

Eyeing Other Breeds

I believe dog lovers float around the dog world like mingling at a party. You work your way around, visiting with everyone until you happen upon that one person that makes you stop and engage in fascinating conversation. That doesn't mean you didn't enjoy meeting the other guests and conversing in lively conversation – it just wasn't captivating enough to hold your attention.

Well, I believe dog lovers do the same thing. They appear to wander from one dog to another until they find that one breed that is so captivating that they never want to leave it. At least that's what I did. I grew up in a hunting hound family, graduated to working bird dogs and culminated with herding dogs. My training experience began with confirmation and basic obedience, then hunting field trials and now herding field trials. The breed that has captivated me and became my breed of choice is the Border collie. Part of that is my appreciation for any breed that has withstood the test of time and maintained the talents of its specific purpose and is used today for that purpose. I find nothing more beautiful than watching an animal perform for the purpose of its breeding whether it is a cutting horse or a herding dog.

In general, the herding breeds share several common characteristics; the first being that of a high level of intelligence. Although they all bring their particular strengths to the team, they all can be taught to do the five maneuvers necessary to complete a stockdog trial. Some dogs are natural fetchers, whereas others are natural drivers, or tenders. Border collies are gathers that are wide working in comparison to other breeds.

Eye is a development of a self-checking tendency based on the stalking phase of the canine hunting pattern. The dog is sensitive to the flight "bubble" around the stock and will show a tendency in varying degrees to balance "vertically" (toward the stock) as well as "horizontally" (side to side). This self-checking tendency helps the dog "read" the stock in situations where slight movement can be critical.

Some of the herding breeds are considered "strong-eyed" and work in a stalking manner with an intense gaze approaching their prey in a lowered crouching position often fixing their attention on a small group or an individual showing precision in reacting to the balance point of the group or individual to which they are fixating on. "Strong eyed" dogs will have a strong continuous eye contact (does not have to be eye-to-eye) also crouching stance and downs a lot. Livestock often don't relax around these dogs and they tend to work better with lighter livestock. Heavy livestock may refuse to move due to the inability to relax and feel unthreatened.

“Sticky eyed” dogs just want to hold livestock. They are more comfortable when they are not moving. “Sticky eyed” means a strong tendency to pause when approaching stock and then freeze in place rather than continuing to move when needed.

“Loose eyed” dogs generally work with a more upright posture, often using their bodies in controlling the stock through movement by blocking, sometimes even bumping the animals, and usually showing an inclination to push right up to the stock with little apparent concern for their flight zone. These dogs tend to have “looser” balance, balancing more on the group as a whole than on an individual, or moving freely past the balance point and then reversing to recover it (wearing). Generally the “loose-eyed” breeds will run closer to the stock and may take longer to develop pace and balance. They may have a tendency to become excited, move quickly, circle the stock repeatedly or dash in close and be harder to stop. They will generally show an inclination to attempt to go around the stock and try to move the animals in some semblance of grouping and bring them to the handler. “Loose eyed” close working dogs make better all-purpose farm ranch dogs where they work with flocks that are used to being handled.

A distinction of the Border collie from most of the other herding breeds is its tendency to arc out wide when gathering sheep and its propensity to be easier to pause when it comes to the balance point before bringing the sheep to the handler. As a breed, they have a much more fine-tuned sense of balance than the other herding dogs.

Gathering work better helps any of the herding breeds to develop balance and the ability to independently cover the moves of the stock while at the same time working with the handler. If this gathering ability is not developed and the dog is required to work with a heavy emphasis on driving early in its training, it may later prove difficult to get the dog to go around and gather up the stock efficiently. The dog will not have developed the feel of collecting, covering and controlling the stock and may revert to chasing or aggressive behavior if the stock is more flighty. Waiting too long before incorporating driving can lead to a dog resisting being asked to move stock quietly and in a controlled fashion away from the handler.

A well rounded training program is required for all breeds with the standard being that the dog, no matter the breed, can accomplish the desired task smoothly and efficiently. Each dog should be approached as an individual. Learn about your dog, your breed and its background. Consider the kind of chore you may be requiring of your dog. Investigate a variety of training techniques and use those that work best for you and your dog in producing a capable well rounded worker.