

INTRODUCTION TO YARD DOG TRIALLING

GENERAL INFORMATION:

Yard dog trialling is a competition that simulates the work that is undertaken in a normal working day of a sheep dog. There is a set of rules that the competitor must understand & is used by the judge to determine a score.

There is much to learn when you first start out in Yard Dog trialling. However, one of the most important attributes is to have patience.

If you are someone who is expecting to walk out on to a course & win trials straight away then this may not be the sport for you. There is a very wise saying, "**You must learn to lose before you can learn to win**" & this saying is very appropriate when choosing to compete in this sport.

Not every dog will be suitable for yard dog trials but most dogs that have natural sheep working ability & will obey commands can be trained to compete in yard, utility & field trials. This alone does not guarantee the dog will be good enough to trial & of course some will be more skilled than others. It is up to you to bring the skills out.

You must be prepared to put in time & effort. Unlike some other sports, a little bit every now & then will not be enough. There is also the physical exercise required by you the trainer & competitor. You must also keep **your dog** in good condition.

When first starting the training of your dog it is essential that the sheep you use are quiet & dog friendly. Scared, flighty or wild sheep will only create more problems & possibly cause many bad habits to be picked up by the dog & the handler. It is much easier to have your inexperienced dog obey your commands on quiet sheep.

TALK TO EXPERIENCED TRIALLERS

Get to know experienced & successful yard dog trailers. Go to training days. Go to as many trials as you can & watch, listen & learn. With yard dog trials there are very few courses that are set up the same, however each should have a combination a variety of the basic elements – pick up, force pen, race, draft, truck or trailer, a bridge or a ramp & a put away. How these are included in the course is up to the course designer. The course may include additional elements as well but must be built so that the majority of competitors can complete the trial in the set time.

Sheep can change dramatically throughout the trial & the way you work your dog will have to change with them. Not only do you need to learn how to train your dog but you will also have to learn how to "read" the sheep so that you a step ahead of them at all times.

THE RIGHT TYPE OF DOG

The breed of dog that is suitable for yard dog trialling is very diverse, however the predominant breed is the kelpie. Border collies are the second most popular breed for yard dog trials & occasionally there are kelpie/border collie crossbreeds & coolies competing.

It is wise to choose your pup or dog from someone who is a reputable working & trial dog breeder whose dogs are known to be good workers. The majority of dogs that compete in yard dog trials are first & foremost kept for stock work. Trialling is their relaxation.

TIME FRAME

The time it takes from purchasing your pup to having it ready for its first trial varies greatly. There are many factors that are taken into account. No matter when you think you are ready to start a young dog in its first trial you must be certain that it is mature enough physically & mentally to cope with the pressures that can occur during a trial.

- 1 Don't be too impatient & trial a young dog too early. Take it to the trials & let it experience the different sights & sounds of the surroundings & at the same time teach it to relax in unfamiliar situations. There is no set age recommended for the dog to start trialling but most experienced competitors agree that too much pressure on a young dog early in its career can be detrimental.
- 2 Don't try to work sheep before the pup is ready. Some pups seem to want to work as soon as they are weaned while others may take weeks or months before they "switch on". Even pups from the same litter may take different times to show an interest in work. Forcing a young dog that is not ready can cause bad habits & turn them off. If they don't show an interest don't be disappointed give them a little time away from the training sheep, then try again. Remember, training a dog to use its natural instincts to become a skilled working & trialling dog requires time & patience
- 3 Don't attempt to push the training of a young dog beyond its capabilities. Eg If you can't stop your dog or call it off the sheep while in a round or small yard then don't attempt to take it out with sheep in a large open paddock.

BUYING THE RIGHT PUP OR DOG

No one can guarantee to sell you a pup that will be a champion trial dog. Every pup in the litter is an individual & may have inherited a combination of different traits. Buying a pup from a reputable breeder of working/trial dogs where both parents are

proven trial dogs will give you the greatest odds. However, many good trial dogs are from parents that haven't trialled but who are very good working sheep dogs with excellent genetics.

A pup or dog whose pedigree & genetics are unknown, that is purchased from a local farmer may be a good farm dog but may be a disappointment in the trial arena.

Working ability in the pup or dog you choose is the first essential requirement, but temperament is a very close second. The breed of dog is important for the type of trialling you wish to do. Conformation is also important but colour, ears & type of coat will not affect the dog's natural ability to work or trial. You must have a good bond with the dog & that may be hard if you don't like the dog for some reason or another no matter how superficial this may seem.

BASICS BEFORE SHEEP

No one likes or wants an unruly dog. One of the most important things you must have in a trial dog is control. Most of the work you will do with your dog when it is trained is off the lead & at a distance away from you. Without control of the dog this will be impossible. Basic **obedience is a must**. You are the leader & the dog must trust & respect your commands.

SIT Begin this exercise as soon as possible, the earlier the better. Teaching a pup to sit before you place its meal down is a great way to start as it soon learns that unless it sits it won't get fed. Even a puppy of eight weeks can be taught this exercise.

COME Call a pup by name & having it come to you may seem like an easy thing to do but you will find that when it comes to calling a dog off sheep at a later age your earlier training will be essential. A pup must learn to come to you every time it is called.

ON LEAD Your pup must be taught to walk beside you whilst on a lead & not be jumping about or pulling you along. Later in its training it will be taught to walk calmly & obediently beside you without a lead, so the basic respect of the lead must be taught at an early age.

TYING UP The life of a trial dog requires times when they will be required to be tied up & remain clam & quiet, so it is important that they learn this as young as possible that being tied up won't hurt them. It is common for a young pup to wriggle & object when they are first tethered & restricted but aim to make the experience as less traumatic as possible. It is recommended that they first become used to being tied up at home before trying it at a trial.

STAY/STOP The basic obedience lesson of **STAY** leads into the command of **STOP**. Some triallers prefer not to have the **STOP** command taught too early & others like to have the command taught before it works sheep. Either way, in trialling it is important that the dog obeys the **STOP** command.

FIRST LESSON ON SHEEP

Most people give their pups a look at sheep. It helps gauge whether the pup has any interest to work. At no time must a pup be put in a situation where it can be hurt, intimidated or frightened by sheep as this will have a detrimental affect on the pup. By the same token if a young pup shows an interest to work sheep that isn't an indication that it is mature to begin serious & rigorous training. If you are inexperienced in training a trial dog make sure you seek some advice from an experienced & successful handler in regards to how much contact & training the young pup requires with sheep. Remember all pups are individuals & some may take longer to show a keen interest. If the pup shows good progress make sure you don't overdo the training as this can turn the pup off its work. Two to three times a week for five to ten minutes is enough early in the training.

BALANCE

Balance is a term used to describe the dog holding the sheep to the handler. Hypothetically, imagine a clock face & if the handler stands at 6 o'clock then the dog should be at 12 o'clock with the sheep held in the middle. If the handler moves to 3 o'clock then the dog should automatically move towards 9 o'clock or vice versa. A trial dog must be able to balance the sheep to the handler before it is ready to progress to the next stage. Some pups may naturally balance the sheep to you while others may not even put you in the picture. Either balance is essential whether it is in trialling or working at home.

STOP - SIDES - OFF

These are commands that the dog must obey to be a successful trial dog.

The pup must **STOP** when asked. It may only be required for a few seconds or it could be for much longer, but when it is commanded to stop it must do so immediately. Many a trial has been lost when it has been asked to stop but it continues to creep on to the sheep or refuses to stop at all.

The pup will need to be taught to go to left & right **SIDES**. The terms used for these commands are varied. Some examples are: left & right – back & over – go by & come here. It doesn't matter what you prefer to use as long as you consistently use the same one for the same direction. When training some handlers also use a whistle to teach their pups respond to the different commands. Others may use arm or body movements or a short stick or polly pipe. However, what ever is used to assist it must not influence the movement of the sheep.

The **OFF** command is used to teach the dog to move back off the sheep to allow the sheep to settle & not be hassled. An example of this is when the handler is opening or closing a gate or setting up for the draft section. It can also be an asset when a dog is holding the mob of sheep in the larger yards or paddock.

THE TRIAL

Prior to the trial commencing the judge will walk the course with the competitors & explain what they would like to see achieved & also the sequence for the draft. The time for a trial depends on the complexity of the course & is set by the judge in conjunction with the trial convenor. The course is to be set up so that the majority of competitors can comfortably complete the course in the set time. The times are usually between 10 & 15 minutes.

COMMENCING A TRIAL

The handler stands at the casting peg with the dog released & behind. The sheep are released from the holding pen & the judge will indicate to the timekeepers when the trial begins. Usually, there is a bell rung but sometimes there is a variation to this. Once the bell has rung the handler then casts the dog around the sheep to bring them to the next section of the course. The judge during the talk will have indicated when the handler can move to the next position.

OPENING & CLOSING GATES

When opening gates the arc of the gate must be clear so that it does not push on to the sheep. When closing gates all parts of the sheep must be across the line of the gate before the handler moves to close the gate.

HOLDING A POSITION

During the judge's talk, handlers will be instructed where the judge would like the handler to stand. They must stay in that position until the section of the course being worked is completed.

BACKING OR WORKING A RACE

In Yard Dog trialling every course will include some form of race work. It may be a drench race, a draft race or a race or ramp on to a truck or trailer & it can be a combination of them all. It is essential that a pup or young dog is taught to work a race. Most yard dogs will work the race by backing but others may work the outsides of the race. Both are acceptable but whichever method is used once the dog starts to work it must continue to use that method throughout the trial. A combination of backing & working on the outside of the race is not allowed. Some young dogs naturally enjoy backing & will take a very short time to learn to go up to the head of the race & then drop down & move back through the sides of the sheep inside the race. Other dogs take some time to confidently run up along the backs of the sheep & then drop down to move the sheep forward. If you have not had experience with this type of training, speak to an experienced & successful handler.

BARKING

In Yard Dog trialling it is handy to have a dog that will **BARK** on command. Barking is not essential but controlled barking can be useful. It is not recommended to have a dog that barks all the time. From a very young age teach your pup to be quiet when it barking is not required.

WALKING FROM GATE TO GATE

When walking from one gate latch to another, in most instances the dog must clear & hold a pathway so the handler can walk in a straight line without walking through the sheep.

JUMPING OUT

It is important that to teach your dog to stay in the yard or race that is being worked. If you do teach your dog to jump across fences make sure it is only on command.

PUT AWAY

The put away is the final section of a yard trial. The dog must put the sheep into the pen & wait until the handler closes the gate. The trial is completed when the gate is closed & both the dog & handler are still on the course.

CONCLUSION

Yard Dog trialling is an exciting & challenging sport. It assists in increasing the skills of both the handler & the dog & applies to many of the every day jobs undertaken by sheep dogs & their handlers. This brief synopsis only includes the basic principles of training for yard dog trialling & is intended for anyone thinking of taking up the sport. To increase your confidence & knowledge go to trials, speak with experience handlers, observe how they work their dogs & sheep to achieve a smooth flow throughout the course & attend training days when the opportunity arises.