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Covalle and Lacamas: A tale of two trials

Albyn Urndak

The third annual "Wild 'N Woolie" sheepdog trial staged by Lorlei Judd was held the weekend of July 27 at Covalle, Utah, a rural village east of Salt Lake City. A few weeks later, the seventh annual Lacamas valley sheepdog trial, in Camas, Washington, just about Portland Oregon and put on by dairy farmer, Lynn Johnston and his wife, Allison, followed suit.

These trials have no direct connection to one another, but taking them together in a single report seems useful because they offer contrasting highlights in terms of the layout of the field and course, the nature of the sheep and the shape of the judging.

The Covalle field was long and narrow, though the outrun was a challenging 400 yards. The first day's trial followed a left hand drive, while day two's course turned to the right on the drive. The second day's trial opted for a pure drift with the second drive panel, because irrigation equipment left near the fences had somehow otherwise posed a hazard to the dogs. The pull through drive panel, however, faced the handler squarely, instead of being angled, and from the post looked entirely flat, making it difficult to judge the length of the outrun to it. Normally, however, if one makes a tight turn at the drive away gate close to the post, it may look slightly longer. The panel itself faced further left, but otherwise the same as the first drive panel, with an outrun of the same length. To have negotiated the panel successfully, the sheep would also have had to turn the drive away panel exceptionally wide, thus defeating the intention of having the handlers executing tight turns.

The handlers were split up for the last day of the field, furthermore, stood not too far from the spot, to the handler's left, estimate a drift as a drift with the second drive panel. Because the sheep most likely had spent the night there and were also unusually reluctant to leave the next morning. Nevertheless, the two horsemen who spotted the sheep did a fine job of holding them until the dog could lift.

Yet on the second day, loosier eyes had great difficulty at the lift preventing the sheep from breaking back, while dogs with stronger eye, of which there are far fewer these days, did a better job of holding the line. The sheep were fresh veering of older ewe lamb, reminiscent of an occasional wether in mind. This was usually the case, and any display of eye, since it evokes threats from predators they encounter on their own. But, the second day's trial remained the same, and except for the field, the strong eyed dog with power and presence, ironically, was what most was missed.

I say "ironically" because many have come to believe that the "eye" makes a dog weaker, particularly for long range sheep, whereas this trial showed that "eye" is really a neutral quality. If a dog "has eye," or makes him or her look stronger, particularly where a great deal of field pressure brings it out more fully, while the dog is weak, or lacks presence, "eye" may make it appear tentative and weaker still. Dogs with

Covalle strong eye, in this instance, showed power and control, and making productive use of the tension thereby created.

This difference was true well on the turn around the post, which remained in proximity to the exhaust pan. Loussier eyed dogs often had great difficulty making the turn, with the sheep frequently breaking back toward the drive panels. This was caused not just from the pull of the exhaust pan, but partly by handler error, in which handlers, in order to make sure the dog covered fully, allowed them to over flank. Stronger eyed dogs needed to make only short half flanks, while remaining near the rear of the sheep whose wide peripheral vision easily kept the dog in view. In this way the strong eyed dog could hold the line against the strong pressure from the exhaust as the sheep turned fluidly around the post. And it could do so by taking very small, deliberate steps.

Finally, the shape of the judging tended to be curious. Two judges officiated, one on each of the two trial days. Scores were low both days, with the second days scores falling especially low below par, while the first days judging conformed in the main to handlers' expectations, with perhaps one or two exceptions. The breakdown of scores by phases of work was not provided, so one had to ask the course director for clarification if one had a question about an unusually low score, which could provide an unnecessary awkwardness; at virtually all US trials such breakdowns are routinely posted to the score board as a matter of handler right (what it may become necessary, for instance, to lodge a formal protest or to correct a computational error).

The laving graces of this trial were nevertheless first that the sheep were of an exceptionally high quality, freshly drawn from the commercial range flock, and which posed a very worthy challenge to the dog; and secondly, the handlers' dinner provided by the host were exceptionally delicious, with a great variety of food and generous portions, and virtually the worth the trip in its own right!

The Lacamas trial, reported on in previous issues of ISN, this

year was virtually the opposite of the Covalle event. The trial field was broader and wider, with a 625 yard outrun, even as it narrowed significantly near the top, and with the holding pen standing directly behind the spot point instead of to the left of it. Despite the field's largeness, significant pressure remained, though they differed in kind from those at Covalle and remained more subtle. Although the sheep came from a commercial flock, their quality was clearly inferior to the Covalle lot. If the judging at Covalle appeared somewhat dull, at Lacamas it displayed perhaps an excess of nuance.

The judge at Lacamas, an old timer with old fashioned notions about how to judge, as he himself observed at the handlers' meetings, and with his own, distinctive, standard, offering a contrasting to the relatively less experienced "neovibes" at Covalle. He holds the view, for instance, which he described to me on a different occasion, that although the outrun and lift are allocated separate sets of points, and so formally considered different phases of work, both should be judged separately. I have to say, I do not think that judge judge the lift in relation to the outrun, so that if the lift occurs off line, the outrun itself must be touched as well (once the place at which the dog stops determines the direction of lift). But at Lacamas merely stopping the dog at the point of balance or giving it a steady command as it turns in toward the sheep he would have treated as a re direct and so subject to deduction, either on the lift or the outrun phase, even when the lift itself might have been perfect.

This judge, in other words, seeks to minimise handler commands and to let the dog work freely as much as possible, so that he could judge the quality of its work uncluttered by the handling. In the shedding ring, for instance, only one command per point (including "heave"), pointing to the shed sheep after calling the dog in might be viewed as over commanding and might result in extra points for the deduction.

On the Open field itself there were two significant random changes which made which made the furious curiously difficult. The first ran on the handlers' right, directly on the exhaust pan, with the handlers being dressed in red. And judging by the sheep with the right that their scores were higher, they tended, too, to displace the higher scoring dogs of the first day, who had held their places at the end. This meant that dogs running the second day of trial 1 ran on no run sheep, and so gained an advantage over their counterparts, at the top on day 1 should either have been marked for sorting or used to form the first day's trial, all where the sheep, of course, by that time run already, though for different purposes. This time, however, introduced a different set of complications to their handling. These sheep, moreover, would have also gone through the Proteus (novice/intermediate) and Nubian (novice/lame) examples, and only used indeed.

Altogether, however, the hosts, Lynn and Allison Johnson, put on a splendid trial and many thanks go to them and their helpers for all their hard work, and for the sumptuous handlers' dinner they provided. For the Oregon Sheepdog Society's annual meeting. Scores may be obtained from the trial's website: http://www.losvt.com

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Andre writes that he has a new stick, engraved with the names of all the dogs which are special to him

Andre Cammizzato

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*WEST PS BCC 122 2001
*EPE 003 2007
*IMBRC BCC 216 2005
*PELO BCC 241 2006

On the other side of the trailing stick, inscribed with the names of "all the dogs that have been important in my life", Andre says that he has a new stick, engraved with the names of all the dogs which are special to him.