

One Cardigan's Adventures in Herding, Part IV

Bryn was sidelined with a leg injury for a few weeks in late October and November, but we are back working again. He's been joined by his grandma, Ruby, age 9, my former agility competition partner and his Auntie Sophia, age 6, my show special. Both have herding instinct - Ruby, normally the most independent of my dogs, is taking direction well and good naturedly. Sophia, on the other hand, is a prima donna. If she is not allowed to charge straight at the sheep, she shuts down and starts to wander around sniffing out smells and eating spare "food". Still, instructor Kelly Malone thinks both girls can get their test titles.

Bryn came back from his injury raring to go and guns blazing. So, Kelly had him spend several weeks in a sheep stall with 2 or 3 sheep. He needed to learn to enter the pen calmly, lie down on command, go around the sheep instead of directly into them, and then call off when I asked him to. The first couple of weeks are interesting. Bryn whines, barks and generally carries on from his down position. Eventually he does settle down and is allowed to circle the sheep. He quickly ramps up adrenaline wise, and is taken out of the pen. We go back in later and do it all again.

After about 3 weeks of this, something wonderful happens. My dog grows a brain! He goes into the stall calmly and lies right down, and then circles the sheep calmly. Woo hoo! Now we can start working in the "big" pen again.

The first day with all three dogs in an indoor arena (it's quite cold, snowy and sometimes icy here in Ohio at this time of year), Sophia starts out. She runs straight at the sheep at full speed. But, Kelly is ready with her – she has a pig paddle (stick with a plastic paddle at the end sometimes filled with small beads to make noise) – and BOOM! She slaps the ground in front of Sophia, which takes a considerable amount of the amperage out of her. Sophia immediately starts to sniff the ground, so I chase her and "push" her to the away side, the direction she was originally told to go. Eventually Sophia gets back on track, though she does have a tendency to wander off when she's feeling too much pressure and not able to do as she pleases.

On the other hand, when Ruby has her turn, she very compliantly moves to the side, flanks the sheep, gathers them to me and we move in an orderly fashion. No surprises with Ruby, she's a pleasure to work, and obeys nicely, which is a change from her normal household routine! Ruby is quite independent, normally, and not known for her split second obedience.

Now, it's time for Bryn's turn. We are learning the patterns for the HT and PT. So, first we try doing some figure 8's in the middle of the arena. I am getting lost, letting the dog run in front occasionally, and generally getting my feet and the pig paddle tangled up in the sheep!

The PT pattern doesn't go a whole lot better, with me twirling around at each corner and confusing my dog. It's no wonder that he has no respect for me as his leader! Kelly shows me what I am supposed to be doing with 3 Hershey's Kisses. One is the sheep, one is me and one is the dog. Then she demonstrates how to "kick the dog back" at the corner – I need to stand relatively still, push on the dog in the correct direction and give him time to get back into position before we head out of the corner. So, I push him back to position him behind the sheep before we head in the new direction.

Bryn is doing a lot better after the sessions in the sheep stall. We did have a brief and frenzied fight over who gets the middle of the sheep, but when I don't let him get past me, he gives up and works the sheep pretty well, not putting too much pressure on them to keep them in line.

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