

## **Natural Ability in Dogs. By Kathy Knox**

What is natural ability? To me a natural dog is one that has a feel for what the stock is doing, or is going to do. They just have a way of reading their stock that you cannot train into them; it's just there. For example: say you have very flighty sheep, a dog that has natural ability will sense their flightiness, and pace itself according to that. It doesn't mean the handler might not have to hold it at times, it just means when the dog makes it's initial contact, it'll give the stock time, on it's own, to settle. It'll try to get the stock to change to it's pace by how it approaches them. Dogs that don't have that feel will just rush into the stock, I don't mean diving necessarily, I mean it'll come on at a pace that the stock just can't handle. How much natural ability should a dog have? For me the more it has the better, as long as it has enough of everything else with it. I don't mind a dog starting out looking like it has none; some may start grippy, or run straight at their sheep, or just want to drive to start with. If the dog changes with confidence and training, some naturalness should begin to form. You'll see them as they go on their outrun, looking in and bending in accordance with the stock, not going out to wide, or coming in to tight, just staying off them at the correct distance to settle and move the stock properly. Like I said earlier you still need to hold these dogs, but they make it easier to hold them, because they feel themselves the proper distance to be at to control the stock. Some dogs are judged to early in my opinion, never given a chance to let their naturalness show. When you over train at a young age, you tend to keep any naturalness from forming. If you don't give that young dog that maybe is going straight at it's sheep, but then just as it gets to them it bends a little, a chance to feel it's way through all of that, and just go in and start pushing it off it's sheep, you've taken away some of it's natural ability right there. The same is true for a grippy dog. I mentioned in an earlier article how I feel gripping is caused by many different factors. I have a young dog right now that was terribly grippy when he started, he didn't look like he had any naturalness to him at all. I was just about to give up on him, at 1&1/2. I changed the way I was trying to deal with the grip, instead of putting on more and more pressure, I took him in a very tight area with sheep and just talked to him, got him in very close to them, and let him see he could handle it. That changed him completely, he is now a very natural dog, really feels what he is doing, reads his sheep on his own. The only time he offers to grip now is if I put him in a situation that is over his head, then when he grips that is my fault, I've put too much pressure on him. I know alot of trainers, had they had him, would never have taken the time to see what was actually there, and I don't think people believe me when I say how grippy he was, when they see how natural he is now.

It doesn't mean all dogs are going to have the naturalness once they get their confidence, I just think that maybe some naturalness is taken away for training sake.

Sometimes a dog can be too natural right from the start; I don't care for that either. You've heard people say, it's too nice, alot of times what they mean is, the dog has alot of natural ability, but is too nice with it, by the time you get some training on it, it maybe won't have enough push. I like to see one that once it's method starts showing you can see natural tendencies there along with a bit of devilment. You may have to push it out a bit at times, but for the most part it has a tremendous feel on stock. I like to see a dog like

that, because I feel I'll have something to work with, but not one that's constantly trying to fight you on everything, because it just doesn't have any natural feel.

I think you can help a dog that maybe doesn't have natural tendencies develop them with how you work it.

I try to do as much natural farm work with my dogs as possible. We are fortunate enough to have enough sheep so the dogs get this everyday work, especially during lambing season. Anytime I can let them work on their own without commands I just let them do it. The times when I don't have the natural work, I'll try to set something up that will feel more natural to the dog. For instance, if a dog is slow when covering his sheep, I may have two groups of sheep and have one group breaking to the other group so that it will help pull the dog around. Those sheep trying to get away should help get that dog to move faster on the flank. I would try something like this rather than schooling on the flank. For a dog that is overenthusiastic and needs to slow down I would give him lots of hard work every day. Again lambing time is an ideal time because there is so much work for the dogs. I also use my voice to try to calm them. I'll use a firm but slow and calm voice and just say "hey" as it starts to move. I use my tone to help keep that dog thinking more. I may even use the same situation of two groups of sheep, where one group is running toward the other, this will make him really excited, but I'll keep doing this until I can get him to think. And I'll use that same tone to help put in more thought and get it to settle and slow his movements.

Some dogs just may not have it at all, those are a bit tougher to work with, and handlers' have to be very good at reading the stock themselves, because the dog just can't do it. Some of this could be caused through training, but sometimes it's just the dog.