

TRAINING A DOG FOR HGH

BRIDGE

By Ulf Kintzel

The HGH course includes a bridge. Moving sheep over a bridge is for many shepherds a frequent occurrence.

The risk when going across a bridge with several hundred sheep is that those sheep in the middle of the flock might push the sheep that are on the outside of the flock into the water. Sheep that carry a full fleece run the risk of drowning. In colder seasons sheep that fall into the water run the risk of catching pneumonia. To prevent this from happening the dogs are placed at the entrance to the bridge; one on each side. If the shepherd is using only one dog it will be placed on the more dangerous side of the bridge. This decision has to be made by the shepherd.

In competition often no real bridge is available. A substitute must be set up. The bridge should not be wider than about 4 meters. 6 points are maximum available for this exercise. The dog should be placed at the entrance to the bridge (see picture) and should stand there until the sheep have crossed it. After that the dog should follow over the bridge. If any sheep try to go around the bridge the dog should either on command or independently move these sheep back in line and then should be placed again at the bridge until the sheep have crossed. Sheep going around the bridge is very likely when a substitute bridge is being used. That is less of a concern when the shepherd crosses a real stream or river. However, the risk of sheep falling into the water is, of course, greater.

The position of the dog at the bridge is very important. If the dog is standing too far into the bridge it narrows down the bridge and may force some sheep to go around the other side. If the dog is standing too far off the bridge it leaves possibly enough room for a sheep to try to go through in between bridge and dog. The dog should also not be facing straight forward. Instead, it should be placed in an angle. This way the dog is able to look back. Also, the sheep see “more dog” since the dog is being seen from the side and not from the rear. That itself reduces the risk of sheep trying to go around the bridge where the dog is standing.

Even more important than the position is that the dog stands steadily. A hyper dog, a dog that looks like it will move any moment and possibly charge into the flock or a vocal dog will make it very uncomfortable for the sheep to pass it. They might even want to refuse to do so.

When I start teaching the dog how to stand on the bridge it must already know a “Stand” command. I take the dog on leash and approach the beginning of the bridge (the railing) in an angle – never straight! The command I am using is one that I use in other situations

as well: “Komm Ecke” (“Come corner”). (Out west people like to use the command “Come pick” but I would not want to say this publicly.)

When the dog arrives with nose to shoulder at the railing I give a stand command. The dog’s body should be very close to the bridge. It should be almost touching it. After the dog stood a while I always go with the dog over the bridge using the command “Komm rein” (“Come in” or “Come through”).

Another way of teaching the dog the correct position is to stand the dog in a distance of a few yards and in an angle to the bridge. The handler stands at the bridge with one knee where the dog will be placed, holding the crook in the opposite hand creating a funnel and using the commands that are described above. Important is that the dog indeed learns a new command. A common mistake is that the handler says commands like “Right here” or “Come”. The obedient dog will do just that – try to come to the handler. Often times, the handler corrects the dog in such situations because he/she meant something different than what was said. That leaves the dog uncertain what to do. In my view dogs deal with uncertainty about the handler the worst. I am sure they would “prefer” a good correction when they know what it is for rather than not knowing what the heck the handler actually wants.

When this exercise is done often enough and correctly one will see that the dog will pick up the pattern and will stand all by itself at the beginning of the bridge when it is called “Komm Ecke”.

After the dog stood at the bridge for a while I start going across the bridge and call the dog over the bridge using the command “Komm rein” (Come in). At first, I simply teach the pattern that the dog goes over the bridge and not around it.

The next step would be teaching the dog that it may not go around the bridge. I like to put the dog on a long line, place the dog at the bridge and move completely across the bridge. Then I stand far enough over on the side that the dog is tempted to come directly to me which would be around the bridge. Now I pull the leash gently repeating the command “Komm rein”. Basically, I leave the dog no choice then to come across the bridge.

Most of the training can be done with or without sheep. If sheep are used from the beginning of the bridge exercise it is important that the handler focus on the dog and has somebody else available to lead the sheep or should practice in a situation where the sheep don’t need to be led at all. A panel that is put up somewhere in the pasture where the sheep move around will do. A gate is also a good opportunity to practice. So are many other situations. One will just have to be a little creative.



Anton vom Quasliner Moor is standing correctly at the bridge at our HGH Herding Competition until the last sheep has crossed the bridge.