



*A herder by heritage,  
the Icelandic Sheepdog  
is an expert at  
gathering smiles.*

# *Of Human Bonding*

BY SUSAN MC CULLOUGH

The young woman in the juvenile treatment facility wasn't doing well. Although she'd participated in activities there—including dog care and training—she wouldn't talk with any of the professional staff who wanted to help her. Without knowing anything about how the girl felt regarding her history, the staff was having a hard time developing a counseling and treatment program for her.

Little did the staff know that a short-haired, prick-eared, curly-tailed Icelandic Sheepdog puppy named Kolpera would be the key that would unlock the door to the young woman's shattered heart.

"One day, the girl took Kol off by herself on the lawn and began talking to her," recalls Kol's handler, Donna McDermott, of Burton, Washington. "I could hear, of course, which she knew but couldn't bring herself to tell another person, so she told Kol her sad story. Kol sat perfectly still for what seemed like hours, 'listening' to her every word. With the information that the young woman shared, we were able to develop a treatment program that was successful and she graduated from the program successfully. I was so proud of Kol and her good work."

The young woman's breakthrough and recovery may have made Kol seem like a canine miracle worker to some observers, but to McDermott—who is past president of the Icelandic Sheepdog Association of America (ISAA) and current chair of the club's judges' education committee—no such miracle occurred.

"Kol's work is not special," McDermott says. "It is typical of the Icelandic Sheepdog."

## *A Long History*

The Icelandic Sheepdog is new to the AKC, but the breed's roots go back more than a thousand years. According to the ISAA, the dog emigrated from the Nordic countries to Iceland, where

he was used to guard and herd not only sheep, but also cattle and horses. Little is mentioned of the dogs until the mid-16th century, when Swedish clergyman Olaus Magnus wrote that Icelandic Sheepdogs, which he described as thick-coated white or light-colored animals, were popular among the Swedish upper class, especially women and priests. In 1570, British humanist John Caius noted that the British aristocracy also favored the breed.

In 1576, Abraham Fleming included a description of Icelandic Sheepdogs in his tract *Of English Dogges, the Diversities, the Names, the Natures and the Properties*. In this treatise, he notes:

"Iceland dogs, curled and rough all over, which, by reason of the length of their hair, make show of neither face nor of body. And yet these curs, forsooth, because they are so strange, are greatly set by, esteemed, taken up, and made of, so many times, instead of the spaniel gentle or comforter." Another Englishman, translator and satirist Thomas Brown, wrote that Icelandic Sheepdogs were exported to Britain as family pets but were also greatly valued by sheep farmers there.

But while Fleming and Brown appeared to be saying that Icelandic Sheepdogs were greatly valued despite their rough-looking appearance, William Shakespeare—or at least one of Shakespeare's characters—seemed to feel otherwise. In Act II,



*Intelligence shows in the face of this Icelandic Sheepdog puppy. Kolpera, left, has a natural empathy that makes her shine as a therapy dog. Bottom: In profile, an Icelandic Sheepdog should have a rectangular shape.*



Scene I of *Henry V*, Pistol appears to consider the dog's origins a suitable epithet to hurl at someone who has insinuated that Pistol's wife is a madam: "Pish for thee, Iceland dog! Thou prick-eared cur of Iceland!"

Despite the Bard's insult, Icelandic Sheepdogs were consistently mentioned in naturalists' writings and travel chronicles from 1600 through the 20th century. According to the ISAA, "The descriptions vary somewhat, but it is clear that a distinct dog is being described. The dogs are said to be found in the

countryside; they guard the fields, herd sheep, round up ponies and find sheep lost in snow drifts."

But while the dogs were a necessity to Icelandic rural life, a tapeworm infestation in the mid-19th century caused the Icelandic government to enact a burdensome tax that resulted in a significant reduction of the country's entire dog population. Distemper and other diseases further reduced the Icelandic Sheepdog population. Nevertheless, three Icelandic Sheepdogs were exhibited for the first time at a dog show at Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens in 1897—the first such exhibition of the breed—and Denmark's kennel club recognized the breed in 1898. The Kennel Club (England) recognized the breed by entering a single dog into its registry in 1905, and it published a breed standard at the same time.

Nevertheless, the breed's population continued to drop. By 1950, Icelandic Sheepdogs were almost nowhere to be seen in Iceland except in remote areas. In an effort to save the breed, enthusiast Mark Watson exported some Icelandics to California. Watson also bred Icelandics in his native England.

Meanwhile, two Icelanders, Páll A. Pálsson and Sigríður Pétursdóttir, started a breeding program in the mid-1960s. Pétursdóttir imported two puppies from Watson to add genetic diversity to her kennel. By 1969, the Icelandic Kennel Club had been established, in part to preserve and advance the Icelandic Sheepdog as a breed.

### *Lively and Confident*

Today's Icelandic Sheepdog, the newest member of the AKC Herding Group, is just under medium size—about 18.1 inches high for dogs and 16.5 inches high for bitches—with prick ears

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ©DONNA McDERMOTT; ©JØRGEN METZDORFF; ©LINDA BJØRK JÓNSDÓTTIR

*“We are guardians  
of a national treasure  
of Iceland.”*

and a curled tail. The breed standard states that when viewed in profile, the dog has a rectangular shape, with the length of the body from shoulder to buttock exceeding the height at the withers. The depth of the chest equals the length of the foreleg.

This dog was bred to work in harsh climates and has the coat appropriate to that task: double-coated, thick, and weatherproof. An Icelandic may have one of two coat types: short-haired, which includes a medium-length outer coat, with shorter hair on the head and fronts of the legs and longer hair on the rest of the body; and long-haired, in which the outer coat is recognizably longer than is the case with the short-haired type. Both types feature soft, thick undercoats.

The coat may be tan, chocolate brown, gray, or tricolor, with one of those colors predominating. Accompanying any of these coat colors are white markings, generally on the face, the collar, chest, feet, and tail tip. Tan is the most common coat color, followed by tricolor.

The head should be strongly built, with the skull slightly longer than the muzzle. When viewed both from above and in profile, the head should have a triangular shape. The teeth should form a scissors bite, and dentition should be complete. The eyes

are medium-sized and almond-shaped, dark brown in color, with black eye-rims. The lips are also black, and the cheeks are flat; no droopy jowls should be seen in an Icelandic.

The dog should have a confident and lively bearing, as evidenced in part by an agile gait that shows endurance and good driving action. The dog's expression is expected to be gentle, intelligent, and happy.

U.S. Icelandic Sheepdog enthusiasts plan to do all they can to maintain these qualities. “We hope the Icelandic Sheepdogs will remain like they are,” ISAA president Spike Williamson, of



TOP: ©DORTHE REITZEL; BOTTOM: ©JÜRGEN METZDORFF



ing talents. His two Icelandics, Thorri and Angel, have been therapy dogs for several years.

“Our dogs were recently showcased at our local veterans’ medical center by the American Red Cross on one of our local television stations,” Williamson says. “Being a therapy dog is very special, and these dogs have a special something. In the words of one wheelchair patient, ‘Sometimes you feel down, missing home, and the dogs cheer you up—like that one who licked my hand a while ago. That’s so fun. Makes you feel better.’ ”

The Icelandic can enjoy canine company as much as he enjoys human company. Shellie Greyhavens, ISAA recording secretary and a member of the club’s breeding review and compliance committee, can attest to the Icelandic’s affinity for

Henrico, Virginia, says. “We are guardians of a national treasure of Iceland, and they should be maintained and shown in accordance with their home country’s desires and requirements. We Americans ... must guard against creating our own version” of this breed.

### *Epitomizing Sociability*

Today’s Icelandic Sheepdog is distinctive not only in looks but also in temperament. The breed standard notes that the dog “will always give visitors an enthusiastic welcome without being aggressive”—which may be understating the case a bit. It’s safe to say that if an Icelandic were to take a Myers-Briggs Test, he would probably score off the scale for “E,” as in extroverted. The Icelandic not only gets along with people—he truly enjoys them.

ISAA member Thordur Runolfsson recalls an incident with his Icelandic, Gerplu Spori, that exemplifies this breed’s love of human beings. “One morning, shortly after we got Spori, I put the dogs out for their morning routine and called them back after a few minutes,” Runolfsson, who lives in Norman, Oklahoma, recalls. “But Spori didn’t show up. I went into the backyard and he was nowhere to be found. I figured he had jumped or climbed the seven-foot fence, and I went outside to look for him with no success. We got very concerned.

“After a few minutes my cell phone rang,” continues Runolfsson. “It was the elementary school that is a couple of blocks up the street. They told me that a yellow dog with a tag with my name on it was at the school and enjoying being the center of attention of all the children at the school. He was now waiting for me in the office, feeling right at home.”

The Icelandic’s love of people not only takes him to schoolyards for impromptu visits with children, but also into therapeutic settings such as the facility where McDermott’s Kolpera works. Williamson also can attest to the breed’s heal-

other dogs. Greyhavens was planning to visit the friend who’d introduced her to the breed, and who had six Icelandics, all of whom lived happily together. Greyhavens wanted to bring her two female Icelandics along, but she hesitated.

“I was worried with that many dogs how they would all get along,” recalls Greyhavens, who lives in Athens, Ohio. “She reassured me that it would be fine and that they would get along. Now I’ve had dogs all my life and know there can be issues with bringing new dogs into an existing pack, even if it’s only for a visit. Well, the dogs got along great. There wasn’t one scuffle, and it was a great weekend.”



TOP: COURTESY THORJUR RUNOLFSSON; BOTTOM: COURTESY VIRGINIA MEDICAL CENTER



*Captured on Canvas: Tinni, the first champion from his native land. Opposite top: Spori, the social butterfly. Bottom: Therapy dogs Thorri and Angel, spreading cheer.*

As wonderful as Icelandic devotees think their dogs are, they readily admit that the dogs are not quite perfect. “They can have a tendency to be vocal,” Williamson admits. “Since we live in a suburban area, this can be annoying at times.”

A second possible source of annoyance is the Icelandic’s coat. “Shedding is a shortcoming,” Williamson acknowledges. “The key is to have a very good vacuum cleaner.”

Another possible drawback is the breed’s energy—which is to be expected, given the dog’s herding roots, but can be problematic for some owners. “He needs to have the opportunity to roam around and explore and chase or herd birds or whatever living things he finds,” Runolfsson explains. “However, these traits simply define what kind of a living environment he has to have. In other words, the Icelandic Sheepdog needs a yard to run around in and is not an ideal candidate for city apartment living.”

But even if a high-rise is not the ideal residence for an Icelandic, that’s not to say the breed isn’t resilient and adaptable. To illustrate the point, McDermott points to an Icelandic named Tinni, who was part of a litter bred and whelped by Guðrún Ragnars Guðjohnsen in 1976.

Like any good breeder, Guðjohnsen contacted the owners of her puppies each year to check and see how they were doing. But one year, when she called to check on Tinni, “she was told that he was to be put down as he was no longer wanted,”

McDermott explains. “She immediately drove to the home and retrieved Tinni. He was 3 years old.

“When they got to [Guðjohnsen’s home], ... it became apparent to Guðrún that Tinni had not lived a happy life,” McDermott continues. “She slept with him in the kitchen as that was as far as she could get him to come into the house. After a time, he became a very happy dog and as Guðrún spoke of him, her deep affection for this dog was apparent.”

However, Tinni became far more than Guðjohnsen’s beloved companion. “ISCH Islands Garða Tinni went on to become Iceland’s first conformation champion,” McDermott says. “In the painting by the Icelandic artist Baltasar that was given to [Guðjohnsen] as a gift when she left the presidency of the Icelandic Kennel Club, Tinni stands so proudly—a reminder that our international history is so deeply personal and touches every part of our lives.”

A resilient but sociable dog, Tinni paid his person back tenfold for his rescue. Today, he and his many descendants have become a gift that keeps on giving to those who know and love the Icelandic Sheepdog—a dog who truly is of humans bonded. **GZ**

---

*Award-winning writer Susan McCullough and her Golden Retriever, Allie, live with their family in Vienna, Virginia. Visit Susan’s blog, The Allie Chronicles, at [thealliechronicles.blogspot.com](http://thealliechronicles.blogspot.com).*