Meeker Sheep, Past and Present
Albin Urdank looks at one of the great American trials

lose the collapsed sheep, they had successfully separated from the unmarked, because the sheep reacted to the panic pressure with peculiar wildness, breaking to the shed sheep which had been left at a reasonable distance as not to draw the attention. The only handler actually to pen (with both dogs), Dennis Gillingham, had moved the unmarked off to an unusually distant furrow, before having the sheep start to the pen. With a sheep bolted unprovoked as the gate as closed it, slamming itself into its no. 10 yard rope. A typical Meeker sheep should be to spectators. Another handler could have been a larger prize (now $20,000). But still, something of the old charisma has been retained.

I puzzled over this great result. I had been told on an earlier occasion that the trial's new sheep supplier handled the sheep, with the use of a dog, before delivering them to the trial, unlike the old supplier, who used to bring them down straight from the hills without benefit of sheepdog, by dogs. Then on my way back from dinner on the second evening of the preliminary round, I passed the parking area at the lower end of the field, where the sheep spent the night, and saw a volunteer with two dogs working the flock to be used the next day; the dogs were running wide, keeping them in a tight circle, while splitting around like a top, winding them up. This action was clearly intended to break the sheep, to make them tighter, so that they would not be too much of an untameable. The sheep had started out too heavy, because they had been handled by the supplier in the normal course of delivery, and seemed to need assistance in eliminating the wildness of the old Meeker sheep, which had become the trial's historic signature. This breaking would account for their easier movement in the early morning runs, not being as heavy as they might have been otherwise, and their progressive wildness as the warmth of the day loosened them further (I never got too hot to follow).

I queried the appropriateness of what I had seen to a director present, who pointed out that this wasn't his trial, implying that while an event sponsored by the Handlers' Association, the host had carte blanche to manage the sheep as he saw fit. The volunteer also mentioned that this had been a breaking run, and later told me that she had permission to do so with the clear understanding that they were going out the trial's instructions.

This breaking of the sheep had unintended consequences which (re)acted a deceptive impression of the difficulty of the trial, to the public, in favour of the softer dogs. By "soft" I don't mean "weak", but only dogs whose presence do not make the sheep feel more lightly and therefore read as less of a threat; the trial sheep are not to break as hard as they might otherwise in the presence of a harder dog. The dogs do seem to be "soft", in the way that the sheep are managed after delivery, typically, they are moved from the holding pen in the north-east corner, down the field on the right side, and out to the lake area where they spend the night. The movement down the field creates a track on the right side of the lake, because sheep leave an odour, which will attract other sheep to follow, and allow the herder to follow the sheep by walking down the same path they had drawn there, especially when under pressure from a dog on one side and the herder on the other. But the sheep are not to be pressed too hard, and the handler has to be careful that the sheep do not bolt, which can happen if the handler is not careful.
dog, the weaker the draw, relatively, and the easier therefore for the
dog to hold the line, however imperfectly. Now this practice of
moving the sheep down the line and overhauling them
in the parking area had always been followed at Meeker, but
when the sheep are artificially broken, as apparently in current
practice, the draw becomes that much stronger, particularly for
harder dogs, or dogs with strong "eye", which range ewes find
especially threatening. These dogs in other words are placed at
a disadvantage as a result, and yet may be the more worthy dogs
from the standpoint of testing the true working ability of the
dog, or finding the best working dog, which historically has been
the purpose of the sheepdog trial.

Apart from not breaking the sheep, it would not have taken
much to manage the sheep upon arrival in such a way as to
minimise, or indeed neutralise altogether, artificial pressures on
them. One could have housed them overnight in the old holding
pen, in the NW corner of the field, used when Gus ran the trial,
after allowing them to graze generally in the field, and then move
them in the morning to the new holding pen in the NE corner of
the field. Not only would the sheep have no notion about the
location of the parking area in the SE corner, but the draw to the
old holding pen would be cancelled by their presence in the new
holding pen from which each packet would be set for trial.

Once at Coalinga, CA., I mentioned to the judge, Jack Knox, how
I thought working the range ewes before trial just a little might
make for a better trial, since these were particularly hard sheep,
and I noted that this was increasingly the practice at trials that
made use of range ewes in order to provide some approximation of
shepherding. I recall his reply vividly, and it convinced me
instantly, because it made intuitive sense: the right thing is to
take the sheep as they come to trial and to let them sort the dogs.
This in my view now should also hold true for the condition of the
trial field: let the natural conditions and complexities of the field
operate unimpeded, without human tampering, once the course
itself has been set. The late Max Bywater from northern Utah once
described to me how in planning a trial he had solicited advice
from the late Ralph Puffer about how to prepare the Columbian/
Rambouillet crosses he was going to use for trial; they wintere in
the mountains and had never seen a Border Collie. Ralph, he said,
told him not to work the sheep, but just to walk his dog on leash
through the large flock two or three times, so that they could see
what a dog was, and to leave it at that, and let nature take its
course. Sensible advice.

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**Obituary: Geoff Billingham**

Geoffrey William Billingham, successful sheepdog trialist
and talented artist, died in November, aged 81. His funeral
took place at Roucan Loch crematorium, Collin, Dumfries.

A patient man and a quiet handler, Geoff had a great sense of
humour and a feeling for nature which was clear in his sketches of
sheep, dogs and wildlife and the finely engraved shepherds' crooks which he made.

Born to a non farming family in Northampton, Geoff took to
farm work when he left school and moved to the North East of
England after the war. He worked at Church Farm, Redmarshall,
near Stockton for over 20 years, eventually becoming farm
manager. He started trialling during that time, and also entered
ploughing competitions and won prizes for hedgelaying.

Geoff moved to Otterburn in Northumberland and then
Wolsingham, Co Durham, for a short time before crossing the
Border into Scotland to work for the Duke of Roxburgh at
Bowmont Valley in 1973. He stayed for 13 years until faced
with redundancy in 1986, when he took on a small hill farm
to Tweedhopefoot, near Moffat, and ran it as a working farm,
with a tearoom. Sheepdog demonstrations were staged for the
public.

Geoff was a successful brace handler, most notably with litter
sisters Jed and Trim, with which pair he represented Scotland
three times at international level, coming second with the
were 10½ years old, Geoff won the Scottish National Brace
Championship with them, going on to take the Brace Champion
of Champions at the Royal Welsh Show and the BBC TV's One
Man and his Dog brace class. Geoff had previously been in the
English team with their mother, Meg (T Watson's Jeff, R Short's
Gay) who finished fifth in the International.

Geoff's first trial dog was a blue bitch, Marrick Jed, with
whom he won his first (English) National team place when the
bitch was 11 years old. She finished third in the Supreme.

Geoff had a great affection for Jan, his "bionic bitch", bred
by Les Morsion of Redesdale. He claimed she was the fastest
thing on four legs. Jan won three trials in one week, but she
died early in her career and never had the chance to fulfil her
potential.

After Geoff and his dogs featured in a global advertising
campaign for whisky, the National Geographic Society made
a documentary on his life as a hill shepherd and the start of
the new venture at Tweedhopefoot. His proudest moment was
when he was presented to Her Majesty the Queen at Broughton
when she opened the Borders General Hospital.

Geoff retired to Peebles, but as his health failed, he moved
back to England, to be near his two oldest children in Peterlee.
Missing the Scottish countryside, he returned north and moved
into a nursing home in Biggar and died two years to the day
after his return.

Geoff is survived by his three children Alan, Lynn and Geoff
Jnr, three grandchildren and four great grandchildren.