

California dreaming: the 26th Porterville Spring Trial Albion Urdank

The San Joaquin Valley Border Collie Association, located in California's Central Valley, an agricultural district which serves as a major breadbasket to the nation, held its 26th annual Spring sheepdog trial the weekend of April 4-6, making the event one of the oldest continuous sheepdog trials in the U.S. Nearly fifty Open handler-dog teams ran in two one day trials on Saturday and Sunday, while the lower classes took their chances on Monday, running on the Open field, though at a shortened distance. The Pro-novice or intermediary class (wherein only one member of the team, either dog or handler, might normally run in Open class, or where neither handler nor dog have yet done so but remain too advanced for the novice class), attracted a larger than usual number of entries; the nursery class, more typically, ran far fewer teams. All classes were judged creditably by Bill Orr from Eaglerock, Oregon, the state just north of California.

The course was set on a field normally reserved for cattle grazing, and so there was much high though patchy grass covering the field throughout. The terrain on the south side of the field remained uneven, with hidden culverts spread about, while on the north side, the field opened onto flat sandy ground which led up to a low, shallow lake, where the dogs could cool themselves after running. Both Saturday and Sunday began with cool and crispy mornings, but the weather warmed gradually by late morning, and in the early afternoon became positively warm. The combination of dry warm air and tall grass tended to absorb sound, making it difficult (though not impossible) for dogs always to hear their whistle commands. (The best runs of the day came generally in the crisper early to late mornings). Whistle tones carried well when handlers pitched the sound low and sharp instead of high and loud.

The length of the outrun stretched a modest 350-400 yards, with the sheep spotted about 75 to 100 yards from the holding pen, which, covered with black tarp, was located directly in back of the spot point. The relatively short distance from let-out to spot point often resulted in sheep turning back to the holding pen at the lift; the dog sometimes caused this by stopping off balance or by its tightness at the top; or sometimes the sheep found the dog's mere presence daunting enough to cause them to break back, even when the dog had stopped correctly in position. The closeness of holding pen to spot point also caused some wider running dogs to miss their sheep and run to the back of the holding pen instead; sometimes they found their sheep with the help of a recall whistle, but usually they retired after an interval of searching. The exhaust pen lay off to the handler's right at a fair distance below the second drive panel (the drive began first to the left and then moved across to the right), but still served to draw the sheep off line as they passed the fetch panel. The pressure was significant enough to make some dogs with eye draw up short when sent to gather on the right, and frequently dogs either failed to turn the sheep around the post or had great difficulty in doing so, because of the too strong draw from the exhaust pen.

High pressures at the top and toward the exhaust were no accident but something of a club tradition, and indeed have become a signature of club trials generally (there are two other trials, in the Fall and early Winter, at Lindsay, just above Porterville, and at Coalinga just to the south). This spotting practice probably stems from the early days, when at club trials, sheep were simply released from the back of a stock trailer, rather than spotted by a handler and dog helper, with the trial dog expected to pick up the sheep wherever they landed. Very likely the club's directors took this method to be part of the challenge of the course. But to this writer it seemed to bias the

outcome in favor of dogs whose presence the sheep felt more lightly, and who therefore did not offer much in the way of additional pressure as they lifted. On the other hand, such dogs seemed at a disadvantage when turning the post, as the draw from the exhaust tended to overwhelm their lighter touch.

My own personal preference is for a minimum of pressure both at the top and near the exhaust, as a way of creating an even playing field. It would have been possible, for instance, to locate the holding pen at a distance off to left and behind the trees, so that it remained both off course and hidden, and to spot the sheep by using a relay system, operated by two handler-dog teams. Similarly, one might have set the exhaust pen further from the trial course, toward the back of the field, in order to minimize the draw. I saw such a relay system for spotting sheep in operation at Becki Maloney's sheepdog trial last summer at Kearney Creek in Washington state, and it worked brilliantly. One could cite other examples as well, such as Jack and Kathy Knox's November trial in Butler, Missouri, and the trial at Greystoke, Lancashire in the Autumn of 2003 (at which I ran a dog). Similarly, the sheep, at all of these trials, were exhausted down a long corridor, either settling at the end of it or moving out into a large field, where they remained far from the trial course.

The sheep at this Spring's Porterville trial were two year old Rambouillet range ewes who had been recently nursing, and who all carried large bags under them, which frequently trailed closely to the ground. These are the sort of sheep typically used at the Porterville Spring trial, and traditionally they've been notoriously tough, partly because as range ewes they are not typically accustomed to being worked by dogs and are used to large open spaces, not smaller, more compact fields with a great deal of pressure; because having just recently weaned their lambs, they remain alert to "predators"; and because temperamentally Rambouillet tend as rule to be feisty (and they are large). A dog with even a small bit of eye will draw them, and they will frequently attack head-on, unprovoked, particularly in pressure situations, as around the pen. In the recent past, the club's use of such sheep had produced some handler discontent, and entries for last Spring's (2008) trial fell by noticeable margins. Last Autumn (2008), the club used a board member's farm flock instead, consisting largely of hair sheep (that trial was judged by Scotland's Michael Shearer). Entries were back to normal levels and the scores were much higher than usual. But this Spring's trial saw the return of the Rambouillet, possibly because the board felt that, as a matter of principle, they do really offer a proper challenge and test of the dog, and they are the sheep the club has traditionally prided itself on using.

This Spring's Rambouillet, however, worked more cooperatively than in past years. In the first trial, when the sheep were fresher, there may have been the odd facing of the dog when drawn by pressure, yet the sheep never attacked; and once lifted, they tended to run hard on the fetch, with little provocation from the dog, in contrast to previous years when their heaviness made their movements slower. In the second trial, the sheep never offered a challenge to the dog and moved smoothly around the course, although occasionally a single ewe might make a break for the exhaust area when the group rounded the second drive panel. The sheep may have been prepared for trial, in contrast to previous years, perhaps to ensure that handlers and dogs would have a positive experience. The judge, during the handler's preliminary meeting, indicated that he had tried the sheep out with his dog, and described in broad terms how he thought they would work, joking that they would offer a special challenge at the second drive panel

(and actually that panel was hard for handlers to judge; what seemed to be off-line on the high side at the cross-drive was actually dead on-line). In years past, when the sheep came to trial particularly heavy (one year the first 15 dogs couldn't lift them), the club would have the sheep worked lightly in groups of 10 to loosen them a bit.

Something similar may have been done this year. There were many good runs, especially in the second trial where a single was added to the shed and pen, and still ample time remained to finish the course, which ran to 11.5 minutes (normally because of the feistiness of the sheep, even in the second trial, finishing usually posed a problem for many). That being said,

of the teams that went to the post in the first trial, 20 retired (RT) and seven were disqualified (DQ), with only 19 earning scores. In the second trial 20 of the teams earned scores with 23 retirements (RT) and two disqualifications (DQ). This high rate of failure, however, was caused more by the difficulties and complexities of the field and the layout of the course than by any challenge offered by the sheep. (Scores may be found at the club website: www.sjvbca.org).

Handlers came away from the trial with good feeling, and no doubt this will bode well for future trials staged by this old and venerable club.