

One Handlers Opinion

The Novice Handler

There are varied ideas about the importance of the novice handlers to the working sheepdog sport from, they are a waste of time and energy to the idea that they are the future of this wonderful and amazing connection between dog and man. No matter how you look at it, everybody starts out as a novice and from there they progress at different rates, some never getting beyond the novice level and others that have a 'natural' ability to go on to the highest rank and some times quickly.

All walks of life come to join this wonderful sport. There are people that are city dwellers that have no stock of their own to 'hobby' farmers all the way to full time shepherds. It's a great feeling to see a dog do what his instincts are telling him to do. The handler needs to mold and shape this instinct and the two, dog and man, become a team, one with each other, almost knowing what the other wants or needs. It's a high on the handlers side that can't be expressed. I liken it to sitting on a cutting horse when it's working a cow.

Probably the hardest way for a person to learn this sport is to start with an untrained dog, novice trying to teach novice. The problem here is that the dog has instinct and doesn't quite know what to do with it and the novice person normally with no instinct, just a want to learn how to do this. Now there are people that have stock sense, having already done some horseback riding, or having worked with hunting dogs, etc. These people DO have a small advantage over the person that hasn't done work with stock or 'working' dogs before. So the hard way to go is with both parties in the novice position.

Then we have the people that know that they haven't got the time or talent (at this point) to learn this way, they go and buy a started dog or a fully trained dog. This is probably the wisest way to go, at least one of the team has some knowledge! People will come to me and say that they bought this pup and they want to learn how to herd sheep. When I tell them that we need to wait until the pup is old enough to be able to work stock both physically and mentally, they can't believe it. This is a working dog and it's already chasing the kids! Key word here is chasing, the novice doesn't know the difference between chasing and herding. People look at the price of the started dog and the price of a pup and go for the pup almost every time. What they aren't thinking about is that by the time they put all that time and money in lessons and training in that 'pup' they could have bought the started dog twice! When I was in the horse world, parents were always buying a green horse to put their kids on so they could 'learn together'. Neither one normally learns well and unless you are a kid, it will take a long time (kid's have more time and a long time for them often isn't an issue). I always tried to get people to buy their kid a broke horse, let the kid learn and have fun learning from a great teacher, the well seasoned horse. The sheep herding world is the same. That older seasoned dog can teach that novice handler how to 'feel' sheep and learn how to see and work lines, not have to fight for stops and downs and understand pace.

Next article: Novice trials and classes

A way for handlers and their dogs to show off what they have learned comes in the form of the sheepdog trial. These trials help handlers know what they are doing well or what they need to work on, a form of test. This test is for the very beginner to the trainers/clinicians themselves. Some trials are geared just for the open handler/dog teams, others will have classes for those as well as several stages of novice classes. The novice classes are true testing grounds to see what you need to work on and what you are doing well.

Here in the pacific northwest we have had two novice classes for many years, novice novice and pro novice. The definitions would be novice novice; for the novice dog and the novice handler (handler or dog to never have been run in open class) and pro novice was either a novice dog with an open handler or visa versa. Because the novice novice class could vary as to what the competitor was expected to do it became important for trial hosts to be sure to put in a class description on their entry forms. Some had drives, some had settles some had pens and some didn't. By having it on the entry form, the novice competitor could decide if they were over their heads or not. It was a way for the novice to go to a trial and test their skills, but hopefully not put themselves in to a wreck situation. There were many times back in the late 80's and early 90's that there would not be a class description and a novice handler would enter and find that they had entered a trial that had a 100 yard one leg drive in it and their dog was not driving yet. Or a