

Bobby Henderson

HERIOT, SCOTLAND

Bobby Henderson has over thirty-five years shepherding experience and has competed at sheepdog trials for almost as long. He has won many Open trials over the years in Scotland and particularly enjoys bringing on his own young dogs through the Nursery trial leagues and onto the Open trial circuit. The highlight of his trialing career, to date, occurred in 1998 when he became the Supreme Champion at the International Sheepdog Trial, with Sweep (having been Reserve Champion two years earlier with the same dog).

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What do you look for in a puppy?

I like a pup that's not too long and who carries his tail nicely. Usually a pup'll tell you something. You'll be looking at a litter and a pup will catch your eye. Just something about them—it's hard to put into words. I don't like them really shy, and I also don't go for the boldest one. I like a fairly short back—the short back will help the pup stand more running and be useful on the hill.

How do you raise your pups?

Normally they stay outside, but if the weather's decent we let them come into the house until they start to become a nuisance. After that they're kenneled like the rest of the dogs. We let them into the house as soon as they're taken away from the mother. I try to let the pups see the other dogs in the kennel, just for company, but they're not usually kenneled with other dogs. Seeing an older dog helps keeps them settled.

Do you let the pups follow you around while doing chores?

It's quite good if they follow you around—they learn a lot that way, like how to go through a gate and when to stay back. They're always learning, even before they actually start training.

How early do you like the pup to show an interest in sheep?

That doesn't really matter, but I would like to see something by the time they're eight months old. Sometimes it's easier if

they start later, when they're not so hot. The early starters usually have more eye and are a little more fiery.

When do you start formal training?

You have to take the nature of the pup into account. If the pup is really keen and really strong-tempered, I would let them work from five or six months old with an older dog. I wouldn't really do any training—just let them watch the sheep. But I wouldn't teach them anything like their sides, even though if they happened to go left I'd tell them "come-bye" just to put a word on it. But if they were wrong, I wouldn't chase them or scold them yet. You can take them with you, but you shouldn't tear into them.

What sorts of fields do you like to use to start pups?

A flat field, not too big—you only need about an acre or so to start with, to get them solid on their sides. I don't use a round pen, although I think it could be handy and there's nothing wrong with it.

Do you use an older dog while training your pups?

Yes, I use one to keep the sheep close to me and keep the sheep together, so the pup won't chase them off. The older dog is handy, as long as it doesn't get too involved and take the pup's attention away from the sheep. You wouldn't want to use the older dog too long, just until you have some control on the pup.

How often do you train your pups?

Every three days or so when I'm starting out, and then every day or every couple of days. The training sessions are no longer than fifteen to twenty minutes, depending on what we're doing. Part of that time I just let them work the sheep, backing up and letting them bring the sheep to me. I like to keep the naturalness in the pup.

What do you like to see in a pup's first few sessions?

I like to see a decent tail; it should be down and serious. I like a pup to show some eye; if you have no eye, you have no balance. I also like to see them able to come forward on the sheep, with a little bit of power. But that's not something that all of them would have to do—I'm just talking about something that would excite me. If after a few weeks the pup doesn't want to come forward I might think there was a weakness there.

What would you think of as a serious fault that might show up early?

If the tail isn't working right, it means that the head isn't working right; I don't like to see a pup with a bad tail. I don't like to hear pups barking; it can mean they're not stable or serious.

What are your phases of training?

Once you start getting serious, you encourage the pup to take its sides, but you always should make it easy for the pup. Make the sheep move in the right direction before you ask the pup to take that flank. Keep backing up and encouraging the pup to bring you the sheep. You need some control right away

to be able to keep the pup from charging into the sheep, so you start working on keeping the pup back and also a little stop. I usually get a stop on them fairly soon. I don't teach a lie down until the pup is working sheep. Until you get a stop, it's hard to teach them much. I use the "there" command, which amounts to a stop—I want them to follow the sheep around the field, and "there" means for them to turn and stop at that point, going as slowly as they can while still maintaining control. Pretty soon you'll just be able to say "there," and the pup will know to flank just the right amount to balance the sheep while bringing them to you. If you back up into a fence and have the pup bring you the sheep, you'll have more control and you'll be able to accomplish quite a bit: the pup won't be able to chase the sheep or do anything silly if your back is against a fence. The pup should ideally be flowing with the sheep and keeping a reasonable distance from them, being a bit steady, and stopping its flanks when you say "there." Then you can build on that. You can put the words "come-bye" and "away" on the flanks, and pretty soon the pup will have its sides.

And what's your next training step after that?

I try to get a better outrun, shaping it. You have to have a better outrun before you can do much. I work it at short distances and move myself to make sure the pup goes around the sheep properly. I try to encourage a pear shape if I can, but it's most important to have the pup keep the proper distance all the way around and keep the right distance as it comes behind—it's very difficult to do that and to keep con-

trol, so you're better off asking for a bit more distance on the arc. The distance behind the sheep is more important than the shape of the outrun itself.

When do you start driving?

They have to be solid on their sides before you start driving. I'd also like to have them outrunning decently. Driving is very easy to get once the dog knows its sides and will stop.

How do you start driving?

If it's an easy dog that listens well, you can start having them drive in a circle around you, flanking them back and stopping them in the right place. You need sensible sheep that are used to a dog as well. You can walk with the dog and sheep for awhile. A lot of my dogs are driving before they even realize they're doing anything unusual. If you're having trouble doing that, I'd do the exercise against the fence, walking behind them. The fence can be a big help with very strong dogs. You can walk about twenty yards away from the fence, so that even if the dog is determined to go around, you'll be in a position to stop them.

What kind of sheep do you like to use to start pups?

Fairly solid and sensible—you want the dog to be able to move the sheep, and you don't want sheep that are going to run at the dog. You want sheep that are solid but not too heavy—they need to be able to get up to move them, but they shouldn't be too heavy to lift. You want the sort of sheep that will move when the dog puts pressure on them and stop when the dog doesn't. That way they can actually learn to drive,

which wouldn't be possible if the sheep just ran at the sight of the dog—running sheep teach a dog to follow, not to drive.

When do you start insisting on absolute obedience? How do you balance that with helping the dog develop confidence?

It depends on the dog. If it's a shy dog, I like to be easier on it. I like my dogs to start stopping pretty early on. Once you're serious with training, you want the dog to do what you say. You make things easy for it at first, but you should get what you ask for.

What do you do about gripping pups?

With a pup that's just starting, I let them know that I'm not happy with it, but just with a voice correction. But there again, you need the right kind of sheep. The sheep need to be close to you so you can correct if you see it happening. Timing's very important for something like that. You can usually see it coming. You want to correct it as the thought comes into their heads. If it's silly gripping, I might put a line on the pup so it can't get too far away and help it understand that it's not a good idea to do that.

How early do you introduce whistles?

The stop and the walkup whistles I introduce almost immediately. The flanking whistles I wait on until they know their sides. I like a dog that stops when it's told—I don't like a dog walking through its whistles.

What do you consider the easiest type of dog to train?

One with quite a bit of eye but not too much eye, easy-going. Not too fast in their movements—something with a sensible pace.

What would you consider one of the most difficult types of dog to train?

Something that's really pushy and plain, something that lacks eye. Without eye, the dog doesn't know where it should be. A dog with eye is trying to get where the pressure is; a dog without eye is all over the place and you'll have to pick his spot. Without eye, you need to be thinking for the dog and covering for it. The handler has to be much better with a loose-eyed dog. If a dog has eye, when the sheep move he'll move to cover it. A dog without eye will go too far and then come back too far, and that can be difficult.

When do you start introducing shedding?

They're quite well trained before I do shedding—it depends on how soon I'm needing it. If it happens to be lambing time, I'll introduce it earlier. They'll often realize that I need certain sheep and get the idea without starting formal shedding lessons. I let them take half of a large group away and then let them work them, so they realize that there's some point to shedding.

When do you like to start entering trials?

I like the dog to be pretty well trained—I don't like to enter them before they're ready. By a year and a half I'd like them

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to run a Nursery course. But it depends on the dog; if it's a late starter, it wouldn't be ready as quickly.

What's the most important piece of advice that you'd like to give people who are trying to train their first pup?

The most important thing is to ask for things that you're close enough to them to do something about that. You shouldn't ask them to stop if you know yourself that they're not going to be able to stop, and that you're too far away to make them stop.