Snowbirds on the Border

The eighth annual "Snowbirds on the Border" sheepdog trial, hosted by Ron and Jennifer Ewers, took place on Sunday, November 10th, at the Warm Ranch in Los Angeles, California, about 50 miles east of San Diego. The term "snowbirds" refers to the travel-trailer set who migrate every winter to the warmer south. In this case along the California/Mexico border, and, as it happens, in proximity to the trial site. Hence too the "Border" in the trial's name.

In fact, the border is so close that in travelling to and from Campo from the Paso y Pizza motel, a few miles west

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Ranch, a charitable facility owned by the Catholic Church. That trial course was exactly one out of 450-500 yards across rolling terrain, and in which only a minimal draw to the exhaust pen was made. The dogs were thus able to shift the venue to their home ground, where Jennifer runs a dog-handling training facility and where its practice field doubles as a 40-yard training pen.

This field is smaller, perhaps 250-300 yards for Open and an estimated 150-200 yards for the pro-novice and nursery classes. Its smallness is compensated for, however, by complex terrain in which dogs have to negotiate an imposing hill (depicted in the photo). The sheep too were set for the Open on the downward slope to the handler's left, and shadows tended to obscure their presence, making the cast a virtual blind outrun. The pro-novice and nursery classes had sheep settled at the top of the hill, which the handler had to see them, but in this case, the dogs had to climb the steep sides of the hill to arrive at the spot point. In either case, the complex terrain offered a serious challenge.

The complexity of terrain was further complicated by the strong draw to the handler's right. To get a successful run, one draw right, and a draw by toward the exhausted handler's right, even though the exhaust pen was tucked in the back corner, a draw left, and a draw by toward the holding pen became a factor only on the drive-away, as it made a tight turn to the cross-drive very difficult, with dogs tending to face past the panels back toward the spot point, often independently of pressure from the dog. The cross-drive ran parallel to the draw from the exhaust pen, not directly on-line toward it, thus challenging the dog appropriately to hold the line against its pressure and making for a challenging hurdle.

Hauling the draw to the holding pen and the fast draw back to the holding pen at the lift, but it also made the lift peculiarly difficult, with dogs usually taking a long time, because of their resistance to changing direction, and to stuff into and sometimes scattering the sheep in order to get the fetch started. A "Hard" lift seems to have been wanted, however, by the dogs who took their position against the holding pen's draw. One handler got disqualified when she sent her dog before the sheep had touched upon the hay, as he swerved, and the judge wouldn't worry about whether sheep were spotted precisely on the hay, as long as they graced in proximity to the spot point, and would score the draw accordingly. The decision to disqualify for sending the dog "early" was thus probably taken in compliance with the course rules, set by the course director, who has always firmly monitored their enforcement.

Placing range sheep on hay in this instance seems to have defeated the true purpose of the lift, which occurs at its best when the sheep are in a group in the hay, and when the sheep move forward smoothly at the point of first contact, assuming that the dog's movement is towards the handler, (see SDS rule 5.2.3, LIFE). Having the spotter hold the sheep, with the aid of a strong dog, would have served equally as well as placing them on hay, with the added benefit of preserving the lift's integrity according to SDS standards.

The range sheep used were lambs which came from a combination of Shropshire, Suffolk, Dorper, or Suffolk crosses rather than the more typical Ramboilleau used at this trial in past years. Suffolk, though having a stubborn temperament like that of its name-sake, is subject to the rule and perhaps chosen for this reason.

Snowbirds alwaystravel in an anomaly in the way they moved, commented on by handlers who ran dogs both first and second day of trials 1. Because of the large number of entries (83), the handlers were allowed two day periods, or what they referred to as the great majority of entries running the first day of each trial. The sheep used the second day of the first trial, which ought to have been the best day, as the first day's lot, with each handler getting an un-worked packet of five, appeared heavier and harder to move than those used the day before. This remained true even when adjusting for the effects of using lambs, which are always leaderless and, up to this point, presumably lacked any direct experience of dogs. (Range sheep brought to trials are usually expected to remain un-worked beforehand).

Not only did the sheep appear heavier, but they could also break into groups, and, after a day or two under the pick-up truck, the sheep would show no sign of improvement, even to the dog's effort to turn them onto line, even as the dog went to head. For instance, the dog might have had to apply pressure, only to be stopped in the lift at the first part of the fetch, because of sheep resistance to leaving the hay, including facing the dog. They might have started moving with a more normal pace during the middle part of the fetch, with the dog rating them correctly, but then break into a dead run, off-line, as they encountered the draw either on the downward slope to the left or from the pressure of the exhaust, which badly affected the turn around the post. At this point they might run well past the post or turn to fight the dog as they resisted going around it, in which case precision gripping on the nose might be called for.

On average, the sheep the second day of trial 1 moved unusually slowly regardless of the quality of the dog behind them, but they tended not to break and run for softer dogs whose lighter feel did not compound the pressure coming from dogs. This remained true even when they pushed hard, as this succeeded at best in getting a normal pace for their efforts. A generous time allowance meant that an unusually slow moving dog had a good chance of finishing the course regardless of its pace. On balance, the trial's high-pressure venue favoured the softer dogs, as such venues often do.

The sheep from the first two days were merged for the start of the second trial and worked more smoothly and uniformly the next round. The second trial added a single to the pen and shed with a maximum possible score of 110.

By wide consensus among the handlers, the judging took place fairly and consistently throughout, and all appreciated the hard work involved. One curiosity, however, was the high formality with which the shed, pen, and single seemed to be scored. The "Sweep" sheep taken "out of hand and for the shed and correspondingly the last sheep also taken on the head for the single were well scored, but should be re-gathered to the centre of the ring and brought in a straight line to the mouth of the pen. This standard follows traditional conventions, although not consistently throughout, although SDS rules do not sanction it.

Many thanks to Ms Diana Deal, from Caldwell, Idaho, for good judging; to Ron and Jennifer Ewers for staging, with its large number of entries, this logistically difficult trial; to Leon Harris, their workman, for spotting the sheep to hay; to the youngsters from the 4H agricultural club for the work and to the many, many, numerous volunteers among the handlers who helped in various ways to make this challenging event an overall success.

Final results:
1st place: Ewers, Ron and Jennifer (without judge)
2nd place: Ewers, Ron and Jennifer (with judge)
3rd place: Harris, Leon
4th place: Young, Tyler
5th place: Harris, Leon (with judge)

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