

## Herding Dogs Round 'em Up!

**Energetic herding dogs find their calling among sheep, cattle, and other livestock.**

*Lisa Hanks*

“When my dogs get the opportunity to herd, their eyes light up and their entire demeanor changes. This is what they were bred to do,” says Shelly Hollen, of Texas, who has been training her Australian Shepherds to herd since 1988. “It’s like finally scratching a hard-to-reach itch.”

Watching a herding dog work is like watching a formal dance. The dog circles left; the flock swoops right. The dog comes forward; the flock moves back.

Livestock will flock together for safety and move away from a perceived threat. Sheep in particular, are highly sensitive to sound, sight, and smell, and can spot danger 1,000 yards away.

Historically, herding dogs have performed many farm tasks, from rounding up nearly wild hill goats, to driving cattle to market, to keeping grazing sheep in a common area. Just imagine Central Park in the 1930s as sheep were grazed in the aptly named Sheep Meadow twice daily.

Today dogs are more likely to herd in organized events. “All herding events have similar goals — to promote and maintain the enduring heritage of the stock dog,” Hollen says.

Some breeds are natural herders with instincts that have been hard-wired for generations, but not all dogs have the right talent and drive.

The best way to tell if your dog has any herding aptitude is to expose her to gentle livestock. Depending on her instincts, your dog may circle or charge the stock, bark like a crazy mutt, or use the crouch-and-stare technique. If she shows this herding drive, she’ll need some basic obedience skills and good physical conditioning before getting started. You’ll also want to recruit a reputable, experienced trainer, and attend classes and seminars as often as possible.

“You can train for six months to a year before the dog is truly ready for competition,” Hollen says.

Handlers must be coordinated, quick-thinking and physically fit, maneuvering and sprinting over rough terrain in all weather conditions. “Expect to land on your backside every now and again, usually with the livestock’s help,” Hollen laughs. “This is fondly called, ‘sheep surfing.’”

Many dogs naturally have a strong gathering or fetching instinct, circling around behind the flock, and bringing it toward you. Others show a driving instinct, moving the flock away from you. A well-rounded herder does both.

Herding styles can be as different as Martians and Earthlings. A dog may bark or not, crouch or stand tall, nip at heels or go face to face, run close to the herd or wide, and have a strong or a loose crouch-and-stare technique.

Each club has its own rules and events; some offer titles. Most offer an entry-level instinct test. Stock you’ll find at herding events includes sheep, goats, cattle, geese, turkeys, and ducks.

Typically, any purebred dog designated as a herder by a dog registry such as the American Kennel Club is eligible to compete. The Australian Shepherd Club of America and American Herding Breed Association also allow rare herding breeds, as well as mixes and some working breeds. Contact these organizations or your local training club for more information.

If your dog isn’t a herding breed, don’t despair. Dog clubs, as well as local fairs, sometimes offer informal matches.

Why do people love to herd? “The teamwork and a job well done are my reward,” Hollen says. “I smile; they smile!”

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