

Calendar

Prodigy Dogs

Border Collies Do the Job

It's pretty seldom that I get a border collie with a 'screw-you' attitude," says Terry Parrish, owner of San Pasqual Stock Dog Training Facility in Escondido. "They want to succeed. They want to fit in. It's harder to get the point across to some than others, but they all want to do the job."

The "job" is herding sheep and cattle, following the orders that the handler gives them with a shepherd's whistle. Weighing between 1400 and 2000 pounds, the bovines naturally give the dogs more trouble than the 100- to 200-pound sheep do. "A cow can kill a dog," says Parrish, a handler, breeder, and trainer of herding dogs.

"And even though we tend to use fairly gentle cows at the training facility, the fact is, if one of them has a calf by her side, she's not very nice. So dogs have to be able to hold their own; bite hard, if necessary; then get out of the way, so they don't die."

Not that sheep are harmless. "I used to have a big old Suffolk," says Parrish, referring to the black-faced breed that originated in England. "We called her Dog Killer. She could read a dog from 100 yards away. She'd leave the flock and go to that dog if she didn't like it. She'd wait for it to get in the right position; then she'd slam it up against something solid and try to kill it. She was something else, very tough, but she respected dogs who had power."

Some people make a crucial

mistake when herding cattle with dogs, says Parrish. "They use them only during some intense work, like branding or castrating. So every time the cow sees a dog, it goes into fight mode. But if you use dogs regularly, the cattle quit associating them with trauma." The trouble is, the method takes time.

"And most people in the cattle business don't want to do it that way, even though they'd get a lot more accomplished. Just look at my sheep: they're so used to being worked, if I blow a whistle, they come running. They know if there's a whistle, there's a dog, and they gotta come home."

Parrish, who breeds border collies exclusively, will bring one of her "child prodigies" to the sheepdog trials this weekend. "I'm going to run a 'nursery dog,' one and a half years old, who learned almost everything she needed to learn in about four months. Now it's just a case of letting her grow up. I've got her sister, too, who's not doing well at all, although another sister, seven months old, is. Sometimes picking out puppies is a bit of a crap shoot."

Speaking of puppies, Parrish wants people to know that border



Border collie trial

collies make poor pets. "They're highly active. They need tremendous amounts of exercise. They need mental stimulation, and catching a ball isn't enough. They need to problem-solve. They're the only breed I know that makes judgment calls. For example, if I give a command, and something's not compatible with it, they'll decide to do what has to be done instead." They do this despite knowing the consequences of disobeying her. "They can get into a lot of trouble if they don't mind me. But they also know I expect them to be thinking about what they're doing."

The breed is becoming a popular choice among "pet people" anyway, and Parrish often hears their regrets. "They say, 'This dog is driving me nuts.' And I always say: 'Didn't the breeder warn you?' Parrish won't sell to a "pet home" unless the dog has failed sheepdog school — "because what prevented it from being a tremendous sheepdog is that it wasn't obsessive-compulsive enough. And a failed sheepdog does make a wonderful pet, because it's still a border collie, except it's not driven to herd. And if it were, it would still be with me."

Border collies bred as pets differ from Parrish's working dogs. "If you see border collies at a dog show, then come to the trials, you'll ask, 'Are the dogs the same?' What breaks my heart is that border collies are the last of the great herding dogs in the world. But the American Kennel Club has undermined what it took the shepherding community in the borderlands of England and Scotland centuries to do. They perfected the dog through a highly selective breeding program, generation after generation. It has taken these fucking AKC people just three or four generations to wreck it."

Why such a short time? "Because the characteristics of a border collie are unique. They used its DNA type in a genome study a few years ago because it's so identifiable. I mean, eventually you're going to have two breeds in this country — the real border collies that work and the stupid fluffy pets."

— Jeanne Schinto



Border collie herding sheep

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Sheepdog Trials
San Diego Scottish Highland Games & Gathering of the Clans
Saturday and Sunday, June 22 and 23
9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
Brengle Terrace Park
1200 Vale Terrace Dr., Vista
Adult, \$10; Youth (6-16), \$5; senior/military, \$8
619-645-8080 or
www.sdhIGHLANDGAMES.org