coats. The standard describes both collies as lithe, strong and active dogs, "carrying no useless timber, standing naturally straight and firm. The collie presents an impressive, proud picture of true balance, each part being in harmonious proportion to every other part and to the whole."

As distinctions go, the difference between the collies' coats is a big one. Although the smooth collie possesses a short, dense coat that is relatively easy to maintain, the rough collie's coat is long, abundant and a true grooming challenge. Because of this profuse coat, daily grooming of the rough collie is advisable. It is essential the brushing be thorough, going right down to the skin - many owners are oblivious to the weighty mats which are forming closer to the dog's skin. When the coat starts to "blow," it is best to give the dog a really good bath, which should remove all the dead hair. In stark contrast, the grooming requirements of the smooth collie are relatively small, consisting of semi-regular brushing and the occasional bath.

Popularity has not done the collie's health any favors. Some collies suffer from collie eye anomaly - a condition of collie dogs where the narrow shape of the head causes the eyes to be malformed. It takes a prevalent problem to be named after a breed; before buying a young collie be certain the parents' eyes are tested. Dermatomyositis is another common collie problem. This is an autoimmune skin disorder that begins with

lesions and skin ulcers on the face. It can progress into muscular atrophy that makes chewing or swallowing difficult. Collie nose, more technically known as discoid lupus erythematosus, is a series of rashes that affect the nose and face of collies.

Despite these problems, the collie remains a wonderful breed - everybody's all-star dog. Although some may lament the effect Lassie and Lad have had on perceptions of the breed - creating, perhaps, heightened expectations - certainly a dog could do worse than to represent the virtues of loyalty, grace and courage. No breed could wear the heavy mantle of hero more naturally than the collie.

Reveille, Texas Style

Lassie may be the most famous collie in the rest of America, but in College Station, Texas - a unique college town in the heart of a state that has always preferred to follow its own star - the leading celebrity collie is Reveille VI, Texas A&M University's official mascot.

Throughout the years, many have questioned how a school with the nickname of "The Aggies" adopted a purebred rough collie as their mascot. According to Aggie lore, some Texas A&M students, referred to as "cadets" in the school's military nomenclature, were returning to campus in 1931 and accidentally ran over a black and white dog. They took the injured dog back to their dormitory. In the morning, when the bugler sounded reveille, the dog started barking and promptly received her nickname. Reveille was soon adopted by the marching band and led them onto the field for the year's first football game, immediately earning a position as the school's mascot.

The first Reveille was not a purebred collie but did resemble one. When she died in 1944, a rough collie was selected to replace her as Reveille II. Reveille VI now carries on the tradition of her fabled predecessors, proudly serving as the mascot of this historic Texas institution.

Laddie, Come Home?

As it has made fun of pretty much everything else, *The Simpsons*TM turned their deliciously sharp colored pencils on the collie's reputation as a superdog in an episode titled "The Canine Mutiny."

In this episode, Bart gets his hands on a credit card. He sees a mail order ad for the "World's Best Dog" (bred in Vermont) and promptly places his order. Several weeks later a crate arrives containing an incredibly handsome, athletic and intelligent male collie - a dog in stark contrast to Bart's somewhat haggard but loyal greyhound, Santa's Little Helper. In case any of us have missed the allusion, Bart names the collie "Laddie."

While Santa's Little Helper is sacrificed to the repo men in the collie's place, Laddie quickly becomes one of Springfield's most popular citizens, admired by everyone from Homer to Mr. Burns. He even wins a special medal from Mayor Quimby after rescuing a baby. Bart soon begins to regret forsaking the love and loyalty of Santa's Little Helper for Laddie's bland perfection.

In the show's patented formula of television-imitating-television-skewering-life, boy and his dog are ultimately reunited. Laddie goes on to a sparkling career with Chief Wiggum's police department, and Homer, being Homer,

says, "D'oh."

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