

Things To Think About Before Starting to Herd

Thoughts

It is 2 hours each way for me to go herding, we don't go very often. And lessons are fairly expensive. I know too much obedience training is frowned upon for a young dog, but I have found that putting a 'stop' on the dog and playing fetch have helped, I think, to speed up the process.

Find a trainer that you can trust to be kind to your dog. If your dog doesn't like him, then don't go back, a happy dog learns faster and you both enjoy it more. A long drive to the best trainer is worth it even if there are other trainers closer. Have a stop and recall on your dog even though it will go out the window the first time they are on sheep!! It will return. :)

Bring your dog into the new venue ready to learn. Other than shear instinct testing there will be some "disciplines" that are called for. Herding should be fun, intriguing, problem solving...but it is not necessarily a party. Having a relationship with your dog is of utmost importance.... this is a team situation and the handler must be as ready to learn as the dog.

Herding is always a work in progress.

Our first attempt at herding was with our first bearded, 25 years ago. We sought out trainers in our area and suffice it to say we had a number of bad experiences with trainers using very different approaches. We and our dogs were frustrated, so we stopped. At the 2010 National in Loveland, we entered a dog in the Herding Instinct Test under Carol Ann Hartnagle. After allowing the dog time to watch others, she saw enough potential in the dog to recommend a trainer in our area & contacted her about the dog. The trainer had a waiting list, and still does, but we were fortunate enough to eventually earn a spot. She is not looking for other students at this time as she is very busy, we have not listed any contact information. We have now been training and attending clinics she hosts, and have done AKC & ASCA trials. The reason we have now been successful is that she is a trainer who welcomes the ideas of other recognized trainers. Foremost, she recognizes that not every dog or breed is trained one way. We feel very fortunate and the dogs enjoy themselves which is most important. We train weekly and travel for over 2 hours to do so. For us, it is less about the titles and more about the experience and seeing the dog and the handler progress.

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Thoughts

The rewards of herding with your Beardie can be many - success in understanding stock, learning how your dog learns, being comfortable around stock, the people you meet, the farms you go to, the teamwork with your dog. If you plan to do both competitive obedience and herding, some think that starting with herding avoids a dog's dependence on the handler. Locate a trainer who is experienced in starting new handlers and dogs and understands different upright herding breeds. Visit a class or private lesson to observe; if you are comfortable with what goes on, good. The trainer should have livestock and safe training areas that are appropriate for all experience levels. Ask about the trainer's philosophy of training - is the dog allowed freedom to learn on its own (with some guidance) or is everything micromanaged? What is the trainer's experience with their own dogs, trialing, and livestock management? Before starting to herd, it is wise for the dog to be able to walk at your side on a completely loose leash regardless of distractions.

We all start out knowing nothing about herding, and we never DO end up knowing everything. There is always something to be learned from each new clinic/clinician. Learning how to read stock is one of the first things that a new person should aim for. Without this skill you will not be able to help your dog. Set a good foundation with a trainer who fits your needs. Remember to watch the stock (not your dog), to keep moving, and try to end things on a good note with each lesson. I would also like to remind people that even if a dog does not "turn on" the first time on stock, do try again . . . sometimes it takes 2-3 times for that instinct to kick in! Above all, make it fun for both you and your dog.

Unfortunately I see too many dogs started by allowing them to chase stock. I think that this is an especially poor approach with Beardies that already have a overly endowed joie de vivre. I agree with a wise instructor that told me that one episode of "yahoo herding" leaves a lasting effect on the dog that will need to be overcome before herding with respect for the welfare of the stock can proceed. First and foremost, good herding is good stockmanship where respect for the welfare of the stock means minimizing stress. Although it may seem inconsistent with the above idea, trust your Beardie. By this I mean, allow your Beardie to make mistakes. They really do think on their feet provided the brain blood is not boiling with adrenaline. While they are figuring a problem out, it is important to enforce clear the behavioral boundaries that they must operate within, such as pace, respecting the flight zone, and calm presence.

If you think you might be interested in herding competition, take the time to attend local trials and see first hand what types of skills your dog needs to compete successfully. Volunteer to work; the timer and score runner jobs don't require much skill or knowledge but they allow you to listen to the judge scoring the dogs and you can learn plenty plus make friends in your area's herding community at the same time. The clearer the mental picture you have of the skills your dog needs, the fewer mistakes you are likely to make in early training. It is way easier to train your dog properly the first time then have to re-train after allowing him/her to develop bad habits. I would also look for a trainer who has the flexibility to try different methods if a suggested method is not working with you and your dog.

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Thoughts

Be patient. It can't be rushed. Enjoy your dogs and have fun with them most of all!

Training is for the handler as much as your dog. The road can be long but is very rewarding as you travel. Be patient!

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