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PURSUING 'EWETOPIA'

Shepherding dogs and a time-honored tradition

BY PATTI MURPHY

The history of sheepherding in the Wood River Valley goes back more than 150 years, tracing its beginnings to John Hailey, an early pioneer who in 1862 settled in the area and brought a small herd of sheep with him from Tennessee.

Today, twice yearly, livestock herders still run their sheep through the mountains and valleys of central Idaho, passing right through the town of Ketchum. To celebrate the woolly creatures, the Ketchum, Sun Valley and Hailey areas host the annual Trailing of the Sheep Festival, a five-day celebration of everything sheep related, from sheep-shearing demonstrations, to lamb barbecues, music, storytelling and a sheep parade down Main Street.

And, what is a sheep festival without sheepdog herding trials, where more than 60

dogs and their handlers will compete to see who the best sheepherding team is.

Herd Mentality

Watching a herding dog work with a handler to control a group of sheep is like watching a choreographed dance between human, canine and ewes. These dogs, primarily border collies and Australian shepherds, are highly intelligent, agile, and live for their work.

"They need a job," said Patrick Shannahan, owner of Red Top Kennel in Caldwell and professional sheepdog trainer for 23 years. "They're not a good dog to buy and just stick in the backyard with nothing to do. If they don't have an activity, they're going to make one up, and it's probably not going to be a good one," Shannahan said with a laugh.

First bred along the border between England and Scotland—thus, their name—border collies possess herding instincts so intense they often try to round up children, ducks, cats or other moving objects. They are extreme athletes who want to please and work with humans, which is why they are often seen competing in agility or obedience trials as well as herding.

"They want to be part of a team," Shannahan said. "You can get all philosophical about wolves and pack leaders, but they've been bred to want to work with us."

Border collies use what is known as "eye" to control a herd. Eye refers to the intense concentration and stare they use to get the sheep to do something. Border collies also tend to use a stalking or slinking posture,



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while other breeds like Australian shepherds work in a more upright position using their body to move the herd.

“When a herding dog discovers it can control a sheep’s movement, that’s the reward,” Shannahan noted. “That’s when they turn on and get quite excited. Herding and controlling the sheep and working as a team with a person are what it’s all about.”

Local sheep rancher and former state Senator John Peavey is a third-generation sheep rancher, owner of Flat Top Sheep Company and, along with his wife Diane, co-founded the Trailing of the Sheep Festival in 1997. Peavey talked about the natural herding instinct of these dogs and recalled the day he knew his border collie, Jock, was “a dog of a lifetime.”

“When he was 11 months old, still a pup, we were getting a bunch of heifer calves out of the pen, and got them pushed out an open gate to take them out to pasture,” Peavey said. “The calves were running around, bucking and snorting, and Jock watched us go through this twice. The third time we got them pushed up to the gate, Jock ran up and cocked the



Above: Border collies use “the eye”—an intense stare to control a herd of sheep. This characteristic and swift, stalking movements enable the dog to move a herd of sheep precisely according to a shepherd’s command.

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Top: During the Trailing of the Sheep Festival in October, sheep are moved from grazing territory north of Ketchum to winter feeding areas in southern Idaho and beyond. **Bottom:** A sheepdog goes to work during the Trailing of the Sheep Festival Sheepdog Trials.

lead heifer as she was starting to lead all the others in the wrong direction. He jumped up, grabbed her by the nose. This heifer never had a dog hangin' from her nose before and she's spinning around trying to get rid of the damn dog. When she headed for the gate, he dropped off, headed around and grabbed her by the ankle. And every heifer followed her and out they went. You couldn't teach a dog to do that."

Sheepdog Trials

Herding trials test the dog and its handler in tasks that would naturally occur on a farm. "We are gathering the sheep, driving

them away, sorting some," Shannahan said. "There's a communication between the dog and the handler, and also between the dog and the sheep. The dog lets the sheep know that they need to go through the course while at the same time not worrying them." Handlers usually communicate through whistle commands, which are different for each handler.

Lavon Calzacorta, coordinator of the sheepdog trials for the past three years, explained the maneuvers involved in the competition. First is the "outrun," where the dog leaves the handler and runs 400 to 500 yards into the field and introduces itself to



five range ewes. The “lift” is when the ewes begin to move under the influence of the dog. The “fetch” is the dog bringing them down the course toward the handler, making sure all the ewes pass through fetch gates and then turning them around the post where the handler is.

Next, the dog drives them out again, then across through gates back to the handler to the shedding ring where the dog and handler will try to pull two ewes off the band of five, which is called a shed. “This illustrates practical farm work. For example, if you have a sheep that needed to be doctored or you just didn’t want it in the group, the dog and handler need to be able to split the group,” explained Calzacorta. Finally, they will put the group back together and into the pen. They have between 12 and 14 minutes to complete the entire run.

Shannahan said, “Even though these dogs have been bred for work, they also have a personality. Many look the same, but they’re not. Some are bolder than others, some are shy; they can be big, small, long hair, short hair, different colors.

“There are a lot of good dogs that are great work dogs at home, but it takes a special dog to be a great competitor.” ❁



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