

One Cardigan's Adventures in Herding, Part V

It was a mixed weather weekend at Hado Bar, June 19 and 20, 2009 – the weekend we tried - and succeeded - to earn our AKC HT (herding tested) title.

All winter we had been working in the barn. Bryn had a little bit of difficulty transitioning from the confined barn to a larger, open field. At times, he stopped dead, seeming to say “how can I handle them in this big pen!”. Other times he just chased, and absolutely refused to believe that slower and further from the stock is better.

Herding instructor Kelly Malone says that upstanding dogs tend to default to closer and faster, thinking that is the way to keep the stock from escaping. Not so – they need to learn that giving the stock distance and “sneaking up” on them is the way to get them under control.

Given the troubles that we had with downs and stays, I would say that the most marked change is that Bryn is pretty solid with those elements now. He is more compliant about stopping, but he still does like to fight me once he's moving. He has flashes of brilliance, where he's working away from the stock and calmly, but there are too many moments of diving at the sheep.

For those who don't know, the HT is more or less a herding instinct test. The dog needs to be under control, however, and wait for direction from the handler to start. He gathers the sheep and brings them to the handler. With the handler in front, the sheep next and the dog behind, all parties do three passes around orange cones in a large field in a figure 8 pattern. What the judges are looking for is controlled entry onto the field, the dog working the stock in both directions (go by and away, or clockwise and counterclockwise), and then the ability to call the dog off.

It is much easier than the elements of the real herding trials, where dog and handler go through several obstacles. The sheep are gathered to the other end of the field with an outrun, then sent through a Y gate, down a fence, to another side with another gate, through that gate, up the side of the field and into a pen. From the pen they are sent across the field to two panels, and then held at the other end of the field for a moment before exiting quietly into another fenced area.

The sheep don't always want to go where the dog and handler want them to because of the “draws”. These are elements such as gates that they might be able to escape through, food, the handler, etc. The dog represents “pressure”, as do other things that exist in the minds of sheep, such as flapping tarps, changes in terrain, etc. There are three trial levels in competitive AKC herding. At the lower levels, the handler walks in front of the sheep and dog, in the highest level, the handler must stay at one of several posts while the dog manages the stock on his own. Really, the elements of herding are quite simple – the dog performs an outrun to gather the stock, walk ups to push the stock, call offs and stops. But, on the second day of the herding trial we attended, the course was reversed from normal. That meant that the sheep had two draws along the one side of the fence, the

handler at the shedding pen, and the gate. Most of them would start running at some point along the fence, and then each dog seemed to be playing catch up. Most looked rather startled and completely caught off guard when the sheep started to bolt. Apparently, the course is usually run a certain way and not varied.

After the herding trial, then the test levels were done, PT and lastly HT. PT is slightly more advanced, in that the dog has to push sheep through a gate and remain under control even with the sheep escaping (the handler pushes them out through a gate into another area using the dog).

This was the first herding trial either of us had attended, and we were the green team all the way. We started the day with a bit of apprehension – at 8 AM it was pouring down rain in Columbus, with lightening and thunder on the side. The weather was pretty decent by the time we got to Hado Bar, and had some really wonderful moments. Hado Bar is such a pretty and peaceful place, it was truly a nice way to spend a couple of days.

The first day went pretty well mainly because I stopped him a lot – too much for the judge, she fussed at me for fighting with my dog. The one time that I didn't fight with him, he chased sheep in a circle. He took direction fairly well, gave me a change of direction when I asked him for it, and easily passed his first "leg".

The next day was much uglier. Funnily, Kelly said before our run that Bryn looked calmer than the day before. I was figuring on trouble, though, because when I was practicing "get back" with Bryn, he was barking at me. Perhaps he had time to reflect on what went wrong (in his opinion) the day before, and figured out some ways to correct his "mistakes". My dad got a short video clip of our second day's run, and the dog looked a bit like a honeybee flitting in and out of the flower. The poor sheep were running in circles trying to escape the crazy dog.

The judge absolutely did not want me to interfere with my dog by stopping him. He kept yelling JUST WALK! Hmm, how does one walk when one's dog is pushing sheep at one? But, the judge is always right! Sure enough, I ended up on the ground at one point and got my feet stepped on several times by the panicky sheep that were looking to me as their safe haven.

I feel at once elated at having passed that first hurdle, and humbled by how much I don't know even after a year of training this dog. In retrospect, I can say that the dog did what mattered and worked the stock – or maybe "worked them over" is a better description of the day's activities!

We are taking a hiatus from herding as Bryn will be going to Germany in mid-July to meet a girl! Hopefully we can pick up where we left off in November when he comes home.

Nancy Willoughby
June 21, 2009



Bryn with my mom and dad at Hado Bar Farms the day he earned his HT title.