

Selecting the right working dog.

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A well trained working dog is within most farmers grasps, but it takes a little time and it takes a little patience. Selecting well bred dogs from well bred parents is the number one consideration.

It is amazing how many farmers will study the pedigree of the stock they keep but won't take the time to do the same for the dog that will be working that stock. Selecting the right pup is crucial if you want the right result.

Research is the key. Too often the farm dog is a hand me down or a throw away pup from an unplanned litter. And too often it turns out no good. It costs the same to keep a mongrel as it does to keep a good dog. I know where I would prefer my money spent.

A good place to start when chasing a dog is with the local agricultural show. Sheepdog trials are an excellent source of well bred sheepdogs. Most shows have sheepdog yard trials or arena 3 sheep trials.

Sheepdogs always bring a crowd. There is a certain magic in how the dog handlers communicate with their dogs. It is fascinating and appears well beyond the average bloke. The high standard the trialers achieve may well be, but to have a handy dog assisting around the farm is far from it. Watching the dogs allows you to make a fair assessment. Some dogs you won't like at all, others will be great. Watch the handlers too, to see how they speak to the dogs. No point in spending all day arguing with a dog or yelling at it. The dogs I like is a very personal choice and it needs to be for you.

Speak to the handlers about the dogs you like and discuss your requirements. Often Trialers have dogs that are part trained that will not make the trial ground but could be great for you. But be prepared to pay a little more though. A trial dog may be a little fancier than what your after but in the variety on display there may be a couple that catch your eye. Sheepdog associations are another good source. They have a list of breeders and can help with some direction in where to look for the type of dog your after. The Working Kelpie Council is another contact worth speaking too if a Kelpie is what your considering.

Talk to the associations about sheepdog training schools. A couple of days training can be the difference in getting the dog you want or another mongrel who is not worth his dinner. A small amount of handler instruction will make a world of difference.

When selecting a pup you really need to see the dogs parents. Both if possible. No point in taking a pup because it is a Kelpie or a Border Collie and assuming it'll work. Chances are it will, but maybe not in the situations you want it to work. You need to see its parents on stock and to discuss your requirements with the breeder to ensure it is the type of dog you need.

There are Yard dogs for Yard work, Paddock dogs for Paddock work, there are utility dogs that will do a bit of both, dogs that bark, dogs with eye and with style, there are Kelpies and Border collies, Blue healers and German Coolies and cross breeds, the list goes on. Think about what you need ,the work you have, the stock you want to work and most importantly see what the parents will do. Many farmers are impressed with a dog that backs and barks but don't use a dog in the yards. It's a paddock dog their after and should be looking for casting dogs, dogs that will run out and fetch a flock at a steady pace. Backing and barking are handy when the yards need filling but can be a nuisance when bringing in a mob of wild flighty young sheep, a dog that keeps off a little might do better. Assess your requirements.

Temperament is another important consideration. Temperament is the nature of the dog. Assess if the pups parents are personable, friendly, standoffish or bold. Look at the temperament and ask yourself if you could get on with that dog. Liking the dog is going to be very important when it comes time to train it. If you don't like the parents don't take the pup. Your temperament is also important. If you are one to raise your voice easily don't get a sensitive type pup. If you are a little more easy going don't take on a very hard headed dog. Match your temperament to the dog.

Having a well trained sheepdog even on a small farm can reduce your workload and stress levels when handling stock, but having a working dog with no work for it to do could increase the stress levels pretty quickly as well as your reduce your chook stocks, destroy your garden plants and anything else they can amuse themselves with. Working dogs are bred to work and some need to work more than others. Consider this when selecting your pup. I have both Kelpies and Border Collies and have found that there are extremes in both breeds. I have nice quiet and steady Kelpies and I have another who wants to work all day. Assess your workload and pick a pup for the job. Both Border Collies and Kelpies make great active pets but will go stir crazy if left on a chain for long periods without any stimulation.

Once you have the pup you like it is now time to bond it to you. Take the pup around with you and get it used to the strange noises and smells. I let my pups play with the kids and be part of the family. House training and basic obedience, like to wait for their food or to sit and come are great to teach your dog as it gets used to you. Be firm but fair with the pup as it grows, to establish its position in your pack. Ensure everyone in the family is aware of your rules and sticks to them. Inconsistency causes confusion in a young dog. Ensure the family knows your commands and use them.

Keep it away from the chooks though or you will find out how good a sheepdog you've got a little too soon when it catches them and try's to eat them. A sheepdog herds sheep because of its instinct. We have for centuries selected dogs with more and more herding instinct to get the modern sheepdog who has an overwhelming desire to herd. It's not something we can train. It is a predatory instinct that we as humans have selected for and put to good use. We are, in his eyes, the lead dog in his pack and his job is to bring in the

prey for you to kill. Like the wolves in the wild the modern sheepdog is performing his role in the pack. So it is a small step for a dog to go from herding to killing. We need to control that through training, with commands over that instinct as the dog get older. Letting a pup near the chooks, or other poultry for that matter, without our control is a recipe for disaster. Bonding with your dog establishes that lead dog position for you which will be very import when it comes time to train.

Young dogs need a place to sleep and call their own that is safe and secure. Even a young dog can do a lot of damage in a short time if left to its own devices. A pen is ideal with a solid floor. Raised timber floors also work well. Teaching a pup to tether is another a way of ensuring, as it gets older, that it is safe at night. Tie a pup for short period at first with you in sight. Reassure the pup as it struggle to get to you. Gradually increase the length of time on the tether. Short session on a lead also gets a young dog used to being chained out. Ensuring the dog is secure will give your a better nights sleep and keep the nieghbours on good terms.

If you do the research before buying a pup, bring it up well and let him grow up, you will have a the foundations for a life long mate and farm hand who will need no pay only an occasional pat. He will work from dawn till dusk for dog biscuits and ask for no overtime. He will love you no matter what you call him or how late you come home. Spend a little more on a well bred dog, take your time and with a little thought you will be rewarded, that's a guarantee.

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