

Miles Covered – One Sheep Producer’s Journey

Light of early morning sparkles off dew covered grass. All is quiet except for the sounds of sheep munching the remaining grass before winter snows cover everything in a frozen blanket of white. Among the sheep Sara walks contently, steam rising from the cup clasped snugly in her hands, as she contemplates the future of her flock. The mental to-do list lengthens in correlation to the emptying coffee cup. As she drains the last of the needed liquid caffeine from her cup she glances to Miles. Laying at the gate her new partner is watching, waiting for the smallest indication that it’s time to work. Once the Cartwright house is quiet, Adam and the kids off to school and work, this is how Sara prefers to start her day. Her sheep production journey began years ago.

Sara grew up on her family farm near Fort Wayne, Indiana. She fondly remembers her childhood, lessons learned working beside her dad and the love of sheep has stuck with her. Her dad raised Hereford and Hereford cross cattle and commercial white faced ewes, a mix of Polypay and Columbia. A traditional management system was used; early shed lambing and grazing during the growing season.

Now on her own place after ten years away from the area, life has her circling back to those lessons she learned as a child and to a flock of her own. Growing up, marriage, and children enables her to see things a bit differently. With an empty nest looming in the near future Sara feels this is the time to grow her flock.

Like many small flocks, Sara’s flock was easily managed with rattling a bucket of corn until the flock grew to over 50 ewes. Rotational grazing with electronet worked well except for the days the flock needed to be moved. Taking down the fence, rolling it up, then replacing the fence around fresh grass required letting the sheep loose. The real challenge of convincing ewes to move calmly back to the confines of the fence then began. The whole family was beckoned to pasture to complete the job at hand. Kids running, yelling, waving arms, and two adults giving contradicting directions. Stressed sheep and arguments resulted from the chaos. Raising sheep became stressful instead of an enjoyable endeavor. The flock became more than Sara could easily manage alone. The stress of having family members assist wasn’t a great option, even so the kids would soon be gone making extra hands hard to come by.

Selling lambs directly off the farm Sara had more customers than she had lambs. She wanted to expand her flock but management changes needed to happen first. A knowledgeable hired hand that was also affordable would need to be found. Sara, a long time subscriber to *sheep!*, had been reading about stock dogs thinking that might be a viable answer to her dilemma. She enjoyed dogs and had the time at home to train one. ‘Couldn’t be that hard’ she figured. “Not ever seeing a stock dog help with chores, I had an extremely rudimentary idea of what the dog would be capable of and what I wanted in a dog,” Sara remembers.

Sara, fond of Australian Shepherds, searched for a pup from ‘working lines.’ Finding a litter that sounded good she bought a pup, Leo, hoping he would provide the needed assistance with rotational grazing. Sara used Leo with hit or miss success. She decided getting help to train Leo would teach her how to communicate getting him to do the things she needed. Making an appointment for a lesson Sara and Leo made the four-hour trip south to Clearfield Stockdogs.

“Actually, seeing a demonstration of trained dogs working stock, I began to envision how I could use dogs at home making my life easier. Denice’s dogs made it seem so simple; gathering sheep and moving

them anywhere they were asked. In no time at all, with no stress, the flock was moved," Sara remembers.

Leo, like many dogs, wasn't sure what we wanted him to do with sheep. He wanted the sheep still, holding them along the fence. I wanted him to move sheep to Sara, which we were able to accomplish after some time. Sara needed to understand how her position affects the dog and 'feel' the correct way to move. The best way to do that was to work a young dog of mine. Jess, an 8 mo old Border Collie, was working simply from natural instinct. The only commands she knew was 'sshhh' to go to sheep and 'Here' to come to me. Jess naturally keeps sheep in one group, changing her position balancing sheep to the handler. Anywhere Sara walked, Jess puts herself in position pushing the sheep toward her. Sara was impressed with the amount of sheer desire and instinct that made moving sheep easy with Jess.

Sara returned to attend the first in a series of three Success with Stockdogs Workshops. This SARE(Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) supported workshop brought 18 livestock producers and their dogs to the farm to work with clinician Jack Knox. Jack grew up in Scotland, spending the majority of his life as a shepherd. He travels the US and Canada holding stock dog training and handling clinics. Rather than teaching dogs to obey commands when working, Jack believes that by using the dogs mind, its natural ability and instinct you gain a competent partner able to make the right choices for you and your stock without being told every step. Correcting the wrong bits, leaving the good stuff alone allows you use the dog's skill set and their strengths to your benefit.

Having a wide array of producers at the workshop; cow/ calf, grazing stocker cattle, small wool flocks, commercial sheep flocks, and poultry production along with their dogs; Australian Cattle Dogs, Australian Shepherds, Border Collies, as well as an English Shepherd and a McNab enabled the participants to witness the differences in the way the dogs approached and worked stock.

Sara had many 'AAHHaa' moments that changed her perspective and thoughts about stock dogs. "I had mistakenly thought any herding breed could work stock with the right training. I viewed stock work as an obedience activity rather than an activity driven by instinct. The clinic proved some dogs are very capable of working stock, others simply don't have the needed skill set. Actually, this was very freeing to me. I no longer felt like I needed to do things to keep my dog interested in stock or that it was my lack of knowledge inhibiting the dog. Seeing Jack work every dog removed the variable of each individual's knowledge and experience from the equation, leaving just the dog. Either they had the 'want to' and instinct to work stock well or they didn't." Sara commented the level of instinct and natural ability was evident in individuals as were the differences in the way the breeds worked. The Cattle dogs and Aussies moved sheep by physical pressure, "it was body driven and unsettled the sheep. The Border Collies moved sheep with 'eye' and their presence enabling the sheep to remain calm." During the clinic Sara worked both Leo and a young Aussie. Both dogs showed a bit of interest but that interest wasn't sustained.

"I enjoy many things about Aussies but they simply don't have the depth of ability and demeanor that puts the sheep at ease that I want and need in a working dog. No amount of obedience training on stock could ever replace the instinct and knowledge bred into a good working dog."

Sara wanting to take advantage of the learning opportunity asked to work a dog of mine. This enabled Sara to focus on things she needed to learn to work a dog rather than trying to keep the dog interested in sheep. "The clinic convinced me that if I want help with my growing flock I need a dog that really

wants to work and knows stock. I also need a dog working in a way that calms the sheep rather than adds stress. A trained dog with experience would be the best choice enabling me to learn from the dog while putting him to use every day. The dog could teach me and my sheep.”

The three-day workshop enables participants to gain more insight and experience each day into what is needed to work a dog on stock. Jack has been working stock with the help of dogs his entire life. Knowing how to communicate with the dog is second nature to him. Using tone, position, movement, encouragement and correction he is able to make huge strides forward training a dog. It looks simple when Jack is doing the training, it really is far from simple.

Sara returned home from the clinic convinced that an experienced Border Collie to assist her with the daily management of her flock was the way to move forward. Much quicker than Sara anticipated Miles was working beside her. “There is a learning curve for all of us – me, my sheep and Miles. Things didn’t go exactly as I envisioned, we hit road bumps. We have lots to figure out yet. Sheep that are not used to being worked by a dog and a handler not sure how to work a dog or even what to ask will add challenges but I am excited about the possibilities.” Within minutes Sara was hooked. “Miles is already a huge help. He made my life easier day one and continues to do so each day.”

Sara says a trained dog with experience was the right purchase for her and her flock. She feels like the purchase price was well worth the immediate help Miles provides while also teaching her lessons about sheep and stock dogs that will be useful in the future. Sara says, “I am money ahead, there are less headaches. Miles is more forgiving than family members. I am able to sort out the problems since he is trained; if it is me, the sheep or the dog not understanding. I don’t believe it’s possible to train a dog using it’s instinct until you have years of experience working with a dog and stock. There are many nuances that I need to learn; when to encourage versus correct or when to be quiet waiting on the dog. Even in the short time Miles has been here he is already reduced the stress on the stock and us. Chores take less time and are more enjoyable.”

In conclusion Sara says, “I was at a crossroads. I needed help with the daily management of the flock. I had to find the most cost effective and time efficient way to grow the operation. Miles is the answer for us. He has the genetics and experience that are imperative for the job. I have wanted to transition to an accelerated lambing program, now I believe I have the needed help to ensure success.”

A couple weeks after Miles joined the Cartwright’s, Sara fell and broke her arm. Miles immediately stepped in becoming not only Sara’s legs but her arm that morning. He gathered the flock, pushed them into the electronet. Sara closed the fence, no corn needed. “Not sure what I would have done without him. I can tell you I wouldn’t have been carrying a bucket.” Sara’s husband has stepped in taking care of the majority of chores. Adam was a bit reluctant when Sara first told him her plan to buy a trained Border Collie, no longer. Miles fell right in step with him, the two are enjoying working sheep together. It sounds to me like Miles converted him quickly, seems to be working on the neighbors as well. Currently Adam is looking for more bred ewes to add to ‘his’ flock.

“It’s amazing how quickly things can change. We don’t hardly go into pastures without Miles. I will never again be without a working Border Collie,” Sara says.

Welcome to sheep management with a good working dog beside you.

I haven’t told Sara or Adam but I see a his and hers Border Collie in their near future.

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