

Cow Country News

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Stock Dogs Employed by Two KY Cattlemen

As if by magic appearing out of thin air two border collies trot eagerly beside him. Like the three amigos they make their way to the pasture gate. Marco and Polo know it's feeding time, not for them, for the steers. There in the trees, that is what they hope for, a few new steers hanging back from the rest not making the short trek to the feed bunk. Marco watching and waiting for the go ahead, off like he has been shot from a cannon, gathering the stranglers trotting them to the bunk. Always eager for more work, he lays looking toward the cattle.

Jeff McAlmond of Windy Ridge Farm outside Paris, KY has incorporated Border Collies into his feeder operation. McAlmond buys 250 steers in late winter weighing 400 – 500lbs. at local cattle auctions. The steers stay in small pastures for several weeks so they can be observed, vaccinated, dewormed and any other issues tended to while they acclimate to the routine at Windy Ridge. Rotationally grazed and fed a TMR (Total Mixed Ration) reaching around 850 lbs in late summer they are sold going into feed lots to reach slaughter weight.

McAlmond believes working Border Collies are excellent help. The dogs are available 24/7; providing experienced labor, a ride along buddy and a tax write off to boot. They are always willing to lend a 'paw' saving him time and thousands of steps a day.

McAlmond was given his first Border Collie Marco seven years ago. Polo, an eleven month old son of Marco, is just beginning his working career learning the needed skills that will enable him to be a valuable partner. Having always enjoyed a dog's company McAlmond says, "Border Collies actively want to be working partners," which is why he chose this particular breed. "I wanted dogs on the farm that would help with cattle, hang out while fixing fence and curl up in the shop while I worked. Working a dog on stock is a learning process that has taken years. I am just now feeling like I have a few things figured out. Good stock dogs know what to do because of instinct. We need to learn how to communicate with the dog, reading both the stock and the dog's body language. That takes time. You are looking for small signs of what they are thinking; watching ears, tail, facial expressions." McAlmond uses the dogs to assist with moving the cattle to working facilities or when moving to fresh pastures. "When gathering cattle the dogs are far more efficient. They can go into the woods, creek bottoms, and steep hillsides; places that an ATV and Side by Side can't." He also uses the dogs when one steer needs treatment saying it is less stressful on the stock to bring up a few with Marco rather than have to bring up 200 then sort out one.

Slogging through the mud, slipping on ice, trying to gather cattle in heat and humidity, and getting run over takes the fun out of having a cow/calf operation says Kevin Beal of Burlington, KY. "Working cattle is enjoyable from atop a horse, not so much on foot." Beal bought a pup, Chip- a McCallum bred Border Collie, thinking he would replace some of his footwork with a stock dog making it less stressful for all involved. Little did he know that training a stock dog required as much dedication as training cutting horses.

Trying to learn how to train Chip from books and DVD's wasn't working well. Attending several of Bryan Neubert's horse training clinics Beal asked advice on stock dog training. Neubert recommended Jack

Knox since their training methods were similar. Both emphasize using the animals mind and ability to your benefit rather than mechanical training based on strict obedience. Beal has now attended three stock dog clinics with Knox, each teaching him another piece of information about working cattle with a dog. “Most clinicians are very willing to help giving advice if you are sincere about wanting to learn, improving yourself and the dog or horse,” Beal says.

Both Beal and McAlmond took advantage of a unique opportunity for livestock producers interested in learning to use stock dogs in their operations. Success with Stockdogs Workshops is a SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) supported program. The first workshop was held in Nov 2017, two more workshops will be held in Bennington, Indiana; one April 27 – 29, 2018 and the other in fall of 2018. The workshops are designed to educate producers through demonstrations, discussion and hands on individual instruction. Livestock producers are presented with practical information enabling them to decide if a stock dog would benefit the operation, they also gain knowledge and experience laying a solid foundation for all their work with stock and stock dogs. For those wanting to participate with their own stock dog, learning to better train and use the dog, time will spend along-side the clinician. Throughout the workshop practical training of core skills for both dog and handler, low stress handling of livestock and building a sustainable management system with assistance from stock dogs will be the focus.

Demonstrations focus on using the dogs to help accomplish real work with livestock – gathering and moving stock, watching gates, moving stock away from feed bunks, penning, medicating stock, sorting etc. The stages of training starting with a young pup, walking you through several different dogs, ending with a finished dog are also included. Individual skill training includes either beginning stages of training in a round pen or small field or recreating work scenarios that you and your dog can accomplish with the help of clinician. The actual training depending on what is most appropriate and helpful for you and your dog. Not all dogs are at the stage where they are able work in a new environment with stock they do not know. Young dogs benefit from cementing fundamental skills necessary to accomplish chores. Inexperienced handlers benefit most by concentrating on skill building elements that will be added together to make accomplishing chore work seamless once they and the dog are ready for that. Attendees are able to participate with or without a dog.

The three-day workshop enables participants to gain more insight and experience each day into what is needed to work a dog on stock. Knox, born and raised in Scotland, has been working stock with the help of dogs his entire life. He and his wife travel the US and Canada teaching people about stock dogs. Knowing how to communicate with the dog is second nature to Knox. Using tone, position, movement, encouragement and correction he is able to makes huge strides forward training a dog. It looks simple when he is doing the training, it really is far from simple.

“I didn’t know what I didn’t know,” McAlmond says about training and working a stock dog. “It looks a lot easier than it is. I sent Marco to Clearfield Stockdogs in Indiana to learn the basics of stock work. He was trained on sheep then I would work him on cattle, take lessons and attend stock dog clinics with Jack Knox. I learned that the time training on sheep was needed, it allows you to get closer to help the dog in a safe training environment. Training on only cattle is much more difficult and dangerous. Once the dog and handler understand the basics, are working well and ready to work in a larger pasture, making the transition to cattle isn’t difficult. Attending training clinics improves my handling skills and

understanding of what I am seeing when dogs interact with stock. Each day builds on what you learned the day before, or the years before, giving you help with specific skills.”

Beal says the last year of working with a stock dog has taught him several important lessons. The first lesson “instinct is there at birth, you can’t add it later. Working a dog on stock is more involved than it looks, especially when you depend on the dog to think and act independently for the benefit of you and the stock rather than train it mechanically based solely on obedience to only do as you say. Lastly, I learned I would have been further ahead purchasing a trained dog, waiting to train a pup until I knew more. Even with a trained dog I would have needed help learning to work him but the dog would be able to teach me something every time we worked together.”

“The November 2017 Success with Stockdogs Workshop was particularly eye opening,” Beal comments. “The livestock producers and their dogs varied widely. Beef and dairy cattle, sheep and poultry producers attended with Australian Cattle Dogs (Heelers), Australian Shepherds, Border Collies, Shetland Sheepdog, and an English Shepherd. It was extremely revealing to witness the different working breeds on stock. All these dogs had livestock at home. Some had the interest and instinct to work, learning and changing over the three days, making huge strides forward. Some didn’t exhibit much interest in working stock. Many people think that simply having a Border Collie or Aussie or Cattle Dog is enough. The dog will work stock, that is not the case. The instinct to work stock is genetic, instinct and stock sense needs to be specifically selected for when breeding, then it is up to us to learn how to direct that instinct. It would take dedication over a lifetime to learn what has become second nature to Jack Knox. Attending his clinics I am able to benefit from his expertise improving not only my training and handling but also learning to read body language of the dog and stock which is vital. Working stock and using dogs involves *feel*, you can’t learn that from a book or DVD. There are many small nuances in both the dogs and stock that Jack sees enabling him to move to the right position, or say something at the right time, in the right tone to help dogs. I am still trying to figure out the big picture, how everything fits together. Attention to details, anticipate the dog and stock, then know what how to respond is a learning process. The clinics help me to see those details not only when I am working my dog but when others are working their dogs.”

Wrapping up the conversation Beal notes the more training and experience you have the better you are able to read and communicate with the dog. “Better communication and the right training with a dog that has good instincts enables you to accomplish more tasks in less time with less stress for the livestock, the dog and you. The Success with Stockdog program provides the opportunity to move a few steps closer to my goal of a partnership with Chip built on trust and respect using his instincts and intelligence to manage my cattle in a low stress manner.”

For more information on the Success With Stockdogs Workshops visit www.clearfieldstockdogs.com, Success With Stockdogs Facebook page or email denice.r@lycos.com

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