Testing for weakness

Albion Urdank

The Terry Parrish trial field showing the clump of trees

Two sheepdog trials held a week apart in the Western US, this Fall 2013, offered interesting contrasts in terms of location, course set-up, and sheep used, but in one crucial respect they produced ironically a curiously similar outcome.

The first trial was hosted by Terry Parrish of San Pasqual CA, near San Diego, at a large field located in Valley Centre, a slightly urbanized rural environment just north of her training facility, “Action K9 Sports,” the weekend of October 25-27. Ms Parrish has been active with Border Collies, as trainer, handler and trial host for decades, and is largely responsible for having introduced and developed the sport of sheepdog trialing in lower Southern California. The second trial was staged by the High Desert Sheepdog Association at Smith, Nevada, near Reno, a remote farming village far to the north of the Valley Centre trial, and not far from the Oregon border, the weekend of November 1-3. This trial was offered by a new sheepdog association and in contrast to Ms Parrish’s experience, most of the handlers associated with it, while themselves running in Open, were fairly new to the task ahead.

The first trial had an unusual shape to the course, with the gather set off to the right hand side of large field, and with an outrun of approx 500 yards. The drive panels and pen, on the other hand, were set to the left hand side of the handlers’ post and away from the gather point, so that upon completion of the gather, the sheep had virtually to be brought onto another field.

The reason for this anomaly was that the field containing the gather was in fact made narrow by large clumps of trees that effectively acted as a boundary (see photo below). Technically it was possible for the dog to leave to the left and go around this clump, but the handler would have lost sight of the dog altogether and the dog its sheep. The handler therefore could not correct the dog, and in the two cases where it had been sent in this direction, the dog never found its sheep. Thus most handlers sent to the right, but in doing so faced two problems immediately.

The outrun to the right had to be exceptionally tight, with the dog hugging the fence line, in order not to disturb the sheep at the top, while the sheep were left to stand freely without hay or spotter to hold them against the draw from the holding pen, which was located above them at not too great a distance and slightly to their left. In other words, the draw from the holding pen, which was marked, emanated from the handlers’ left but was deliberately not off set by a spotter holding the sheep (the spotter remained in place but didn’t hold the sheep). Properly speaking, one should therefore have sent to the left, in order to cover that pressure, but was prevented from doing so by the clump of trees. Sending to the right was thus a lesser evil but doing so disadvantaged the dogs, often fatally, because of the inevitable tightness. This was a deliberate contrivance.

The dogs which succeeded in lifting under these circumstances tended to be the softer ones whose physical presence did not impress the sheep enough to make them break away from where they stood. In most cases, however, the sheep felt disturbed enough to break back to the holding pen before the dog could complete the turn to the lift. There were more disqualifications than one could count, even though the judge offered numerous re-runs. Marie Mains, for instance, in what was not unusual, was given two re-runs. In both instances, the dog hugged the fence line and went deep but disturbed the sheep nonetheless, because of its natural physical presence, such that they broke back to the holding pen, forcing a DQ. Ms Parrish had spotted the sheep and one could hear her shout over the radio in frustration after the second debacle “the dog caused that!”, presumably to pre-empt the offer of yet another re-run (she did this sort of thing with some regularity in what seemed to me interference with the judging). But actually the dog hadn’t “caused that”; it was the fault of a wrong-footed set up deliberately contrived to defeat the dog in the name of offering a challenge.
The sheep used at the trial, moreover, were Ms Parrish’s school flock, brown ewes of indeterminate breeding, possibly from barbadoe lines, though many seemed woolly. They were quite dog broken, moving like slugs for softer dogs, while running and breaking from dogs with presence even when pressure was minimally applied. To pen them, one needed only to open the pen gate and they walked in virtually of their own accord. The only real challenge they presented was at the shed, since they tended, as school sheep, to clump tightly together, making the opening exceptionally difficult to create, while regrouping quickly behind the handler as the dog tried to come in, as excessively dog broken sheep tend to do. Softer dogs, whose presence the sheep felt minimally, had better chances of success.

The High Desert Sheepdog trial was of an altogether different complexion though, for different reasons, it produced a similar outcome of a high rate of dog failure (the first day, 30 runs produced only 9 scores and the second day witnessed even fewer as the sheep grew more difficult). The course was shorter than at Valley Centre, about 300-350, yards, more compact and square, though with complex terrain which fairly challenged the dog.

Handlers had the real option of sending to the left, though most chose the right side, for reasons that were perhaps similar to the Valley Centre trial. Although it was more appropriate to send left, in order to cover the pressure back to the holding pen, the outrun, while deep, was made problematic by a high burrow that crossed the field and so blocked the dogs’ view of the sheep. It was not inordinately high, and my Kept, at least, negotiated it smoothly, but there was a real risk, as happened with my Bert, that the dog would be turned in prematurely and cross its course. To send to the right successfully, dogs had to cast unusually wide in order to counter the strong draw back toward the holding pen.

The terrain on the right, however, sloped downward and tended to bring the dog in tightly. So dogs which ran out of contact, actually benefitted from what normally might be considered a fault.

The sheep used were fresh range yearling ewes with little if any experience of a dog and used only to being worked in large numbers (see photo below). They were Rambouillet/Merino crosses, bred largely for their fine wool. They were highly sensitive to pressure when worked in groups of five and when subjected to being penned. Needless to say, they were not broken in any way before trial which is as it should have been (the sheep should be accepted as they come to trial and be allowed to sort the dogs without pre-trial tampering, as Jack Knox once wisely opined to me) But rather than running from the dog, they were hard to lift and easily turned to face it even after the fetch began; when doing so, they simply stood their ground rather than actually fight, and this unnerved many a dog. Those which succeeded in lifting could not keep much of a line, especially on the fetch, and on the drive-away, the dogs invariably lost them altogether. Very few actually were able to make the turn onto the cross-drive, and those which had often lost them in the direction of the exhaust pen. The difficulty lay not so much in the sheep themselves but in the placement of both the holding and exhaust pens which created excessively strong draws on a relatively compact field.

The holding pen was situated only a few yards from the spot point, and these sheep, not accustomed to being separated in small lots, eagerly broke back, despite the presence sometimes of as many as five dogs and handlers trying to hold them. In the first round they were held to the spot point by hay with a spotter and dog backing up. But most dogs couldn’t lift off the hay, and so the second day no hay was used initially. This proved more disastrous, because the sheep broke back with even greater determination and force, and none of the dogs seemed strong enough to manage them. Finally hay was re-introduced, and the sheep were ring-fenced by five to seven handler-dog teams to allow a lift to take place. The exhaust pen, however, was placed at the very periphery of the course, almost on line with the handlers’ post. Fetches when they did occur were radically off line and in the direction of the exhaust pen as a result. The draw grew worse the second day, as the sheep now knew where that pen lay.

This was quite frustrating to the trial hosts for whom this trial was the maiden event of their new association. Had the holding pen been placed further back, amidst a clump of trees and bushes, for instance, and a relay system devised to bring out the sheep, spotting would have gone much more smoothly, and the draw back would have been eliminated. The exhaust pen, furthermore, needed simply to be located much further away from the actual course in the adjacent field. The debacle arose out inexperience, not a lack of goodwill of which there were gobs, and a failure to appreciate the effects of field pressure on sheep, especially of the range ewe variety, which is a very common enough fault. No doubt the next effort of this very worthy association will have absorbed the lessons of its maiden voyage. All the ingredients for a smashing trial are there: great sheep, open fields amidst a genuinely rural farming community. It could even provide a venue for the National Finals.

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**Obituary: Myra Soden**

We lost Myra Soden at dawn today, and Border Collies everywhere lost a real friend. In her life, Myra rescued hundreds of Border Collies, and dozens of mixers, taking them in, working with them, easing their fears, and finding the perfect forever homes for them. She was well respected in rescue circles across several states and she didn’t stop with dogs. She once found funding and help to capture an entire feral cat colony, have them spayed or neutered, notched and returned to their territory.

Myra had a quick temper, a sharp tongue, a quick wit, and a heart of gold. If you were her friend, there was nothing she wouldn’t do to help if you were in need; and she didn’t stop with just her close friends. For example, when she lived in Kentucky, she helped all of her Hispanic neighbours with their interactions with a government whose language they were just beginning to learn. If you weren’t her friend, she pulled no punches. She brought out love in some people, and exasperation in others. She was a truly unusual human being who will be sorely missed by both two and four legged creatures. On her Facebook page, she pasted the following quote "Your beliefs don’t make you a better person, your behaviour does!"

She asked that all of her dog-related possessions should go to the Kentucky Border Collie Association to be auctioned for the club. Please send any other contributions in her name to the KBCA, care of Annemarie Holland, 219 Cooke Road, Paris, KY40361, USA

*In Myra’s name
Take care
Polly Matzinger*