

One Cardigan's Adventures in Herding, Part II

Not much time has elapsed and even less exposure to sheep since our first installment, but things are happening very fast for us. Probably because of my experiences in other kinds of dog training, such as obedience, schutzhund (dog protection training), agility and conformation handling, I know a lot about dog training and handling, and have good natural timing. It also doesn't hurt to have spent the time waiting for our next lesson studying herding through books and videos, and have joined Herder's L email list. And we have taken the opportunity to brush up on our obedience, sadly neglected (and with limited success – so far). The dog is usually the more “savvy” of the pair in pursuits like herding and schutzhund, as long as the instincts are in place.

Our big challenge is motivating Bryn to want to obey. I do find obedience training to be somewhat of a challenge with my Cardigans unless they understand “what's in it for them”. Even at home with the dog right in front of me he is not always inclined to want to lie down for me – unless it's that he just doesn't really understand. Though, I find this a bit hard to believe as the reason after the 400,000th repetition of the exercise! He does tend to do better downing from a distance, so it may really be a confusion issue.

It's been 5 weeks since our last lesson, as Kelly has been off judging herding trials and such. The memory of our last very successful lesson is burned on my brain, however, and I'm sure on my dog's brain too. He had a very good session off lead in the small pen. For our first lesson this time, we are in the small pen again, this time with about 10 sheep rather than the 3 we used the last time. Rather than trying to walk ahead of the sheep, this time we are working on the dog circling the sheep and stopping when asked to. Of course, it's not as simple as it sounds – there is a lot of dog running this way and that, not listening when I want him to stop, and having to block him with the rake while trying to disengage from the middle of 3 or 4 sheep. He doesn't notice a sheep that has broken away, and neither do I, so Kelly points out our error. Immediately, Bryn brings in the straggler. It's a bit hot and sunny out and before too long, the dog's eyes are tending to circle in his head from the heat and excitement! So, we call off and wait for other dogs to work.

I spend my time watching other people send dogs on outruns, correct dogs that are too eager, push sheep through gates and move them around pastures. When Kelly calls for Bryn, he barks eagerly in his crate. This is the work he was born to do, and by gosh, he wants to do it!

Kelly uses Bryn to push half of the sheep into the indoor arena. Now we are working a bit on obedience – asking him to give us a down before he's allowed to play. The sheep eye him warily from a corner of the arena. Now I stand half way between Bryn and the sheep and send him on an outrun – he is to circle around behind his sheep in the direction that I tell him using my rake (because it's a bigger visual target than just the herding staff). To ask him to circle clockwise, the rake is in my left hand and I sweep the rake in the direction that I want him to go. We have not yet added the herding commands, “go

bye” for clockwise and “away to me” for counterclockwise. I find that I don’t trust my dog enough and tend to be overly enthusiastic on corrections. Kelly tells me to please not chop the dog’s nose off, because she likes him. By the end of the lesson, though, I have fine tuned that a bit and the dog is also listening better.

To my amazement, he remembered how to stay out and away from the sheep and not angle in directly toward them. I turn and start to walk, and we are herding! We walk up along the wall. Bryn gets a warning from the rake if he starts to run up ahead of the sheep. He needs to stay behind them. I have a little bobble toward the end, forgetting where we are going and the sheep and I are away from the wall. No matter, I direct Bryn to drive them into the corner. We turn and go the other direction.

Kelly then has us do the same thing, but this time diagonally toward the corner of the arena. I make a mistake and ask Bryn to down while he is in the corner. This is not good, as the dog could become trapped there behind the sheep, but also it pushes them out of the corner. Brynnie disobeys, and runs to a balance point that keeps them in the corner. Kelly tells me that he was correct and I was not. She explains to me that this time she put Bryn on “trial sheep” (sheep that are commonly called “light” because they tend to scatter more easily than “heavy” sheep). She says that he is not exerting undue pressure, because if he was, the sheep would be all over the arena. He is working eagerly and with confidence. Now we need to really get cracking on our obedience. Next herding in two weeks, where we will have two glorious days of Kelly’s herding clinic!

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