

# Unforgettable Breeders

who helped build the foundation of the Australian Shepherd breed



INTERVIEW WITH

# Sally deBeque Smith Sunwood

Paula McDermid

## Sally deBeque Smith

### Sunwood

Established 1976

#### **Tell me about your first Aussie.**

My brother brought the first Aussie into our family in the early 1960's. She was a blue merle female named Bluebell and she had a very cute head and good breed type. I don't know what her pedigree was but only remember that she arrived in a wooden crate at the train station in Glenwood Springs Colorado next to the Colorado River. My mother, my grandmother, and I went to pick her up. My brother had told me she was "blue"

in color. I didn't think such a thing existed—hah, a blue dog! I was thinking blue like the sky so I was disappointed to see a gray dog with odd black patches and copper trim. At the time I did not think she was that attractive, but she had a wonderful temperament and became my best friend who went everywhere with me especially after my brother left for college.

#### **Have you had other breeds?**

When I first started showing and breeding, I had Great Danes. We lived on a western Colorado cattle ranch at the time and the Danes got lots of exercise and were very athletic. They could jump flat-footed over five-rail stock fences or up and over the side of a pickup. Unfortunately, they had a weak genetic link and did not live very long due to torsion, and we lost them all before the age of eight.

In 1976 I bought Rio (ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX ASCA HOF) from Judy and Stewart Williams (Windermere Kennels) as a



Sally handled ASCA CH All That Jazz of Gefion CDX STDd "Jazz" to Best of Opposite Sex at the 1982 ASCA National Specialty. Jazz was the daughter of Sunwood's foundation sire and foundation dam and was born in 1978. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

birthday present for my husband, Rick. We began to show and breed Aussies and then eventually started with Whippets in 1986, which I still have today.

**What attracted you to the breed?**

Excellent temperaments, easy-to-train family farm dogs with easy-to-maintain coats.

**Tell me about the people who had the most impact on your evolution as a breeder.**

I would say that it took a village to mentor me, but in the earliest days it was Judy and Stewart Williams (Windermere) and Doc, Lucille and Lucia Kline (Coppertone) who had quite a few more years in the breed when I got involved. I also became friends with Celeste Lucero Telles (La Plata) and we discussed conformation to the finest degree and still do to this day. I can watch her judge and be completely in-tune with her placements. I remember watching her judge a big class at a Pre-National show and thinking, “Cel, don’t overlook that really nice merle bitch at the end of the line. She’s so correct.” Celeste walked right back there and pulled her up and I thought, “Oh yes, of course you found her!”



Sunwood’s foundation sire ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF “Rio.” Born 1976. Breeders: Stewart and Judy Williams, Windermere. Photo: Doug MacSpadden. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

Georgjean Hertzwig and Jeanne Joy Hartnagle-Taylor both shared lots of insight with me about Dr. Heard and all things Aussie. Jeanne and I trained our stockdogs together and had a great time. We are back in touch these days and can get on the phone and discuss structure and anatomy on dogs and horses with regard to function longer than most people could tolerate it. Jerry Rowe, Bob Vest, Ernie Hartnagle, and Kathy and Brad Warren were also very influential in helping me understand stock dogs and different styles.

**Did you have a specific focus for your breeding program?**

My goal was to keep the breed type, balance, and movement, while focusing on a great temperament and working instinct, in addition to screening for hereditary defects to maintain longevity and health.

**What were the most important reasons you were successful?**

I believe the reason I was successful was because I carefully chose and was quite lucky with my foundation dogs, Rio and Glitter. They were the whole package and as much as I could hope for in a foundation sire and bitch. They both lived very long, healthy lives. Rio was over 17 and Glitter was 16 when they passed on. I am forever grateful to the breeders before me who set me up for success.



Sally presented ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF "Rio" in the Stud Dog Class at the 1984 ASCA National Specialty. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

**Over the years, what type faults have you seen in the breed?**

- Size in the breed has gone up and down a bit over the years even though breeders have done a better job of maintaining consistent breed type. In the past some males were difficult to distinguish from the bitches; that occasionally still happens. You need a medium-sized male with a big presence and a masculine head, but without going too far and losing athletic ability and endurance. A bitch should be a classic female and you should be able to spot the difference an acre away. Breeders need to maintain that balance.
- There was a period when Aussies that had foxy little faces. The muzzle was smaller around than it should have been to match the backskull. I realize that functional structure is more important, however it's also important to maintain breed type, and those heads were a little weak and not typical good type. I admit that I do like



Sunwood's foundation bitch ASCA CH All That Glitters of Gefion CDX STDsd. Born 1976. Breeder: Georjean Hertzwig, Gefion. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

a nice head on any breed—horse or dog. My theory has always been that if I have to look at that face every day for 16 years or more, why not make it a pretty one?

**What are the three biggest changes you've seen in the breed?**

- I think there are lovely and very correct Aussies being bred today and so many more resources available to check for hereditary defects. However, one of the biggest changes I have seen in the breed (and lots of other breeds) that I'm not enjoying is movement that's loose, unconnected with a very

inefficient “flinging” motion of the front end to get out of the way of the incoming rear. I think most of it stems from imbalance from inadequate shoulder assemblies, steep shoulders and/or shoulders set too far forward which cannot balance the angulation in the rear. Judges need to stop rewarding this and exhibitors need to stop showing their dogs at breakneck speed to force movement that's not natural or correct. The shoulder assembly and length of upper arm are the key to the whole deal, the support that keeps senior dogs arthritis-free and steady for their entire lives. Dogs carry 75% of their weight on the front end. You can never quit trying to improve the shoulder assembly in any breed and when you get it right, the dog's movement will be effortless, low, powerful and strong. There will be no stress in the dog's expression when it moves—it's easy and comfortable.

- The second change I've seen is an imbalance in overall height to leg length—the legs are too short. You don't want a leggy dog, but when the distance from the ground to the elbow does not match the distance from the elbow to the withers, you have a balance problem.

- The third undesirable change I have seen is in regard to the head. Too many specimens have smaller eyes and a lot of males have loose “wet” flews. This is a herding dog that should have a dry clean mouth, period. You can have a nice blocky balanced head with tight lips. Pendulous wet lips are not desirable for this breed. As far as the eyes, please be mindful of size and correct shape and placement. If you go down the wrong road here, you will have a very hard time correcting it and that trait can impact the dog’s functionality and health. Just ask Sheltie breeders about that. The Aussies in the era I was showing had beautifully sized and shaped expressive eyes that were placed correctly on the skull to protect them when working stock. Please work hard to keep these traits.
- I would be remiss if I didn’t mention sloping topline, a fad that unfortunately seems to be on the upswing now. The breed standards are very clear on this. AKC: “Back is straight and strong, **level** and firm from withers to hip joints. The croup is moderately sloped.” ASCA: “The topline appears **level** at a natural four-square stance.” The slope in the croup (that means **JUST** the croup, not the topline) has to be felt with your hands. Visually, that topline should appear like a table top from the withers to the tail. Even a slight topline slope is not correct for an Australian Shepherd and should not be rewarded by judges. Please do not compromise on this, even a wee tiny bit. It will change the body of the Australian Shepherd forever. It will create havoc with your balance and will compromise the dog’s health and endurance of the hips and the hocks.



ASCA CH All That Glitters of Gefion  
CDX STDsd. Born 1976. Breeder:  
Georjean Hertzwig, Gefion. Photo  
courtesy of Sally Smith.

### What is your proudest moment when breeding and showing?

I had lots of proud moments with my dogs, but a lovely one was



Sally clowning around with ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF "Rio." Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

winning Started Ducks with Rio at the National Specialty out of an entry of 30. On that day he was just so special for me. He was a well-known campaigned conformation dog at the time, the crowd at ringside was large, and it was not expected that a Flintridge line-bred "showdog" could win at that time. I had worked all summer with him, and my trainer Jerry Rowe was there with my friends, so it was a special day for Rio and me.

### **What was your greatest disappointment?**

The biggest disappointment for me was not being able to get AKC recognition for the breed when I was still involved. I got tired of traveling hundreds of miles to shows only to have exhibitors decide that they would not enter their dogs. We were showing in the heat of summer in cattle barns and such with no air conditioning. I just got weary of it. In retrospect, it worked out for me as I moved on to show, breed, and course Whippets after that, and I have a deep love affair with them to this day. However, I still have and always will have a special place in my heart for Aussies.

### **What are the most important lessons you learned and advice you'd like to pass on to newer fanciers?**

- The most important thing you can do is to become a passionate "student" of the Australian Shepherd for the rest of your life. Never stop learning and trying to gain insight about every aspect of Aussies. Have several mentors, even from different breeds. You can be involved at high level in dogs for 40 years and still have mentors!
- Study your pedigrees as far back as you can go. Go see and meet the dogs in your pedigree that are still alive, regardless of their age. It will enlighten you more than you know, and you might meet a new mentor with a lot of information to share.

- Never overlook the importance of dams and granddams in any pedigree. Sometimes, if you study it, they are the key to the whole pedigree (that the stud dog always gets credit for). Study those grandmas and great-grandmas. Overlooking them will punish you with consequences.
- Don't breed to the latest popular winning stud dog just because you can easily sell the puppies. That is selling you, your bitch and the breed short. Focus on what your bitch really needs to improve and what every stud dog will bring actually to the table. Call anybody and everybody who have bred to a dog you're interested in. You have to do some research. It's a whole lot more than seeing a couple of nice puppies out of a stud dog and deciding he's the one. If you are professional, respectful and confidential in seeking information, experienced breeders will be honest and outright with you. Open the conversation by bringing up the strengths and weaknesses of your own bitch. What strengths does this stud dog bring to the table, what weaknesses? Is the dog you need abroad, not in the U.S.? Do you need a complete outcross and there's an unfinished working titled dog or Agility dog that would maintain your breed type and refresh your line with desired traits? Health problems occur when



ASCA CH Sunwood's High Gloss Finish. Born 1980. Notice her lovely topline and outstanding shoulder assembly. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

the gene pool is squeezed down too much. Don't limit yourself—think outside the box.

- Go to every seminar about everything “dog” that you can attend and be a sponge. If you get stale you'll never improve. I've seen people who have been showing and “getting by” for decades and they have never improved because they quit working on it.
- Learn clicker training! I guarantee it will change your life and your dog's life! Even my horses are clicker trained.

- Go to shows and find a great handler that will allow you help them as a “gofer.” Offer to “gofer” water, coffee, towels, brushes or whatever they need. They always need help with something and they will reward you with knowledge and tips. Ask them for a critique on your handling.
- Stay for Best of Breed or groups and instead of chatting ringside, or shopping at vendor booths, watch, focus and study the handlers. Watch their hands, their footwork, their position, their precision. The really good ones are subtle and frame out the dog. I learned a lot by watching toy dog handlers—I learned to slow down, to be precise, to be soft, soft with the hands. Have people film you in slow motion and you will see all the unnecessary jerking you are doing on your dog’s neck. Be soft, train them, don’t string up their necks and manhandle them.



ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF “Rio” had a powerful presence working sheep, with a lowered-head approach. He enjoyed a little action if there was a tough black-faced ewe that challenged him, but could be so gentle as to move ducks off the fence with his nose. Photo credit: Doug MacSpadden. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.

**How would you like to be remembered as an Aussie breeder?**

I'd like to be remembered as a breeder who was a lifelong student and who cared about the improvement and longevity in the breed above winning or anything else.



ASCA CH All That Jazz of Gefion CDX STDd "Jazz." Born 1978. She was awarded Best of Opposite Sex at two consecutive ASCA National Specialties: 1982 in Michigan and 1983 in Texas. By ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF x CH All That Glitters of Gefion CDX STDsd. Breeder: Georjean Hertzwig, Gefion. Owner: Sally deBeque Smith, Sunwood. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.



Sunwood's Changing of the Guard "Tyler." Born 1983. By ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF x ASCA CH Windsor's Tabu of Sand Canyon. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.



ASCA CH Sunwood's Shine It On. Born 1979. By ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF x ASCA CH All That Glitters of Gefion CDX STDsd. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.



ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF "Rio." Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.



ASCA CH Sunwood's Bravo! Bravo! "Bravo." Born 1984. By ASCA CH Rising Sun of Windermere CDX STDsd ASCA HOF x ASCA CH All That Jazz of Gefion CDX STDd. Photo courtesy of Sally Smith.