

Starting a pup for stock work. Written by Simon Leaning

Having done the research and selected the pup that suits your requirements, the time will come when you will want to find out if it has the instinct to work sheep. I am seeking a trial dog but the training is the same regardless of your requirements. I would point out though, that this is just my way of doing things and it is not the only way. I have attended training schools from a variety of handlers and have found what suits me and my dogs. I am also constantly learning. I would encourage you to do the same.

Firstly, don't be in a hurry. Allow the dog to grow a little and give it a name. Teach it to come reliably when called. Have the pup know its name and establish a good relationship with the dog as it grows. I like to introduce a pup to sheep from about three to four months but there is no hard and fast rule. A pup needs to be well grown before serious training begins however. A pup with a good relationship with the handler will start better. But be careful not to have too much obedience type control on a pup as it may be reluctant to leave your side.

When introducing a pup to sheep, set the stage well. The ideal is to have a round dog and sheep proof pen of about 30m circumference. I use dog wire of about 900 high as a pup is unable to escape and it is high enough to keep sheep in. Many trainers have a higher fence up to 1.8m for training older dogs who can jump. A round pen eliminates corners for the sheep to get stuck in and creates a training venue for a pup to learn about pressure and get use to it. A pen such as this is easy to build using star pickets or permanent posts and is well worth the efforts.

For the first introduction, it is important to get five quiet sheep, not lambs. Sheep that have been worked by dogs before are best and sheep that will not take a dog on or challenge it. Young Merinos are most suitable and steer clear of Suffolk or other British breed sheep for the early training as they tend to be far too sticky and hard to move. The pup must win all the time in this early stage. You could also start a pup on ducks. Khaki Campbells or Indian Runners are also excellent for starting a pup, but don't stay on them too long. And be aware of the consequences. Egg production will reduce.

What we are using is the pups hunting instinct. Sheepdogs have been bred over many years by selecting the best individuals to breed from to get a dog that has the desire to work, is easy to train and has the stamina, strength and intelligence needed for stock work. It is important to work with that instinct and allow it to develop to get the best from a dog.

The objective of the first few lessons is to get the pup interested in working stock and have him balance them to you. No commands or instructions are required at this very early stage. Just encouragement and plenty of praise.

In the round pen have the pup on a 3m light cord clipped to it's collar and slowly lead the dog around the sheep. A keen young pup will be excited at the prospect but don't worry if

the dog is not interested as it will develop as the dog grows. The intention of this very early introduction is to get the pups interest. Walk the pup around and increase the excitement by moving the sheep and stirring them up. I use a plastic leaf rake to block the pup and ensure I am in control. If the pup starts to show interest, drop the cord and allow the pup to go around the sheep. My pups have a strong heading instinct and a fair amount of eye. What that means is that they are keen to get on the opposite side of the sheep and bring them to me and use their eyes to stare down the sheep and control them. These two traits are what I was looking for, as a steady approach is better for trialing. If your pup is keen to get to the head you will have an easier start.

A young keen pup may do many things. Some may just ignore the sheep. Some may run at them. Some may try to escape. Some will just stare at them and hold them against a fence. All of these reactions are fine and nothing to be worried about. The dog is too young to shoot just yet. Two or three minutes is all that is required at this early stage. If a pup is not interested don't worry, the penny will drop with time.

These introduction sessions will need to be repeated a number of times. When introducing my pups, I showed them sheep a couple of times a week for six weeks. I say nothing just allow the pup to learn about sheep. Very short sessions with lots of encouragement.

I look for my pups first reaction to be an arc around to the other side of the sheep and come in. I encourage them to start that way by controlling my release. Good pups that are keen to get at the sheep will take some catching when the session is over. The cord allows you to retrieve your pup, the rake allows you to keep the pup from diving in and to move the sheep if necessary. I always finish while they are still keen to work and am careful not to let them get bored. Some patience here will pay dividends later. Don't overdo the training.

Remember the object is to have your pup on the opposite side of the sheep to you. As we progress in training we will teach a dog to drive, but it is important to allow the heading instinct to develop and to not have conflict with a pup at this early stage. Once a the pup is starting to show interest, walk backwards and allow the pup to bring the sheep to you, moving steadily and work into the open area of the round pen.. When pup is well grown, balancing comfortably, holding the sheep and fetching them to you, you can progress to a larger yard. Take one step at a time and ensure your pup is proficient before moving on.

Pups will show interest in working at different ages. Some may take up to twelve months before they are ready. Be patient and if you have done your research in selecting the right pup, you will be rewarded.