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TRAINING A SHEEP DOG

Some Hints for Beginners

By E. G. RILEY

An untrained sheep dog pup doesn't cost very much, even in these days of inflated prices, but when he is properly trained he will perform in a few minutes, work that ten men could not accomplish in as many hours. That is a point worth remembering when training a dog—you are developing an asset, that will save you a hundred times his cost in time and temper—so it is well worth your while to train him properly.

Every man is not temperamentally suited to the training of a sheep dog—otherwise there would be far more really good dogs about—so first ask yourself whether you are capable of handling the job.

For a start, you must like and understand dogs. You must possess unlimited patience and lots of self-control for if you can't control yourself you have little hope of being able to control a dog.

It isn't always easy to control your temper—I know because I sometimes lose mine—but a lost temper can mean

Mr. E. G. Riley, of Gingin, the author of this article is an outstanding breeder and trainer of sheep dogs with the unique distinction of having held the State Sheep Dog Championship on four occasions. His dogs gained first and second places in last year's championship trials at the Royal Show. Apart from successes on the trial course, Mr. Riley has had considerable experience of station work and droving and his knowledge and understanding of dogs is put to good effect when, as a Vermin Control Officer of the Department of Agriculture, he has to pit his wits against the cunning of sheep-killing wild dogs.
a pup spoilt or at best a long time spent in eradicating the memory of that one mistake.

If you can't be reasonably certain of controlling your temper, don't waste time trying to train a pup. Buy yourself a ready-trained dog or at least one that is broken in to the rudiments of working sheep.

CHOOSING THE PUP

When you have convinced yourself that you have at least a sporting chance of becoming a successful trainer you can commence looking round for the prospective pupil.

Here in Western Australia, you will be limited to a choice of two breeds, the kelpie or the Border collie. I have bred and trained good dogs of both breds but all my dogs today are Border collies. I like the collies because, for one thing, there are more good strains available—and strain is far more important than breed.

Whatever breed you fancy, make sure that your pup is descended from good working stock, for the instinct to work is bred into these dogs. A pup who has never seen sheep will often be found rounding up the fowls almost as soon as he can walk.

If your dog's sire and dam, and his grandsires and grand-dams were good workers, able to stand up to hard wear and tear, there is a good chance of the qualities appearing in your pup.

Naturally, if you have the choice of a litter, pick the pup that appeals to your fancy. The head is a good indication of quality, and your pup should be bright-eyed, keen and alert, the sort of pup that takes an intelligent interest in everything that moves. Of course he should be well-built with sound legs and good feet.

PRELIMINARY TRAINING

There are no hard-and-fast rules for training a dog. Pups are individuals, just like human beings, and the methods that suit one pup may be useless with another. Some learn their lessons easily—and forget them just as quickly. Some are slow to learn but apparently have more retentive memories. Some are nervous and highly-strung while others are "tough guys".

All need different handling and half the art of training a dog is being able to recognise the temperament and adapt your teaching methods accordingly.

I have often been asked at what age a pup's training should commence. There are many different ideas on this subject but I like to get busy as soon as the pup is weaned, say at nine or ten weeks of age. At that age, many of the early lessons can be made into a game which the pup will enjoy.

First give your pup a name and use it often. Preferably the name should be something short and distinct, different in sound from the names of any other dogs on the place so that there will be no confusion. It should be a name that carries well when shouted, so that he can be recalled easily when working at a distance.

DON'T shout at the pup at this stage, however, or you are liable to reduce him to a scared bundle of fur. Speak to him quietly and kindly and talk to him con-
stantly so that he gets confidence in you. Call him by name at all times so that he learns to answer to it promptly. Never hit him or apply any form of punishment—your voice is sufficient to let him know he is doing wrong, or to let him know he is doing right. Always be generous with praise when he does the right thing and your pup will soon be anxious to please.

Tie him up to get him used to being on the chain and then take him for walks on the chain or lead. When he will walk freely on the lead, carry a stick and hold it in front of him if he comes alongside you or tries to run ahead. Say "Heel" or "Get behind" each time you check him and he will soon learn to follow at heel wherever you go. Don't keep him tied up but let him run around and develop his body and mind.

**TEACHING TO SIT**

When he has learnt to follow at heel, hold the lead in the left hand and press him down to a sitting position with the right, saying "Sit" each time as you press him down.

Don't make the lessons too long, not more than about five minutes twice a day for a start.

Persevere with the sitting lesson, until he will sit down on command without being pressed down. At this stage accompany the command, "Sit", with a downward motion of the hand and he will gradually learn to sit when the signal is given, even if you don't speak.

Now move away to the full length of the chain and keep the pup sitting. Check any tendency to move at this stage, until you call him to you.

When he will sit on command or signal and stay down until called to you, put him on a light cord and continue the same lessons but at greater distances. Lengthen the cord to 25 or 30 yards and persevere with short lessons until eventually you can sit him down, walk away from him to any distance up to the full length of the cord, and then call him to you.

Don't rush this training for it is the basis of most good sheep dog work. If your dog will sit on command and return to you immediately he is called or signalled, he is more than half trained. At least you can check him whenever he does the wrong thing.

Never give your dog lessons off the cord until the habit of prompt obedience is second nature to him. If he refuses to sit, or runs away from you, and the
cord is not there to check him, the chances are that he is finished as far as really good work is concerned.

You now have a dog who will sit on command and come to you when ordered. Sit him down, walk away then call him to you but sit him down again before he has covered the distance. Practice this and get him used to stopping and moving in response to both commands and signals.

At this stage too, check any tendency to dash about at high speed, especially when coming to you. Check him by saying “Steady!” and holding up your hand until you can slow him down or stop him without actually sitting him down.

The actual words of the command don’t matter, in fact many trainers work entirely by whistle signals, but always use the same command for each movement and always accompany it by the appropriate hand signal so that he gets his orders by eye as well as ear.

When you call him to you, always move away from him so that he gets into the habit of coming in behind you.

**SENDING HIM OUT**

The next lesson—still on the cord—is to teach the pup to run out on command. This may be a trifle difficult and will call for lots of patience.

With the pup at heel, sweep your arm outward and say “Go” or “Get out” or any suitable order. At the same time move away from him and backward to give him the idea. You may even find it necessary to run out with him at first, but persevere until he will run out to right or left when ordered. Insist on every run commencing from the “Heel” position.

If he still cannot get the idea of running out on command, don’t lose your temper with him, but take him into a paddock where there are a few sheep. He will usually want to run after the sheep, and will soon get the idea.

If he doesn’t go out wide enough, run with him and say “Keep out,” waving him away all the time till he is at the full length of the cord.

Check him immediately if he tries to cross in front of you, for “crossing the cast” is an unforgiveable crime in sheep dog trial work, and you may want to enter him in a trial some day.

**WORKING WITH SHEEP**

Up till now, you will have noticed that I have hardly mentioned sheep. Don’t take the pup out to work sheep until he has enough pace to “head” his sheep satisfactorily, or you may spoil a good pup. Some may be ready at five to six months, others may take longer.
When you are satisfied that he will obey you every time, even when not on the cord—when he will run out, stop, sit and come to you as ordered, and has learnt the meaning of "Steady!"—you can try him out with sheep.

Have a quiet mob of 20 or 30 sheep in a small paddock. They will be all the better for having been "steadied down" previously by an older dog.

Start close to the sheep to lessen the chances of him crossing his cast, and send out your pup to a flank, making him start his run from the "Heel" position. Walk towards the sheep yourself and try to get him to go well round behind the sheep. Don't sit him down on his first lessons with sheep or you may find it difficult to lift him again.

If he tries to run right round the sheep in a circle, run round them yourself in the other direction and check him, then send him back in the opposite direction.

ENCOURAGE THE PUPIL

On a young dog's first run with sheep do not insist on any standards of perfection. Short of biting a sheep, let him do almost anything he likes, otherwise you may confuse him and make him unwilling to approach the sheep. Give him all the encouragement you can.

Later, try to get him to run out wide to a flank and circle round to finish his run in rear of the sheep with the mob directly between him and you. If he does this and stops or sits, don't hurry him, but let him think things out for himself.

When he has settled down, try to call him on to approach the sheep, keeping him well steadied. If he moves forward on to the sheep don't speak again until he stops. If he succeeds in getting the sheep moving towards you, keep moving backward so that the sheep are between you and the dog all the time.

If he sits down and is disinclined to move on to his sheep, move the sheep yourself and then call him on again.

As soon as he learns to come up on to his sheep, check him if he runs out to a flank, except when this is necessary to head the sheep back on to a straight course.

CASTING

The act of running out to take control of the sheep is known as "casting" and the ideal cast is one where the dog starts from behind the man and runs well out in a wide semi-circle, moving at a smart canter to a point immediately in rear of the sheep so that the dog, the sheep and the man are in a straight line.
Practise this with your pup, first using quiet sheep that have been thoroughly steadied. Teach him to cast from both flanks according to your signal, and occasionally stop him in mid-cast, call him back to you and send him round behind you and out on the other flank.

Start with short casts and gradually increase the distance. Check any tendency to "cross the cast", that is, to cross between you and the sheep, and stop him immediately if he splits off one or more sheep from the mob or goes between scattered sheep. The cast should be wide, so as to collect any stragglers into a compact mob.

APPROACHING AND BRINGING

Having run out on his cast to a position in rear of sheep, the dog should pause, then move steadily in to take command of the mob, not dash in on his sheep and send them off at the gallop. By practising on quiet sheep in a small paddock you will be able to check him and curb any tendency to work too boisterously. Don't hurry this early training as that is where good habits are formed and bad habits are checked.

Having assumed control, the dog should bring the sheep in a straight line down to the man, preferably not letting them get out of a walk.

This work is best taught with a smaller mob of ten or a dozen sheep, as they will move more freely than a large bunch. They should still be quiet and well steadied for a start so that they do not dash around and excite the pup.

Practise casting him and getting him to stop "on balance" behind the sheep, then walk away and get him to bring the sheep after you. Move around the paddock slowly and encourage the dog to bring the sheep after you wherever you go.

When he has learnt this lesson, try to get him to put the sheep through a gate, first going through the gate yourself, and later with you standing near the gate while he takes the sheep past you. Use a good big gate for a start and give the pup plenty of praise and encouragement when he gets the sheep through.

CAST, APPROACH and BRINGING: In this diagram the desirable features of a good cast are shown. The dog should move out smartly on command, preferably running somewhat wider than shown in the sketch. Travelling at an even pace without any hesitation or checking, he should run to the spot marked X, where he should pause to size up his sheep. The approach should be smooth and forceful with no sudden movements to upset the sheep, and he should then bring them steadily towards the man.
DRIVING

From this stage, the natural sequence is on to the driving of a flock of sheep. When your pup will take the sheep through the gate, stand to one side and wave him on past you, following his sheep.

He may dash out to a flank in an attempt to head the sheep and bring them back to you. If this occurs, check him, call him back to heel and send him out on the other flank, checking him again before he gets far enough to head them.

Occasionally allow him to head the sheep however, otherwise he may refrain from heading them when needed.

By this time, your pup should be familiar with the various commands and signals and may be progressively introduced to more difficult tasks. If he is the right type he will have already begun to use his head when handling his sheep.

Try not to make the mistake of over-commanding him. Throughout the training period, while he should obey all your orders promptly, he should be given plenty of opportunities to do his own thinking and handle the sheep in his own way, so try to keep your orders down to a minimum.

A dog which can be sent out and left to handle the sheep without direction is a much better animal than the one which has to be directed in every move he makes.

For this reason, I usually make a point of allowing a young dog to work a mob of sheep on his own quite frequently, preferably in a small paddock where he cannot get too far away. This is good training as he learns by experience and has to do his own thinking. If he encounters any serious problems or persists in doing the wrong thing, he can be recalled and put on the right track without difficulty.

That, I think, covers most of the points of training a working dog, and if your pup has learnt these lessons thoroughly he will be well worth his rations and a far better dog than the majority of so-called working sheep dogs found on West Australian farms.

If you have any ideas of entering your dog in sheep dog trials, he will have received a sound basic training which should pave the way for the more exacting requirements of the trial course.

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