

Sheepdog Expert Articles

Sheepdog Trials: Choosing a Future Champion by Ceri Rundle

One of the most important and exciting decisions any would-be trainer has to make is 'Which puppy should I buy?'

Now I am well aware of many 'olde wives tales' such as 'always choose the one with three whiskers' or 'the one that always sucks from the mother's last teat' and so on. And that many so called 'experts give us all kinds of recommendations as to what a person should look for when selecting a puppy from a litter, but at the end of the day, we should choose the one we like. To get the full potential out of any dog, you must like each other.

Many people will suggest that any dog is likeable: Well, every human being is 'liked' by some one but that doesn't mean that you or I would want to form a long-term partnership with them - and that is the issue here. Working dogs are individuals like us each with different personalities and characters - therefore finding your 'perfect partner' is not an easy task.

Before selecting your 'champion' you MUST do some homework. It is no good at all just rushing out to look at the first litter of Border Collies that you hear about and then buying the 'cute little white one because it reminds your daughter of your neighbour's old 'Nipper'... No! You must do your homework FIRST.

My father has always looked upon Wiston Cap as being his ideal dog and has therefore strived over the last 30 odd years to breed another like him - in looks and working style and ability. We believe that we came very close in the form of Bwlch Taff a dog that won the Welsh National twice (the first time when he was just 15 months old) and the Reserve Supreme Championship before he died at the age of fourteen. Bwlch Taff was a grandson of Wiston Cap. The goal continues today with both our 'Bwlch' and 'Moel' lines of breeding...

It really helps if you do have an idea of your 'ideal' type of dog so that you can then be directed towards the appropriate bloodlines and reputable breeders. Also consider if you have a preference for a bitch or a

dog? Do you prefer rough or smooth coated dogs? What about colour? Just remember to not sacrifice a good temperament or working ability in the quest of owning a dog of a particular colour!

There is also your own personality to consider - you wouldn't want to have a very strong willed dog if you are more of a reserved type of person and vice versa, a very gentle nature dog would not be the best choice if you are quite a dominant type (apparently that's me ..?). I personally like a dog that I can really 'get at' and it keeps coming back at me - testing and pushing me. These dogs are quite a handful to train but are usually the best for the 'big job' - that is, the tough trials courses and they will stand up to the pressure of competition. But, they are perhaps not the best choice for the complete beginner.

All these little points are extremely important and must be considered BEFORE you select your puppy.

If you don't really know anything nor feel you know enough about the different bloodlines or the type of dog you want, I would suggest you attend some trials, watch the dogs working and talk to their handlers. Find out the dogs' bloodlines and then contact some recommended breeders who will advise you as to when suitable litters are due. The sheepdog trialling world is extremely small and the majority of us are very friendly and will gladly try to help.

I would obviously expect you to buy your puppy from a reputable breeder whose working dogs are ISDS registered and have been eye tested for both PRA and Collie Eye Anomaly (some may have been hip scored too for Hip Dysplasia but many of the top handlers are not keen on risking their dogs by putting them under general anaesthetic. It is also worth mentioning here, that my father has seen, bred and trained hundreds of dogs and has not once seen a working dog with hip problems. But it is amazing how many 'problems' seem to occur overseas...) We also have all our puppies tested for CEA when they are six weeks old and have them inoculated against the awful Parvo Virus before they leave our farm. If you are not willing to invest in this added security and help protect the future well being of the working Border Collie, then I am sorry, but you don't deserve to have one of these marvellous dogs.

When you go to see the litter - go on your own. If you take children or your partner, you may be persuaded to take the puppy that would not necessarily be your first choice. Having said that, I would always choose the pup my dad should keep.... But remember, you have got to like the puppy because it will be you who will be training it.

I personally like to spend considerable time watching a litter of puppies to see how they interact with one another ; How they react to strangers and new noises, etc. I tend to choose the cheekiest one that is very inquisitive and not at all backward in coming forward - and which is nicely marked (in my opinion). I would never choose one that seems very shy, or awkward with strangers or tends to stay by itself a lot - children and some women tend to choose this type because they feel sorry for it. This is not a good reason to choose a puppy...

When you eventually start training your youngster with sheep, you want one that is full of self confidence and not one that you have to keep coaxing. The latter type will never stand up to the pressure when the training becomes quite intensive which it will do for the top competition. Right, so now you have made your choice (see check list) and got yourself an eight week old 'bundle of mischief'. Will it be a winner ? Who knows...!

A foal may be bred from the best two race horses in the world. When it grows up it will most certainly be able to run fast, BUT, will it be able to run as fast as its parents or, more importantly, faster than the competition. It is down to its own ability and the trainer / jockey being able to get the full potential out of that horse.

Sheepdog training is a little the same - only much more difficult because the only contact we have with our 'partner' is through our voice or whistle. Plus, we all know that just by mating two brilliant dogs it doesn't mean that they will reproduce a dog that has all of its parents qualities without the faults. Each puppy may throw back to one of the parents predecessors and look nothing nor act like either of the parents.. This is what makes breeding so fascinating and why it is really important for a novice to talk to the trainers who really dog know these dogs' bloodlines and find out what sort of typical traits, faults and habits these working lines have.

There are no guarantees in this sport - all we can try to do is to increase the odds. By selecting a puppy in the way I have mentioned, I believe, you will have made a great start.

Good Luck.

CHECK LIST

Parents

- ISDS Registered
- Eye Tested for PRA and CEA
- Hip Score (Not vital)

Puppies

- Wormed
- Eye Tested
- Inoculated
- General Health

(No presence of hernias, dew claws, fleas, deformaties of the mouth, deafness. Check presence of testicles in male dogs).

(posted 28/07/2003)
