

TRAINING A DOG FOR HGH

THE BEGINNING OF TRAINING

By Ulf Kintzel

The decision when to start to train the dog is not easily answered. It depends on the dog, the handler (skills and experience) and also on what else the dog is supposed to learn, in what other fields it is supposed to get trained.

Personally, I start my dogs at the rather young age of 7 to 9 months. However, for several months the dog has "light duties". Nothing is expected yet. The dog mainly works while the sheep are grazing. The more demanding parts of the dog's jobs, like moving the flock on a road from one graze to another, the dog learns much later when the dog is definitely older than one year. It is possible to teach more demanding jobs at a younger age but the problems that usually go with it show at a later time. In my opinion, it is not worth it to rush the training at the expense of problems that might occur later.

The training starts with teaching the dog to stay on a border. In real life there is usually some sort of border between two different fields. That is the whole purpose of teaching the dog to work on such a border in order to be able to utilize unfenced pastures right next to fields with crops. However, these borders are sometimes too difficult to teach a beginner dog. Therefore, all kinds of borders that are easier can be used such a tire track, a plowed furrow, a track in the snow, a farm road, the edge of a harvested corn field or a mowed border. The latter I use also for my lessons since I need suitable borders every day for those people who train their dogs with me.

The sheep will be put in a graze, the dog will be put on the border. The dog is on a long leash in order to control it. It is important at this point that the sheep make no attempt to leave the graze or a second - trained - dog needs to be in place in order to control the flock if needed. I find it important to point out that the dog, for at least several weeks of the early training, is not actually needed. In other words, the dog receives its first lessons in situations that don't really require a dog. This way it can be avoided that the dog will be put into situations that it cannot possibly handle due to its inexperience and young age. Much later the dog will be put into situations where it actually has to truly tend the sheep. I also choose grazes where the dog has to work just one side and does not have to cover the end or even the opposite side of the graze and I also avoid grazes where the dog has to cover long distances due to the fact that the sheep are very spread out. The key idea is that nothing is truly expected from the dog yet. In the following paragraphs I will explain why the dog already has enough to deal with.

The dog will be put on the border right next to where the sheep are grazing. It is not good when the sheep are more than 5 yards away from the border because a great distance might not trigger the inexperienced dog's drive.

The dog will be given the command "Border" or "Furrow" (the German command would be "Furche"). The handler walks up and down inside the graze with the dog staying on the border,

the dog will be encouraged with praise to patrol the border. However, every time the dog tries to come off the border, every time the dog steps off the border into the graze it will be corrected. This puts an enormous stress on the dog right from the beginning because the dog a) doesn't understand yet what the procedure is, what the correction is for and b) receives the correction before it actually can truly kick into drive.

If the dog is weak one can avoid this partly by letting the dog run for a longer period of time along the fence line of a fenced pasture for sheep with the sheep close to the fence. This way the dog can develop drive without being corrected. However, once the true training starts the stress is still there while the dog's drive may not be "killed" that easily anymore.

Once the dog understands the concept of a border - which usually takes just one or two lessons with GSDs from herding lines - the leash can be dropped and the dog may move more freely. Now it is important where the handler positions him-/herself and the crook - the shepherd's tool to guide, signal and correct the dog - come into effect. The handler should stand somewhere in the middle of the flock and a few yards away from the border in the graze. From this position it is "easiest" for the handler to guide and correct the dog if necessary. In addition, the handler is most visible for the dog.

The dog will be encouraged to work the parts of the border where the sheep are closest. The training goes at this point along a very fine line. On one hand the dog is supposed to be in place, not letting the sheep out of the graze. On the other hand, if the dog makes just one step into the graze it will disturb the sheep and it will be corrected because it is supposed to learn to leave the sheep alone as long as they are in the graze - no matter how close the sheep are to the border. This puts an enormous amount of stress on the dog, especially since it learns the rules as it goes along. Since it receives more corrections than usual it helps to praise the dog more than usual as long as it has done the tasks correctly. With time the dog figures out the system, will be enough under control to be encouraged without trying so hard to charge in anymore and the dog will start to work more lively and freely again.

That would be the beginning of the dog's herding career. As long as the dog is quite young I do this for several months. I let the dog gain experience, drive and confidence. I make sure that this very basic and very important training works quite well before I move on. Many training mistakes that I have seen in dogs - including dogs that I trained in the past - have occurred because the dog was taken further in training too soon. The dog wasn't ready, the needed experience and control not gained.

On the other hand, problems can also occur when the dog is kept too long on the border and does other tasks too late. Why that is I will describe in my next article.

Since I believe I am writing mainly for an audience that does Schutzhund I would like to add something for the Schutzhund folks: If you consider doing herding in addition to Schutzhund I would suggest to start with the prey work **before** you start with herding. That can be done at a much younger age when playing with the dog. Once the dog takes the puppy tug or whatever else is used very well one can consider starting herding. If the herding is done first you might experience that the dog is not the playing kind of dog anymore, might not like to work in prey.

However, once the dog has learnt it before the herding it won't forget. In addition, I would not suggest to do a protection work lesson shortly after a herding lesson. It works the other way around.



A clear border like this mowed border helps the dog to get the idea rather quick.