Elements and levels of tests and trials for dogs with little herding experience, and those with substantial training.

A Look at AKC's Herding Tests And Trials
BY JAMES B. SPENCER

Folks around the herding breed rings are speaking a new dialect these days. They toss about such terms as: huntaway, strong-eyed, outrun, lift, gather, fetch, drive, balance, shed, wear and boundary.

Old-time herding talk. Straight from the pastoral lands of England, Scotland, Australia, Europe and rural America, and brought into the AKC world with the new herding tests and trials. A welcome addition to the usual chatter about topline, shoulder lay-back, angulation and ear-set.

Yet, who needs herding tests and trials today?

Every agricultural socioeconomic indicator projects a decreasing demand for working stock dogs. The family farm/ranch tops the endangered species list. Our rural population has been flowing irreversibly to the city since the Civil War. Arable and grazable land shrinks every time an urban developer sinks a shovel into fresh earth. Current livestock techniques minimize pasturing and maximize feedlotting.

Is AKC creating a supply for which the demand is disappearing?

Not according to the four members of the ex officio Herding Development Committee I talked with: Lois Russell and Lynnette Milleville of Connecticut, Susan Holm of Colorado and Linda Rorem of California. They feel that more complete socioeconomic demographics point to an increasing demand for working herding dogs, in spite of the bleak agricultural outlook. More on that after a look at the program itself.

The program has two major divisions: non-competitive tests intended for dogs with little or no prior herding experience; and competitive trials intended for dogs with substantial training. Open to all AKC herding group breeds, the program has two graduated non-competitive titles and three competitive titles—all suffixes to the name, as well as a championship title which appears as a prefix.

Elements of The Tests
The tests offer two graduated non-competitive titles: Herding Tested (HT) and Pretrial Tested Dog (PT). The

The author also wrote, “A Perspective on Hunting Tests” in July. A hunting test judge, he has written Retriever Training Tests (Arco, Prentice-Hall) and Hunting Retrievers; Hindsights, Foresights & Insights (Alpine).
HT title indicates that the dog has shown herding instinct and is under basic control. The PT title indicates that the dog has had a modest amount of training, but not enough to compete in the lowest level trial.

To earn the HT title, the dog must pass both a Preliminary Test and a Principal Test. In the Preliminary Test, the tester (judge) may handle the dog for inexperienced owners. To pass, the dog must show five minutes cumulative herding work within a fifteen-minute test period. It may work in any of the three accepted styles: driving, in which it moves the animals forward while the handler walks along near the dog; gathering or fetching, in which the dog circles the stock and brings it towards the handler; and boundary, "living fence," in which the dog patrols the perimeter of the area in which the stock is kept. (See the following article, "The Boundary Style of Herding."

"The Preliminary Test," Lois Russell said, "is like a first lesson for both dog and owner, neither of whom may have had much exposure to livestock. In that case, the experienced tester handles the dog, and the owner observes."

The stock may be ducks, sheep or cattle. If the dog drives or gathers, three to five animals are required. If the dog does boundary herding, ten are required.

"Properly prepared livestock animals are essential," Lois Russell said. "Even if they are worked regularly by the farmer's Border Collies, before a test or trial, they must be conditioned for about thirty days with trained AKC herding dogs. That way, they flock properly for dogs of various breeds and sizes, dogs that work close to them."

After passing the Preliminary Test, the dog may be entered in the Principal Test. Here the owner handles his dog and must show minimal control. He must stop the dog before starting to work, and at the end he must stop and recall the dog. The dog is given fifteen minutes in which to show five minutes sustained herding work (any of the three styles).

For both tests, the arena is small and fenced. With sheep or cattle, it measures between sixty feet by sixty feet to 100 feet by 100 feet. With ducks, about forty-five feet by ten feet.

The AKC awards a Herding Tested certificate to the dog that has passed both Preliminary and Principal Tests. The letters "HT" may then be placed after the dog's name.
The HT is not a prerequisite for the more advanced Test. The PT requires that the dog and handler work as a team to move the stock around the arena in both directions along a specified course, after which they must pen the stock. The dog may drive or gather. Either way, it should show reasonable balance, that is, it should maintain a position relative to the handler and the stock that controls the path along which the animals move. (See the photo, pg. 48.)

If the dog is a boundary herder, the PT test begins with a three- to ten-minute boundary exercise before the stock animals are moved around the arena as described above.

The fenced Pretrial Test is larger, measuring approximately 100 by 200 feet. Driving and gathering dogs are allowed ten minutes to complete the course. Boundary herders are given twenty minutes for both boundary work and moving stock along the course. Three to five stock animals are required for driving or gathering, ten for boundary herding.

The AKC issues a Pretrial Tested Dog certificate to the dog which has passed two such tests under different testers. The letters PT may then be placed after the dog’s name.

**Trial Levels**

Trials resemble obedience, having three graduated competitive titles plus a competitive championship title.

The titles are Herding Started (HS), earned in the Started class; Herding Intermediate (HI), earned in the Intermediate class; and Herding Excellent (HX), earned in the Advanced class. To earn a title, a dog must pass the tests in the associated class three times at different trials under three different judges. Passing requires earning at least sixty percent of the total points plus at least fifty percent of the points in each working category. The judges place the high scoring four dogs in each class and award High in Trial (HIT), just as in obedience. The rules contain run-off procedures for ties.

To accommodate dogs which were trained before the program started, AKC has established a two-year period during which the competitive titles are non-progressive, meaning that dogs need not earn the HS before attempting the HI, nor the HI before attempting the HX. After the initial two years, titles will be progressive.

A dog which has earned the HX title may continue competing in the Advanced class to earn points towards the competitive title, Herding Champion (H.Ch.). One to five points are awarded to each placing dog, depending on the number of dogs competing and the placement won. To become an H.Ch., a dog must win at least fifteen points, including two first placements, one of which must carry three or more points.

Clearly, the structure shows the influence of obedience. However, within that structure, the Herding trial format is more complex.

In each class three “courses” are offered: course A for driving and all-purpose farmer ranch dogs; course B, a modified Border Collie type course for fetching dogs; and course C, a modified continental course for boundary herding dogs. Each handler may choose the course best suited for his dog’s herding style.

“Although there will be many exceptions,” Linnette Milleville said, “I expect to see Cattle Dogs, Bouviers, Corgis, Old English Sheepdogs and Smooth Collies on course A; Rough Collies, Shelties and Beaddies on course B; German Shepherds, Briards, Belgian Sheepdogs, Belgian Tervuren, Belgian Malinois and Pulik on course C.

The type of stock animals used depends on the course selected and on the resources of the sponsoring club. For course A, AKC requires three to five cattle, sheep, or goats; or five ducks. For course B, three to five sheep or five ducks. For course C, twenty to one-hundred sheep. Ducks are not allowed on course C.

The size of the arena depends on the course and class. Course A must be between thirty-three by sixty-six yards and sixty-six by 132 yards for all three classes. In course B, the size of the fenced
fields must accommodate the outrun, which is the initial semi-circular path of the dog from the handler to the far side of the stock. For the Started class, the outrun is between forty and 100 yards; for the Intermediate class, between 100 and 200 yards; for the Advanced class, between 100 and 400 yards. For course C, a fenced field of approximately two to six acres will accommodate the length of the boundary course, including all turns and obstacles.

In the Started class for course A, the dog and handler move the livestock along a prescribed course through several turns, between standing panels, through chutes and into a pen. In the two higher classes, dogs perform both gathering and driving work, to demonstrate their versatility. In the Intermediate class, the dog does a short outrun and gather, followed by the same basic pattern as in the Started class, except that the handler is more restricted in his movements. In the Advanced class the dog does a moderately long outrun and gather, followed by the basic pattern, with handler movement even more restricted.

In the Started class for course B, the dog does a moderately long outrun, lift (the initial moving of the stock by the dog) and fetch. Any style of lift is acceptable, from the strong-eyed birddog-like freeze to the huntaway (barking and bouncing). After the fetch, in which the dog may wear back and forth behind the animals to keep them together and on course, the dog and handler move the stock through a pattern which includes panels and chutes. The handler leads the stock with the dog balancing in the rear.
A rough Collie is tested for herding instinct using ducks. While the dog is showing an interest in the stock, the handler encourages the dog to move toward the ducks.

At the end, they pen the livestock. In the Intermediate class, the outrun and fetch are longer. The handler may not lead the stock animals through the rest of the course. To demonstrate versatility, the dog must drive as well as fetch them. Only when the stock approaches the pen may the handler move from his original position. In the Advanced class, the outrun and fetch are longer still, almost one-quarter of a mile each. The drive exercise is more difficult, and at the end, the dog and handler must do a shed, that is, isolate one or two selected animals from the flock.

In the Started class for course C, the dog gathers the stock from a pen and then boundary-herds them along a narrow path through several turns, through a narrow grazing area, past other penned sheep, over a bridge, into a wide grazing area, and then to a road where they pass a standing vehicle. After boundary-herding them down a road, the dog must re-pen them. In the Intermediate class the course is similar but longer with a stop near a real or simulated farm road as a vehicle goes by. In the Advanced class the course is longer still (880 yards). Following the stop by the road and once the flock is on the road, the small vehicle passes both ways. The vehicle may be a bicycle, a cart pulled by an animal or a small garden tractor. The dog must keep the flock from interfering with the progress of the vehicle.

**Why Herding Tests And Trials?**

This is an attractive program, potentially a great spectator sport. However, with most Herding group dogs living in high-rises, condominiums and urban/suburban homes, and with fewer than perhaps one in ten-thousand owners having livestock to tend, who needs it?

The short answer is: The breeders need it; the owners need it; and dogs need it most of all.

The breeders need this program to reestablish the working credentials of their stock and to maintain or reestablish proper temperament and physical soundness.

"It is the eleventh hour for many of these breeds," Lois Russell said. "If you breed only for form, without consideration of function, in a breed that was designed for work, you create serious
Herding requires teamwork. The handler and the dog must read each other continuously.

physical and temperamental problems. Some AKC herding breeds—not all—are 100 years removed from real farm work.

“The instinct testing done by a few of the national breed clubs and by the American Herding Breed Association (AHBA) during the past several years has been an excellent beginning. However, we need the trial program as well, because it demonstrates graduated levels of trainability, not just instinct.”

Linda Rorem said, “We cannot determine temperament in the breed ring. For example, herding breeds should be gentle but courageous. We can prove that in tests and trials, but not in the show ring.”

Susan Holm said, “People select herding breeds for certain characteristics: steadiness, loyalty, reliability. We can prove that our breeding stock has these traits in the new tests and trials.”

The hundreds of thousands of owners of herding group dogs, most of whom will never become serious breeders or show exhibitors, need this program because it is a sport in and of itself, one that both dog and owner can enjoy.

Lois Russell said, “With about 130,000 herding breed dogs registered each year, and say they live six years, which is a conservative estimate, we have over 750,000 dogs eligible to participate.

“This program is based on the assumption that ninety percent—I’m tempted to use the old ivory soap expression, ‘ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredth’s percent’—live in densely populated urban and suburban areas, not out in the country.”

These people belong to the huge post-W.W.II middle class, possessed of enough leisure time and disposable income to engage in hobbies. They will enter the herding tests and trials as a form of recreation, not because they need working herding dogs in their jobs. The enthusiastic response to the instinct testing programs conducted by breed clubs and AHBA has demonstrated this.

The program won’t be fully operational until January 1990, but people are already forming clubs and training groups, looking for expert assistance as they and their dogs practice moving livestock around any pasture they can buy, lease or poach on. Experienced herding folks, like Lynnette Milleville, are working with an overload of beginners groups of recreational trainers.

“I travel to four or five states every week to help groups of beginners,” she said. “Most of them live in high-rises and condominiums, but they want to learn how to work livestock with their dogs.”

Why Herding as a Hobby?

“Herding requires teamwork,” Susan Holm said. “The handler and the dog must read each other continuously. Then, too, both must also understand the stock. The dogs become stock-wise faster than do the owners. Handler errors due to lack of livestock knowledge are common with beginners. They send their dogs the wrong way and the stock scatters to the four winds.

“It’s challenging and it’s fun,” Susan went on. “I know one city dweller so taken with herding that he is looking for a small farm. He and his dog are having a ball out in the meadows, but he is tired of driving an hour and a half each way from his house in town. He has decided to move to a country place with few acres, where he can keep a few sheep and herd to his heart’s content.”

Farmers and ranchers are another potential market. Given the chance to buy working stock dogs from the AKC breeds, many would do so. This may be a diminishing market, but for AKC herding breeds, it is a new one, or nearly so.

“Right now,” Lynnette Milleville said, “Working farmers are limited to Border Collies, Australian Shepherds and Kelpies. Many would prefer one of the easy-to-live-with AKC breeds if they could find proven working stock.”

Susan Holm added, “Many farmers would switch to AKC herding dogs. You know, a dog the wife can show, a dog the kids can enter in junior showmanship, and still a dog the farmer can get a day’s work out of.”

Finally, the dogs need this program.
"They felt very good about themselves, and they were very different dogs from that moment."

Even though many are farther removed from their nearest working ancestors than we are from the First Continental Congress, they retain the instinct to herd. Having the instinct, they need the work to be complete.

Susan Holm told me that she has witnessed dramatic personality transformations in some dogs during instinct testing.

"It's like they realized for the first time in their lives who they are, what they are supposed to do. Their lifelong frustrations vanished, they felt good about themselves and they were different dogs from that moment."

Some dogs express their frustrated herding instinct within the family. I remember Tuffy, the Shepherd/Chow cross we had when I was a pre-schooler. He boundary-herded me in our unfenced yard. If I made a dash for the street on my tricycle, he would grip and hold the back wheel. Kicking and screaming did not dissuade him. It only brought out my mother, who always seemed to side with Tuffy in these disputes.

Susan Holm told me, "My first Beardie had no flock, so he herded my kids when they were toddlers. He would 'gather' them home, 'pen' them on the sofa, and 'wear' until I entered the room. I didn't understand this at the time, but found it very helpful sometimes."

Those interested in more information about locations and dates for these new tests and trials should contact the education coordinator or corresponding secretary of their national breed club (see the listings in this issue).