

Stock Dog Series: Part 1

Four-legged Drover

*Story by***KELLI FULKERSON**

For a dog, being man's best friend may be the most satisfying job; however, one of the most traditional occupations for canines is herding. The stock dog — also referred to as herding, working or cattle dog — was originally developed to assist humans in the control and direction of livestock herds, says Deb Meier, editor of the *Stockdog Journal*. Herding breeds are born with the instinctive tendency to herd; but, because most stock dogs live as companion animals, they may never come in contact with livestock.

"Truly it's a shame," says Meier. "There are so many producers out there that could use the help of a stock dog. They just don't always understand the benefits."

How stock dogs can help

Think of the times you have thought you could tackle a job in 15 minutes, only to spend two hours trying to accomplish the task. It's common when working with cattle, whether you're trying to administer a vaccine, pull a newborn calf or rotate cattle to a new pasture.

Of course, you could take on a hired hand, but that can become expensive, says Meier. She believes any task can be simplified with the help of a stock dog.

"Producers don't have time to coddle all the livestock they have," said Meier. "It's their moral obligation to ensure their animals are receiving the best care, but what if they had a four-legged partner to help?"

A good stock dog can easily replace the efforts of multiple helpers when it comes to moving cattle, says Meier. Stock dogs can gather your entire herd, move them wherever they need to go, separate out individuals, hold them in place, and, most importantly, protect your backside.

There are many factors to consider when purchasing a stock dog. Meier encourages all interested producers to do their homework beforehand. Things to keep in mind include environment, breed, herding style, age and training.

Environment and breed

Just like selecting the right cattle breed, selecting the right breed of dog is vital to their success within your operation.

The American Kennel Club (AKC) currently recognizes 25 breeds in its "herding" groups, though many other breeds can exhibit herding and droving instincts. These dogs vary in size, appearance and country of origin. However, they all share the trait of being able to successfully herd livestock.



Chosen well and trained correctly, a stock dog can be a valuable cowhand and companion.

When researching breeds of stock dogs, there are many traits that are important to look for — temperament, energy level, compatibility with children, ease of training and grooming needs.

Some breeds of dogs will have a strong will and can become aggressive and territorial. This is not ideal for the first-time stock-dog owner, notes Meier. If they become aggressive with you, they are almost certainly going to become aggressive with your cattle.

Getting to know breeders before purchasing a dog is crucial. If there are any complications with the dog, it is important to know what the breeder is willing to do to compensate you for your dog, says Meier. There are rescue organizations for some breeds, which may provide an alternative to purchasing directly through a breeder.

Make sure to talk to other producers in your area who use stock dogs. They will be able to offer insight about their experiences with dogs and breeds that have worked for them.

Herding style

The speed and agility that a dog brings to the table is something that can never be matched by a human, says Meier. Each breed differs in its strengths and herding style. In selecting a breed of dog, a

cattlemaster must first recognize the type of herding that they use when moving their cattle. There are three different types of herding: driving, mustering and boundary.

Driving is the style that is most commonly used in the Midwest, says Meier. This is the style that dogs use when taking cattle through gates and pens and when moving cattle from one part of the pasture to another without human assistance.

"Driving is a quick and easy way to move cattle from place to place, and there is no extra manpower or horse (pun intended) needed," says Meier.

When a dog is used to **muster**, they must retrieve the cattle from far away areas of the property and return them to their master. This method is typically seen in areas with large open pastures or rugged mountain terrain, says Meier.

Boundary herding requires the dog to provide an artificial fence around the perimeter of the cattle, keeping them from wandering out of the producers' designated area. This method is rarely seen in the cattle industry, says Meier.

Before purchasing a stock dog, evaluate your herding style and select a breed that fits your needs, she says.

Training and age

In order to use a stock dog, the dog must first undergo a high level of training. It's a step cattlemen often fail to take.

"That is the biggest mistake that we see producers make," says Meier. "They expect

the dogs to come out and do the job all through instinct. It doesn't work like that."

This is where age at selection factors in, she mentions. If you want to train your stock dog yourself, or if you want to select the specific trainer, it is a smart choice to purchase a puppy. This ensures that you are providing the training for the dog just as you want. Puppies won't be ready for training until at least 6 months of age. Some experts suggest waiting until at least 12 months of age before beginning to train a puppy.

"It's good to let a dog grow up with you," says Meier. "It gives the pup an opportunity to learn your moods and characteristics so that when they are trained, they respond directly to you and your behaviors."

If age isn't a concern, there is always the option of buying an older adult dog that has already been trained and has some experience under its belt.

Stock dog ownership

A stock dog, like any other purchase on a livestock operation, is an investment, says Meier. A stock dog is only as good as its handler, so make sure you are ready for the task of a stock dog on your operation.

"The time stock dogs helped us save was well worth any amount of money," says Meier. "Our dogs are our companions and tools to better utilize our time and money."

Sample of herding breeds

Many breeds of dogs are recognized for their herding and droving instincts. The American Kennel Club (AKC) recognizes 25 in its herding* group. Here is a sample of the different breeds mentioned by the AKC, United Kennel Club and the American Herding Breed Association.

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Australian Cattle Dog*



Australian Shepherd*



Bearded Collie*



Beauceron*



Belgian Malinois*



Belgian Sheepdog*



Belgian Tervuren*



Bernese Mountain Dog



Border Collie*



Bouvier des Flandres*



Boxers



Briard*



Canaan Dog*



Cardigan Welsh Corgi*



Collie*



Entlebucher Mountain Dog*



Finnish Lapphund*



German Shepherd Dog*



Giant Schnauzer



Greater Swiss Mountain Dog



Kerry Blue Terrier



Norwegian Buhund*



Old English Sheepdog*



Pembroke Welsh Corgi*



Icelandic Sheepdog*



Polish Lowland Sheepdog*



Puli*



Pyrenean Shepherd*



Rottweiler



Samoyeds



Shetland Sheepdog*



Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier*



Standard Schnauzer



Swedish Vallhund*

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