

TRAINING A DOG FOR HGH

THE INSTINCT TEST

by Ulf Kintzel

When choosing a dog for herding my approach depends on whether I select a pup from my own breeding or if somebody comes to me with an adult dog and wants to have an evaluation in order to find out whether or not it is worth it to start herding.

When I choose a pup from my own kennel "vom Quasliner Moor" I take it almost for granted that the pup has herding instinct, meaning that the pup will be interested in sheep. Therefore, I pay way more attention to the general characteristics and traits such as willingness to obey, confidence, insensitivity to noise etc. Sex and color are not critical traits for my selection. I stopped doing a puppy test on sheep (lambs). The information is of little or no value to me. At the age of about 6 months or so the dog will occasionally see sheep in a safe environment. By safe environment I mean safe for the sheep and the dog. The sheep are usually in a pen set up with electric nettings. The energizer would be turned off. This way the dog gets to be close to the sheep without actually reaching them. This way I avoid the dog chasing or harassing the flock. On the other hand, the sheep, which don't necessarily respect the dog at that age and especially the goats which respect it even less, cannot reach the dog and cannot hit it.

Often, the dog that age doesn't show much interest in the sheep when seeing them for the first time. However, the interest and the drive increase from time to time, from exposure to exposure to the flock. Once I feel the dog has developed enough interest and is old enough (at least 8 to 9 months old) I go ahead and start the training which is not very demanding since the dog hasn't matured yet.

I approach an instinct test for an interested dog owner a little differently. Usually, I have to test adult dogs. In addition to the herding instinct test I also have to try to evaluate the other traits and characteristics of this dog in order to determine whether or not it is worth it to start the dog in herding.

Among GSDs I have found not many that weren't interested in sheep. The same holds true for other so called tending breeds such as Belgian Sheep Dogs with their varieties (Gronendal, Tervuren and Malinois), Briards and Beaucerons. However, I have found many weak nerved GSDs no matter if from so called show or working lines, no matter if they were bred in this country or imported. This puts a far greater limit on the training. Drive can be built as long as it's there. Weak nerves don't change. One can only lift the dog to a somewhat higher level by making the training successful and enjoyable for the dog. In stressful and demanding situations you are back to square one.

For this test I have basically the same set up. The sheep are in a pen, the dog is usually - at least at the beginning - on a long leash. The movement of the flock inside the pen

usually triggers the instinct, the dog starts getting interested. Soon it starts showing which dogs have a natural tendency to patrol (which I prefer) or which dogs have a stronger tendency to charge through the pen into the flock and chase. The latter dogs have herding instinct too. Patrolling, gathering, charging, chasing, biting and killing is all part of the same instinct. Any of these dogs can be trained to do herding. However, the parts that are not appreciated need to be controlled and the instinct needs to be channeled in a way that the dog learns how to express the instinct in an appropriate manner. I just would like to repeat that the other parts need to be CONTROLLED in order to succeed.

Besides the interest in sheep and besides seeing in what manner the dog expresses its interest I can also see general strengths and weaknesses. It is actually quite obvious whether I am dealing with a confident and friendly or aloof dog - which I prefer - or if I am dealing with an insecure or even suspicious dog which will make the training more difficult. Again, the evaluation of these traits is as important as the herding instinct itself.

I also try to get an idea how willingly or unwillingly the dog obeys. The more willingness there is, the better it is. Difficult dogs are those which, even next to the handler, reply to every command: "Make me". Those dogs may work for a sport where the dog is never or seldom worked at a distance. This behavior is not appreciated in herding since the dog is almost always worked at a distance.

There is one thing that I cannot determine during the instinct test unless the dog has obviously severe problems: How far can I get with that dog, are the nerves good enough to take the stress and deal with the demanding situations? Very often a dog appears to be confident in normal every day situations. However, the training is not for dogs that easily fall apart when under stress. They show different signs of weak nerves at a later time such as avoidance, nervousness or anticipating the task in a nervous manner.

When asked what I feel is the most important trait in a herding dog I have answered again and again: good nerves. I have not found another sport yet, and here I would like to include Schutzhund, where the dog has to prove how it is dealing with stress and pressure.

However, I would like to back off a bit. For many herding is a sport as well. Even within the dog's limits it can be trained to perform the tasks and maybe even be titled. If the dog does not bring enough to be titled as an HGH it may still be good enough to perform in the AKC herding program such as the AKC C course where the dog tends 20+ sheep instead of 200+. After all, for most herding enthusiasts it is a sport and not a way of making a living.

The instinct test is therefore in most cases an evaluation or better an educated guess of how far one could go in herding with the tested dog.