

Satisfying the Urge to Herd

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All those herding breeds, sitting on couches, trotting around backyards, trying, whenever possible, to exercise their innermost desire – the urge to herd.

Your own herders might only get the opportunity to satisfy that urge when children visit or a gaggle of geese goes off course into your neighborhood. But all over the country many herding dogs get to sate their most basic instinct by design. Some do it for work, but most do it for fun and titles.

The American Kennel Club, American Herding Breed Association and Australian Shepherd Club of America herding programs cater to different breed lists, divide their programs into various segments and have their own rules and regulations, yet all have a similar purpose.



A variety of organizations sanction herding tests and trails, but all allow dogs to exercise an innate instinct. Photo by Diane Lewis © AKC.

AKC noncompetitive tests offer “a standardized gauge by which a dog’s basic instinct and trainability are measured,” while the competitive trials “preserve and develop the herding skills inherent in the herding breeds and demonstrate that they can perform the useful functions for which they were originally bred.” Any dog in the Herding Group, plus Rottweilers, Samoyeds, Standard and Giant Schnauzers, Pyrenean Shepherds, Swedish Vallhunds, Norwegian Buhunds and Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs can test at the beginning level.

The AHBA divides its program into trials and tests as well, with the goals of promoting “an appreciation of the skills and value of the herding dog,” and providing “information about herding breeds, herding training, herding behaviors and herding in general.” At the Herding Capability level, herding breeds, plus herding-breed mixes and the American Eskimo, Bernese Mountain Dog, Black Russian Terrier, Boxer, Chinook, Doberman Pinscher, Greater Swiss Mountain Dog, Keeshond, Kerry Blue Terrier, Poodle, Schipperke, and Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier, can test.

The ASCA Stockdog Program’s purpose is “to preserve and promote the instinct of the Australian Shepherd to be a versatile stockdog, showcasing the natural working ability of the breed through the use of certification programs for challenging trialing disciplines on several classes of stock.” In addition to Australian Shepherds, dogs of breeds recognized as herding dogs by the organization’s rule book can earn titles, although they don’t qualify for the ASCA Stockdog finals.



This Shetland Sheepdog may be driving these goats away from its handler or fetching them to her. Photo courtesy of Jan Schlobohm.

Flanking, Driving and Fetching

Herding, like many other canine activities, has its own language, some of it dating back to the days when the dogs worked for a living all around the world, keeping flocks of sheep, goats and other livestock in line.

Some mean what they sound like: holding pen, graze, obstacle and herding instinct. “Balance” is the point at which “the dog has the most influence on the stock” to control the animals’ behavior and move them in the “desired direction.” The “course” is the pattern the dog must follow while directing the livestock. “Driving” is moving the flock away from the handler, while “fetching” is pushing it toward him or her.

Other terms’ meanings are more difficult to discern.

For example, “Come-bye” and “Go-bye” are commands that send the dog “clockwise around the livestock,” while “way to me” commands it counterclockwise. The “flight zone” is the invisible area around a group of livestock “into which a dog cannot pass without causing the stock to feel threatened and attempt to escape the dog.” “Light stock” are moved with little pressure and have large flight zones. “Heavy stock” are the opposite.



Dogs test and trial with various livestock, including ducks, geese, sheep, goats and cattle. Photo by Diane Lewis © AKC.

When a dog “gathers” livestock, it brings them together after they’ve been scattered. “Penning” or “re-penning” sees the dog move the animals into an enclosure, and if it “sheds” a single animal or several, they’re separated from the rest of the herd or flock. The dog is “off contact” when it loses control of the stock, “either by being too far away or by losing concentration.”

If you’re at the “handler’s post,” you’re standing where the dog and handler begin their “run,” or trial performance.



Early herding tests are in controlled situations, but as dogs and handlers progress they often trial in pastures. Here a Belgian Sheepdog demonstrates his ability to allow the sheep to graze peacefully. Photo courtesy of Peggy Richter.

Courses, Obstacles and Pens

The course in herding and stockdog events varies depending on whether it’s a trial or test, the level of the dog and handler, and the sanctioning organization.

For example, in an American Herding Breed Association Herding Capability Test, the arena is only between 50-by-50 feet up to 100 feet square. The tests take place at a herding trainer’s facility in a clinic, or workshop-type, setting with experienced livestock and sturdy fencing. Such tests cannot be done at festivals, fairs or other public venues.

First-leg tests “may may take the form of a basic instinct test and are fairly free-form, with no set path of travel,” according to AHBA rules, with at least three, but preferably more, sheep, goats, ducks, turkeys or geese. The tester can actually handle the dog during a first-leg capability test. For this leg, the dog is on lead or drags the lead. For the second leg, the owner or handler must direct the lead-free dog.

A simple trial course would see the dog and handler at one end of a much larger rectangular-shaped arena at the handler’s post with a minimum of three livestock, possibly even cattle, at the other end of the course. The dog would need to gather the stock, then drive them through two obstacles, consisting of two panels each. For sheep in an AHBA competition, the panels would be eight to 10 feet wide and four feet tall with 12 to 21 feet between the panels. The dog must also pen the sheep in an eight-to-12 foot rectangular enclosure. At lower levels, the handler can be in close proximity to the dog and may use hand signals as well as voice commands and whistles.

At a higher level, the dog would need to “hold” the sheep near the handler as part of the trial, and the handler is much more restricted in his or her movement around the course. In addition, hand signals are eliminated as a means of communicating with the dog.



Moving livestock into enclosures and even across a bridge are skills high-level competitors must demonstrate. Photo courtesy of Peggy Richter.

For the highest level AHBA trials, dogs may perform in actual pastures. “All courses must include: A gather; a wear/drive/cross-drive (according to level of class); various obstacles; a sorting exercise (required for HRD [Herding Ranch Dog] III, optional for HRD I and II); pen work, including re-penning at the end of the course. Optional elements may include such exercises as a designated narrow road or path on which the stock must be kept, stopping and holding the group in place, keeping the group within a designated grazing area, etc.”

Although each organization has its own rules and requirements, ultimately a dog that’s trialed at the highest levels would be capable of actually managing stock on a working ranch.

Titles – Before and After

As with many canine performance events, herding and stockdog competitors can earn myriad titles, indicating various levels of competence.

AKC herders first earn a certificate as “instinct tested,” then move on to their first title, Herding Tested, or HT, which appears after the dog’s name. Next is PT for Pre-Trial Tested, after which the dog advances to trials, Started (HS), Intermediate (HI), or Advanced (HX), not necessarily sequentially. The title is followed by “A,” “B” or “C,” depending on the course on which it was earned, as well as a letter indicating the livestock used, such as “s” for sheep or “d” for ducks. Thus, a title of HSAd would be Herding Started on Course A with ducks. The AKC issues a Herding Champion certificate for “an eligible dog that has acquired an HX title and earned 15 championship points in Advanced classes...with at least two first places in an Advanced class carrying championship points.” The HC appears in front of the dog’s name.



The concentration required to manage a small flock of geese is clearly evident in this Australian Shepherd’s eyes. Photo by LMGray.

Under Australian Shepherd Club of America stockdog rules, as well as those of the American Herding Breed Association, dogs move through the Started, Open and Advanced divisions sequentially. The Post-Advanced division is for dogs that have qualified in the advanced division. Classes indicate what livestock the dog trialed with.

ASCA dogs earn STD (Started Trial Dog) by scoring at least 69 of 100 possible points under two different judges. OTD (Open Trial Dog) and ATD (Advanced Trial Dog) titles require 88 of 125 points. Australian Shepherds can earn Ranch Dog (RD) titles “if they sufficiently demonstrate to an ASCA stockdog judge their capability to serve as a daily working ranch dog by assisting their owners with livestock on working ranches and farms.” Other herding breeds receive Ranch Trial Dog (RTD) titles by working sheep or cattle. The ASCA rules dictate that the “trial must include pen work, sorting, chute work and pasture work. This program was set up to simulate ranch type work.”

In the AHBA Herding Trial Dog (HTD) or Herding Ranch Dog (HRD) title, HTD I after a dog's name indicates it has the Started HTD, while a “II” indicates Open and “III” is for Advanced.

The HRD title recognizes “individual herding dogs that prove themselves to be valuable assistance to their owner in everyday ranch, farm work, day work or in stockyards, auctions, rodeos, day worker, rodeo worker, etc. The location of the test must be where the dog actually works and the work performed will be under normal working situations depending on the type of operation.”

Other AHBA titles include HTAD (Herding Trial Arena Dog) and RLF (Ranch Large Flock).



Convincing a recalcitrant animal to join the herd is a job any competent working dog must be able to handle, as this Aussie demonstrates. Photo by LMGray.

After an ASCA stockdog or AHBA herding dog's title, a small letter or letters indicate the livestock on which the title was earned. For example, HRD III-s,d means the AHBA dog is an advanced Herding Ranch Dog with sheep and ducks, and PATDcs stands for Post Advanced Trial Dog with cattle and sheep in ASCA.

ASCA Farm dog trials are a bit different: “Because of the varying setups of farms around the country, no two farm trial courses will necessarily be the same. Each course should be designed to showcase the working ability of the Australian Shepherd in the day-to-day tasks that happen on many farms.” Dogs may be tested in loading stock into a trailer, moving it around a barn, driving it over a bridge, even removing a halter from an animal. The trials are divided into Open Farm Trial Dog and Advanced Farm Trial Dog divisions, and dogs earn OFTD and AFTD titles.

An AHBA Herding Trial Championship (HTCh) is earned with 10 additional qualifying scores of 80 or higher in the advanced divisions, after the completion of an HTD III or HRD III title on either or both HTD and HRD courses using one type of stock or any combination. It appears before the dog's name.

In the ASCA, champion herding dogs earn a WTCH or Working Trial Champion in front of their names.

Titles aren't everything, of course. Many dogs and their owners test and trial just to satisfy the urge that's so basic to herding breeds – the urge to herd.

If herding might benefit your dogs or you're in need of a new challenge, you can learn more by visiting the websites of the [American Kennel Club](#), [American Herding Breed Association](#) and [Australian Shepherd Club of America](#).

Revised 6/16/12 to add two missing AHBA titles and AKC title detail.

Tags: [American Herding Breed Association](#), [American Kennel Club](#), [Australian Shepherd Club of America](#), [Best in Show Daily](#), [BISD](#), [forum-dog](#), [Herding](#), [stockdog](#), [Susan Chaney](#), [trial](#)