

## Evaluating Instinct

Instinct tests may be formal, sanctioned by an organization; or informal, with no certificate or title earned. In most cases, an instinct test is held with a few sheep in a circular 'control pen' about 40 - 50 feet in diameter. Smaller pens give the tester more control of the situation. The shape prevents the sheep from holding up in corners. Novice dogs do not typically have the skills needed to get sheep out of corners.

The dog enters on lead, either on the dead ring of a choke or a buckle collar. The evaluator observes the dog's body language & demeanor to determine when the dog is to be released. Some evaluators let the dog drag the lead, which makes it a little easier to catch him if he forgets his name or doesn't want to quit.

The dog is encouraged to move toward then behind the sheep. The evaluator is looking for a dog that watches the stock's heads, controls or tries to control their movement, does not chase or grip & seems willing to listen and include the evaluator in the game.

It might not be clear what is chasing and what is early herding behavior, they look similar if you don't know what you're looking at. A chasing dog is directly behind the sheep or on a path between the handler and the sheep. A chasing dog makes no attempt to move in a path wider than the sheep and no attempt to bring the sheep to the handler. The dog may set his sights on one particular animal instead of seeing the group. A dog may need a moderate correction for him to 'see the light', stop chasing and come up with a better plan.

Although it's done to some degree in the instinct testing ring, the object is not for the dog to run endless circles around the stock. Circling is a phase in the dog's learning process. He needs to figure out following is labor intensive and he needs to form a plan. By moving wider than the sheep, or giving the illusion he can move wider, the sheep move off the fenceline and turn towards the tester.

In the first moments of a test, the dog is allowed to do what his instinct tells him to. After the dog becomes more comfortable with the situation the evaluator may try to change the dog's direction of travel. If he has been circling clockwise, counter-clockwise is introduced. It's normal that he have a preference for one or the other, it's similar to humans being right or left handed. Stepping into or blocking the dog's path can change his direction. It's very important that a herding dog learns to work comfortably and willingly in both directions.

Imagining a clock face as your circular pen, the hour hand represents the

sheep, the minute hand the dog & the handler &/or tester will be in the center. The sheep are at 12, dog & handler in the center. The dog is released. IDEALLY the dog would move out towards the 9 or the 10 & proceed towards the sheep at 12. (In reality, the dog will probably go straight towards 12 and the sheep will scramble off towards 3 or 6...)

The sheep are moving towards 3. IDEALLY the dog moves out wider than the sheep, still heading toward 3, but on a slightly wider parallel path. The sheep see the dog out of their left eyes & turn towards the handler in the center. (In real life, most dogs are right on the sheeps' tail, on the same path. The tester will encourage the dog to go out wider, by gesturing with their crook or stepping in towards the dog.)

The herding term for moving clockwise, sheep starting at 12, moving towards 3, is 'come by' or 'go by'; as in 'by' the clock. The counter-clockwise movement is called 'away' or 'away to me'. The commands are easily one of the most confusing components of herding. Early on you won't need to concern yourself with learning them. An instinct test is looking for behaviors that indicate the dog has inborn traits that can be molded into a working herding dog, not looking for command-following obedience.

Let's say the sheep are at 12, you're in the handler spot and the dog goes out towards the 10 & on up to his sheep. The sheep are moving towards 3. You move towards 4 and continue walking up towards 12. The dog should leave the sheep briefly & swing around the sheep, counter-clockwise, changing their direction from clockwise to counter-clockwise. As you do serpentines around the pen, the dog should fairly instinctually figure out to swing around to keep the sheep in 'balance'. You may have to encourage the dog to go out wider by stepping towards him a bit or using your crook. A crook block a direction of travel, they do not point in the direction of travel.

For dogs who will be tending, the typical round-pen instinct test takes the dog in a direction that is contrary to tending behavior. A tending instinct evaluation can begin with a dog loose on the outside of a free-standing pen full of sheep. The dog is free to move clockwise or counter-clockwise around the pen. At this stage we're not looking for the dog to try and control these sheep, we're just seeing if the dog is interested in them. If he's really keen to interact, he's ready to proceed. A less keen dog may need numerous exposures to the penned sheep to 'wake up' the instinct.

The dog is introduced to a border outside a pen of sheep. The dog generally starts out on leash, with the handler walking the dog up & down a very distinct border. The border must be easily identified by both handler & dog. Scuffed up or plowed dirt paths along side grassy areas are ideal. The handler on the 'inside' of the border, closest to the sheep, the dog is on the 'outside'. The dog may travel in the border or along side of the border, but cannot cross. Once the

dog understands & honors the border, he is free to move along dragging his leash or off leash.

In the final step, the dog patrols a border with unpenned sheep. After the dog is reliable at this step, he can begin real work, i.e., patrolling a border showing the sheep where they can graze.

About the other animals in the instinct test...

Sheep & goats were first domesticated roughly about 11,000 years ago, following the dog as man's first domesticated animals (13,000 - 30,000 years ago).

Sheep are prey animals with strong natural inclination to 'follow the leader' and 'stay with the flock'. Sheep instinctively flock together for safety. Once grouped, they prefer to remain together and move as a unit. Sheep that split off will try to return to the flock.

As their eyes are set on the side of their heads, they have excellent peripheral vision & can see behind themselves. They have poor depth perception. To influence a sheep's movement, you must be in their line of sight. A threat appearing in the sheep's left eye, will generally cause the sheep to turn to the right & vice versa. Clean faced sheep have a greater field of vision than wool faced sheep.

Who knew there were so many sheep breeds?! There are a variety of wool breeds each producing wool for different end-products. Finer wool makes clothing and coarser wool makes rugs. Some breeds are naturally polled (no horns) while Jacob rams can have 4 horns. Black-faced sheep have a reputation for being difficult and not having a strong flocking instinct. Hair sheep are often more reactive than woolies. Barbados, St. Croix, Katahdin and Dorper are the most well known of the hair sheep breeds. Hair sheep do not produce wool at all and never need shearing, their thick winter coats shed out in the spring. Occasionally, a test or trial will use goats instead of sheep. Goats somewhat resemble hair sheep, but they do not work similarly. Goats do not have as strong flocking instinct as sheep and their flight zone is different.

Dog-broke stock are the norm for AKC herding tests and trials. 'Dog-broke' describes stock that are accustomed to being worked by dogs. Dog-broke does not mean the sheep are trained or tame, they are conditioned to accept a dog's leadership. Sheep can be dog-broke to particular breeds or working styles. Sheep accustomed to the crouching working style of a Border Collie may freak out when encountering GSDs.

Sheep are often referred to as dumb, but they are very adept at knowing what sheep need to know! Their species has eons of experience reacting to predators.

Sheep size up the dog and handler the second they step onto the field. If the sheep believe you have no control over your dog, they will not trust you and will not flock to you.

Whether your goal is to train for competition or simply to see your German Shepherd Dog do what he was bred to do, a newbie herding handler has as much to learn as the dog. (More so if you consider humans weren't selected for their herding abilities.) Herding training requires mastering fundamentals (dog & handler), understanding course elements (handler), building handling skills (handler) and learning to read livestock (handler).

Not much special equipment is required other than a trainer, sheep, mud boots and a dog-mobile; the trainer and the sheep are critical components. Regardless of your dog's natural ability, time spent with the wrong trainer will greatly slow your progress, if not bring it to a screeching halt. Search out trainers who have successful students & have had success with GSDs or similar breeds in addition to their own breed.