

Get Um Up, Meg!

by Janet S. Herring

From where we stood at the bottom of the hill, the pasture looked empty of sheep. But Meg knew different. Her handler gave her an almost inaudible signal and off she sped -- a streak of black racing up the hill through the tawny grass. Moments later a cloud of white appeared on the ridge, creeping toward us like fog.

Meg drove the flock of sheep right up to the gate, where her master stood with his hands in his pockets, hardly signaling her at all. The young ewes balked at the open gate and tried to circle back to the pasture. Like a cat waiting by a gopher hole ready to pounce, Meg was prepared to keep the ewes in a bunch. She anticipated their moves and moved with them -- like a good cowhorse moves with a steer with little direction from its rider. It took the close work of both Meg and her handler to move the sheep on through the gate. Meg never barked and her master never raised his voice as he helped her with directions: "Get um up, Meg. Way over, Meg."

Once on the road, Meg took over and herded the sheep down the road behind her handler -- Bill Jacobs -- and me. The sheep were quickly sorted and penned and Meg's work was over. As Jacobs shut the last gate and turned to other business, Meg peered through the fence and ran from one empty pen to the other, anxiously searching for more sheep to herd. Finding none she loped to Jacob's side -- by way of the water trough, where she took a quick dip and a cool drink.

Herd dogs like this Border Collie, Meg, are the unsung heroes of much of the livestock industry today. They work for hours in the hot sun and cold rain without complaint; they never ask for a day off; and their labor costs only a pat on the head for a job well done and a good dinner at night. Besides, a good herd dog can do the work of two men.

It's fascinating to watch stock dogs work -- pivoting like a stock horse,



Meg moves in like a cat stalking prey. The sheep can't escape the power of her eye.



Meg is "dropped," eagerly awaiting the next command from her master; her eyes never leave the flock.



Meg hurries to head off the straying sheep. They don't escape her for an instant!

Photos: Scott Harrison

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(continued)

creeping like a cat, charging like a bull. They're acrobatic, athletic and graceful in their work. Herd dogs work like wild dogs stalking prey -- but they don't make the final kill. Through domestication, man has adapted these natural instincts to his own use. However, despite all this, the work and skill of these dogs is seldom acknowledged by anyone but their grateful owner-handlers. Few people realize the patience and know-how that goes into the training of a good sheep or cattle dog. Hard work and skill on the part of both handler and dog make them a successful working team.

In choosing a likely pup to use as a herder, pedigree is important -- whether you're dealing with Australian Shepherds, Kelpies, Queensland Blue Heelers, Catahoula Leopard Stockdogs or Border Collies. A pup from herding parentage has the herding instinct inborn and will learn faster than other dogs.

Bill Jacobs, who has trained stock dogs as a hobby since he was a child, believes that "you can take any dog, whether it's an Airedale or Doberman Pinscher, and train it to work sheep. It might take you longer, but you can do it if you know how to train dogs." He adds that the type of dog chosen depends on the type of stock it will be working.

The ability to herd without stampeding or harming stock is the main thing to look for in a potential herd dog. Working stock dogs must be energetic and even-tempered -- not too aggressive or too timid. When turned upon by stock, they must be forceful enough to hold their ground and not turn away, no matter how frightened they are.

In spite of the differences in the training and style of cattle and sheep dogs, their early, basic training is much the same. One of the first things to do, points out Jacobs, is to gain the puppy's confidence and friendship. Give him a short name that can be easily understood over a distance. Use the name whenever you speak to the pup. He'll soon learn that when he hears his name it means to pay attention and come.

It's extremely important to remember to use the same signals and commands all the time. Some handlers prefer whistles instead of voice com-



mands because they don't convey emotions. "If the commands aren't consistent, the dog gets confused, then the handler becomes confused and upset and no progress is made," cautions Jacobs.

The next step is to teach the dog to sit anywhere, anytime. "Dropping" is one of the handler's main controls on the dog, so it is essential that even an excited dog sit on command. The dog should be taught to stay close by, ready to carry out orders the moment they're given. If dogs run on ahead or take off after rabbits they may scare the stock, explains Jacobs.

The age at which a dog can be started working stock varies with the breed and individual dog. Some pups show an interest as soon as they're weaned. Others show no desire until they're over a year old. Most pups are started when they're between three and six months old. If a pup can be dropped, brought up, dropped and brought up repeatedly in a straight line while the handler moves away, then Jacobs feels the dog is ready to begin working.

Things should be made as easy as possible for the beginning pup. He must be encouraged and praised for

the smallest tasks he does correctly in order to build up his self-confidence. Begin with stock that is safe and won't turn on the pup and scare him. Work in a small area where control can be maintained and the pup can be helped if he gets trapped.

To teach the pup to take direction, Jacobs sits the dog down on one side of the flock and moves halfway around the flock. Then he calls the dog to him. The pup should take the shortest route around the flock. Jacobs believes that "if the dog cuts through the flock to reach you, you can forget it. It would take too long to make it into a herd dog." After the dog comes around the flock to him once, Jacobs sits the dog down again, moves 180 degrees and calls the pup to him. Next he combines the call with arm signals. He calls, "Get um up," and points to the left for a clockwise movement. "Way by," and an arm pointed right means counter-clockwise. Jacobs says that his dogs usually learn these maneuvers in four or five lessons. A whistle means to come forward. A "sssst" sound means to stop and sit down. Signals vary with trainers.

There are various schools of



After a cooling dip in the water trough, Meg races to her job -- bringing the sheep home.

thought on training a young pup by sending him out with an older dog. Some feel that it makes the pup's progress faster and easier because the old dog guides him and provides encouragement and support. However, most people realize that a pup can pick up bad habits -- as well as good ones -- from an older dog. Jacobs believes that pups tend to rely too much on an older dog. "Dogs need less and less signaling as they get older. When you work young and old dogs together, you're giving a lot of direction to the young dog. This can confuse and ruin the older dog because he doesn't need signals anymore."

It's hard to say just how long it takes to train a dog to work stock. It depends on the time put in and the ability of the trainer and dog. Once the dog is trained though, it doesn't forget what it's learned if it's not worked for awhile. It's like riding a bike, once you learn, you never forget. A dog started as a pup is usually working well by the time it's two. When started older, they take longer to train. Jacobs feels that males are more difficult to train because they're more aggressive and

hard-headed. "They usually turn out to be the best dogs in the end, though. Everyone will agree that females are easier to train, but they're also more temperamental."

Jacobs finds that the main problem people seem to have in training stock dogs is that "they don't have any physical contact or control with a dog like you do with a horse." He often leaves a dog under command just watching the stock for 30 minutes or more to develop the dog's concentration and eye. He brings the dog up and puts it down slowly by command to teach it to rate the stock. A working dog with good style crouches as he moves, eyeing the animals all the while, like a cat stalking prey. The livestock shouldn't be able to escape the power of the dog's eyes.

Training stock dogs isn't easy work. Jacobs admits: "People don't believe it when I say that I go out to work a dog for 30 minutes and then get out there and maybe work him for three minutes. I spend the rest of the time just sitting there trying to decide what to do next because the dog's making mistakes."

When a dog is first being trained, it should be a one-man dog. After this,

Jacobs feels that it can be a pet as well as a herd dog. However, commands should only be given by one person. Jacobs comments further that "many people object to having their stock dogs petted. I don't object. In fact, I think it's good. It keeps them from becoming too much of a one-man dog and getting mean." He cautions, however, that too much petting of pups may cause them to lose respect for their handler. The pup should see his handler as a boss as much as a friend.

A good, finished working stock dog should be able to drive stock in any direction and move and stop them with style and eye. It should be able to encircle and bring stock to the handler; it should be capable of being sent out over distance and after strays. Stock dogs should work with their handlers and be willing to please. A good dog should be able to work pretty much on its own. Their attitude should be like Meg's: She practically begged her master for more sheep to work. It looked as though any minute she would jump up and grab his sleeve saying: "Please -- this way -- more sheep." Yet she never barked a sound. 