



Sheepdog Expert Articles

What Class Should I Enter? by Ceri Rundle

One of the nicest things about the wonderful sport of sheepdog trialling is the ability to compete anywhere in the country and to get to meet so many different faces. The only requirement that you need is to know when and where the various trials are being held, the classes and how to enter. Many events have been run on the same weekend for several years so the regular competitors thoroughly 'know the ropes' and can plan accordingly but if you are a newcomer to the sport then it might appear as if a 'secret underground network' is in operation! I can assure you that this is not the case and I'm certain that you would be made to feel very welcome as a newcomer by the organisers of any trial.

To help you get started I would recommend that you try to make contact with a local dogman (Sorry, dogperson!) who could provide a lot of invaluable information about the local trials and some useful contacts elsewhere in the UK. The International Sheep Dog Society's office in Bedford should also be able to give you some help in this direction - (01234) 352672.

Another good source of help is Barbara C. Collins' 'A Guide to Sheepdog Trials in Britain & Ireland' published by Farming Press Books. This book provides details of over 400 sheepdog trials that are annually held throughout the country. Barbara has painstakingly obtained for each event, the details of classes and entry registration, tourist information for each venue, and precise directions on how to find the site (always useful to know!) - even the catering, toilets and parking information is provided.

Most trials are run over 1 - 2 days - usually on a Friday and Saturday - although as the Summer progresses and with there being so many trials held it is often possible to find a trial-a-day! Here in Wales, the norm is for the Second Class (sometimes called the Novice Class) to be run on the Friday and the Open on the Saturday because there are just so many dogs. However, to help overcome this 'problem', the two classes are sometimes run in conjunction i.e. the one run counts for the two classes.

This has the advantage of the organisers being able to take more entries but is perhaps a disadvantage to the competitor who only has the one go. Generally, I believe that most competitors are happy with this arrangement because if they

don't feel that their less experienced dog has a real chance of winning a prize in the Open Class then they can opt not to enter it in the two classes. I also think it stops some competitors being too selfish. By this I mean, it prevents a person who has perhaps two or three 'novice' dogs from having up to six runs and in doing so, perhaps stops the person with just their one Open standard dog from having just one run through lack of time.

This instance can occur because there is no standard set for dogs entering the Open Class - in other words, there is nothing to stop a complete newcomer to the sport from entering the Open Class at their very first trial. Personally I think this should change but that is because here in Wales, we are in the enviable position of having so many competitors. Elsewhere in the country, organisers are 'crying out' for entries to make the trial financially viable (and to meet the 'national qualification' criteria) so any such 'restrictions' would not be welcomed. Here in North Wales, we can have over 100 dogs competing in one day's trialling resulting in a 'standard' being implemented by the judge in order to get through all the runs. This can unfortunately upset some people who have travelled a long way and perhaps end up spending less than two minutes competing because their run has failed to meet the 'standard' by the end of the 'fetch'! Maybe by setting a qualification for entry into the Open Class this 'situation' could be overcome...?

Most competitors will tend to run their young and inexperienced dogs in the Second or Novice Class. Eligibility of entry is dictated by the trial's organisers and is usually set 'For dogs not having won a first or second prize in an Open Class or First in a Novice'. These classes allow the young future hopeful to get plenty of trialling experience before running in the Open. Unfortunately, we are all guilty of wanting to get the dog into the Open Class as soon as possible to try to get some National Qualification Points! Having said that, if the dog is any good, he will soon 'win' himself out of the Novice anyway.

Unfortunately, there are a few people who do 'abuse' this system by keeping their dog in the Novice Class and do not attempt to run in the Open Class in case they put themselves out of the Novice. They keep winning the prizes and gaining more and more experience and there is nothing to stop them continuing to do this season after season. It is quite a lucrative affair as it is much easier to pick up a prize in this Class than in the Open and makes it harder for the less experienced handlers/dogs to compete with them. It is not fair and it certainly is not what this sport is all about.

There is one real disadvantage of moving too quickly into the Open Class: When the perhaps slightly less experienced handler has had a 'fluke' run with his young dog very early on in the season and put themselves instantly out

of Novice Classes. This will mean that they will now have to compete with the very best competitors and dogs straight away and have to strive to meet the high 'standard' at each trial. Imagine being asked to 'retire' frequently at the trials - Wouldn't this become totally demoralising to a newcomer? Instead, wouldn't it have been far better for the handler and their young dog to gain plenty of experience and possibly gain a number of prizes in the Novice before moving into the bigger class?

(posted 28/07/2003)
