

Skilled Employees Working For Room and Board – Stockman Grass Farmer printed 2018

Skilled, enthusiastic labor is hard to come by these days. Could you find an employee who doesn't complain about working from daylight to dusk? One who doesn't mind working in boot stealing mud or complain about one A.M. pasture maternity checks? What would an employee be worth that has the knowledge and experience to do the job well and seldom grumbles? I have found employees that fit those criteria. The real shocker is they willingly work for room and board and a kind word.

As you must have guessed my trusted help is not 2 legged. My help comes in fur covered 4 legged packages, they are working Border Collies. After two decades working alongside these dogs most days flow seamlessly with their assistance. It wasn't always that way, believe me. In the early days of working with stock dogs there were brief moments of brilliance and hope followed by hours of grey hair inducing stress and frustration. Let me share some hard-earned lessons, hopefully saving you from repeating my mistakes.

Where To Begin - Pup or Experienced Dog

I bought a Border Collie pup thinking, "No problem I could train it to work sheep". I hadn't ever seen a stock dog work livestock. I didn't ask to see the parents of this pup work. I was blissfully unaware I was making several mistakes in the first thirty minutes of venturing into the world of stock dogs.

I was not new to working with dogs. Years as vet tech, obedience trainer, dog owner and sheep producer didn't prepare me to select, raise, train and work a young stock dog. I learned the road to working a pup is strewn with struggles that seem to be bottomless caverns followed by huge mountains. At the bottom, when it all goes wrong in seconds, you realize just how deep the caverns are. Patience, commitment and small steps forward are needed to climb the next mountain. Livestock producers tend to reach out asking for assistance only after months, if not years, of frustration and failures. For me it was 3 years before my search began.

Most assume because they selected a Cattle Dog (Heeler), Australian Shepherd or Border Collie... the pup will work their stock. Wrong. Most assume the way they envision a dog helping with stock is the right way, the dog should just "get it." Wrong. Most assume they can learn enough by watching DVD's or reading a book. Wrong. Most assume the dog is the problem when mistakes are made. Wrong again. I have been there, done that.

Simply because the pup is a herding breed doesn't mean it was born with the right stuff (ie. *Instinct*). Nor does it mean it's suited for your stock, your situation or you. How a pup is raised impacts how well it will work stock for you. In addition, how the pup is trained sets it up for success or later problems.

It is easier if you want a sick'em type dog that goes in biting and chasing till the stressed stock hopefully run in the right direction. To me that isn't acceptable. Low stress handling applies to stock dogs just as it does to us. There is a right way to work a dog on stock. Experienced dogs with the training and instinct behind them gain respect and trust from the stock. Having a dog capable of gathering, driving, and sorting stock doesn't just happen. Raising, training, and your dog handling skills all impact your success. The problem is most people buy a pup then a year (or three) into the process figure out they are in over their heads.

"I didn't know what I didn't know," Jeff McAlmond of Windy Ridge Farm in Paris, KY says about training and working a stock dog. "It looks a lot easier than it is. After seven years with my first dog I'm feeling

like I might be caught up to what he knows. I would still be struggling had I not sent the pup for training and attended stock dog training clinics at Clearfield Stockdogs. I was extremely fortunate getting a pup capable of providing the help I need with stocker steers. I have seen many who aren't so lucky. After years of time and money invested in a dog it's tough to admit you would have been better off paying more for an experienced dog. Buying a dog already proven, able to do the needed work, would have enabled me to learn something every time we worked and accomplished a task rather than wondering why I couldn't get my young dog to do what I needed. Most of the time I was the problem, not the dog."

Sara Cartwright of Fort Wayne, Indiana says, "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." Cartwright sought help training dogs she had purchased as pups. After seeing experienced dogs working stock and attending a training clinic she realized, "Some dogs are very capable of working stock, others simply don't have the needed skill set." An experienced dog was located that would suit Cartwright, her family and her operation. "I am money ahead, there are less headaches. Miles(5 yr old Border Collie) is more forgiving than family members when working my flock. Within a week of arriving, Miles reduced the stress on the sheep and us. Chores take less time and are more enjoyable. I had to find the most cost effective and time efficient way to grow the operation. This dog has the genetics and experience that are imperative for the job. Miles is the answer for us."

Fortunately for many, including me, the first pup purchased shows us glimmers of success so we keep trying. The best advice I was given, "You need to purchase a well-trained experienced dog to teach you about working with a dog on stock." I owe more to my first two dogs, Luke and Lad, than I could ever repay. Lad was five when I bought him, he had worked more livestock than I had even seen. Lad taught me more than any person or dog since.

Every pup doesn't end up being good enough to work stock well, many never get to where you want or need them to be. Let me be clear, you will need help learning to communicate with and use the dog no matter how old it is. The advice holds true across the country - no matter the stock, location, or type of operation. Purchasing an experienced dog suited to you and your operation will provide the biggest bang for your buck. You're investing in education, buying a mentor. Keep in mind the purchase of a stock dog, training and care, are all business expenses. Committing to building your partnership with your dog and investing your time and money into a capable dog will begin to pay off day one. The right dog will have you wondering how you ever got along without him/her working beside you. After one week with Miles, Cartwright said, "I will never again own livestock without a good stock dog."

The next article will discuss the most important qualities to look for when selecting a trained dog.

Denice Rackley is a freelance writer who employs, raises and trains Border Collies on her Indiana farm. To learn more go to www.clearfieldstockdogs.com or email Denice denice.r@lycos.com. You can also check out the Success With Stockdogs or Clearfield Stockdogs facebook pages