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HERDING INSTINCT TESTS

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herding instinct tests came about as a way to provide an accessible and standardized introduction to herding for owners and dogs who might otherwise have little opportunity in this area. It is simply the supervised exposure of an inexperienced dog to livestock, in the same way that in a home situation a trainer might introduce a herding prospect to stock as the preliminary to beginning training. Several herding breed clubs have programs whereby dogs passing standardized tests earn the title "Herding Instinct Certified" (HIC or HC). Other clubs do not give titles, but may count the test as a leg toward another title or accept it as part of a versatility awards program.

The tests did not arise with the idea that they could ever substitute for the gradual introduction to herding that traditionally formed the basis of the herding dog's experience. It should be kept in mind that these tests have great limitations. A private session or lesson with a trainer allows for more individual attention. And passing an instinct test does not "prove" the dog is a good herder. Tests only provide a glimpse of potential. It can happen that a dog that does well at a test soon loses interest. Or a very keen dog may prove to be difficult to use as a herding dog because it has an overexcitable or uncooperative nature and may even be too aggressive for the stock. It can also happen that a dog that shows little interest the first time it is exposed to stock, or even after several times, suddenly has the light go on and proves to be a capable herder. Only time, training and experience will provide a clear picture of a dog's abilities.

Although a dog need not have had previous herding training before taking part in a test, a prior introduction to livestock under the supervision of an experienced trainer is desirable, and in any case the dog should have had training to come and to stop (sit or down) on command. The tester, a person

experienced with stockdog training, supervises the introduction of the dogs to livestock, usually sheep but sometimes ducks, geese or goats. While occasionally a herding instinct test will be held at a fairground or similar venue, it is preferable for the test to be held at a trainer's established facility. The sheep should be what are sometimes referred to as "school sheep" - sheep that a trainer regularly employs to introduce young dogs to stock work, well-accustomed to being worked by a variety of dogs. They should be cooperative and move freely and calmly. Sheep of this type will stay grouped and will readily move with the handler, helping to give the dog the right "feel" for the situation.

A herding demonstration should take place before the beginning of testing, with information being provided to help introduce owners to principles involved with herding behaviors and training. Information on various aspects of herding should be provided throughout the day. Education is an important aspect, aimed at increasing the knowledge and involvement of the inexperienced owner, both relative to herding in general and the individual dog being tested, and with regard to preparation for the next steps in herding training.

At a typical test, 15 to 25 dogs will be evaluated, one at a time. Each dog is brought on lead into a moderate-sized enclosure with rounded corners. The tester asks the owner a few questions regarding the dog's background and the owner's experience. Usually the dog is first walked around or near the stock on lead so that its initial behavior can be observed. Then, at an appropriate time, the lead is removed or dropped and the tester guides the dog and encourages it to herd the stock. The stock should be well settled, preferably somewhat out in the open so as to allow the dog and stock to move more freely and smoothly, providing the opportunity for the dog to establish control of the movement of the stock under the guidance of the handler. The owner stays near the tester so as to provide a single focal point for the dog and stock, but usually does not take an active part unless experienced with stockdog training. The movements of the tester help the dog position itself in relation to the stock. The tester may carry a pole to be used as an extension of the arm in guiding the dog's movements. At most tests a maximum of 10 minutes is allowed for each test session. Actual time in the arena often is shorter, the test being concluded upon the dog demonstrating herding instinct.

The behavior of the dogs will vary. Some may quickly show strong interest, with attempts to go around the stock to gather it, or approach it and follow it about; others may require several minutes for the instinct to surface. There might be an attempt at aggressive pursuit, or there might be uncertainty or disinterest. Some dogs will work quietly, while others may bark in excitement. Some dogs may not test favorably the first time, needing additional experience, then demonstrate good instinct at a subsequent test.

After the individual test session, the tester fills out an evaluation or test form.

indicating whether the dog passed and marking the form according to the characteristics exhibited by the dog. The tester spends a few minutes discussing the behaviors shown by the dog and providing additional information and suggestions. For those who decide to look into proceeding with further herding training, an instinct test can provide a starting point for connecting with a trainer and finding leads for obtaining more information.

Evaluation or Testing Forms For Herding Instinct Tests:

The following is an explanation of the terms used on a typical testing form. While they come from the testing form used by the Collie Club of America, several other organizations use similar forms. In the example below, the words in bold type are the words which appear on the form and the words in regular type are explanatory notes regarding the particular section.

The sections on the testing form are primarily descriptive in nature. The first five sections are entirely descriptive and are not considered to vary in desirability. The remaining sections include both acceptable variations and behaviors that vary in desirability in greater or lesser degree. The lines are to be checked where applicable. In some cases it may result that more than one line is checked in a particular subsection, or that no line is checked. The lines for additional comments are very important, as not all eventualities can be accommodated in a standard form. The tester must mark according to what is seen that day, although it can be noted in the comments section if there is evidence of possible changes developing through more experience. Each exposure can bring about changes as the dog becomes more experienced and undergoes the influence of training.

STYLE

- ☐ gathering
- ☐ driving
- ☐ Gathering/some driving
- ☐ driving/some gathering
- ☐ no clear preference

When gathering, the dog attempts to head off or circle the stock and move it toward the handler. When driving, the dog stays between the handler and the stock, keeping the stock grouped but deliberately attempting to push it away from the handler. Dogs of breeds traditionally thought of or used as "drivers" may often in fact show gathering instinct. Behaviors sometimes seen in inexperienced dogs should not be mistaken for driving, such as: an insecure dog that wants to stay near the handler and may run back and forth between the owner and the stock, pushing the stock away; a dog so strongly desiring to head off the stock that, when the stock turns, the dog repeatedly cuts across between the stock and the handler in order to get to the heads as quickly as possible; a dog that is simply chasing or playing.

Some dogs may show tendencies to both gather and drive in varying degrees. One tendency may predominate with the other being used in particular situations, for instance, a dog that may be a natural driver going to the head to stop stock from moving forward too quickly or escaping. If gathering and driving are about equal, the

the two first lines can both be marked.

Some dogs, often through inexperience, seem to show no style preference or switch randomly back and forth between gathering and driving, or simply go after the stock from any position. As the test continues the dog may begin to show a more definite style. Some dogs will need more exposure for a more definite style preference to take hold. A dog which shows both gathering and driving tendencies may pass, but a dog will not pass if it shows no discernible inclination to control the group and its movement, and just runs at the stock or chases with no real attempt at herding.

Behaviors often seen in inexperienced dogs which are in fact due to lack of herding experience should not be mistaken for a herding "style" -- for instance, a dog which holds stock against a fence is simply showing inexperience in dealing with the situation, it is not demonstrating some other "style" of stock-handling.

As with the other sections, there is a comments line for the tester to provide more details about natural tendencies of the dog, testing methods utilized, etc.

APPROACH

☐ runs wide
☐ runs moderately wide
☐ runs close

A wide-running dog consistently exhibits a tendency to keep a good distance from the stock while moving around it, showing strong interest. This should be distinguished, however, from a dog which is running wide because of avoidance behavior or lack of interest in the stock.

When running moderately wide, the dog is neither notably wide nor very close. The dog may start close but is easily encouraged to move wider. Some dogs swing in close, then swing out wider. A more detailed description can be given on the lines for additional comments.

A close-running dog consistently moves close. While such a dog's approach can be widened, it will require more training to effect this.

In many cases the dog's distance from the stock may depend on the nature of the stock and the situation, with the dog placing itself closer or further back as appropriate.

EYE

☐ loose
☐ medium
☐ strong

A loose-eyed dog is one which has good concentration but without the level of intensity of focus of the dog which shows medium or strong eye. Loose eye should not be confused with lack of attention to stock. Loose-eyed workers are in control of their stock and keep track of the overall picture. A fairly upright body posture and a free-moving manner of working are usually displayed.

Medium indicates intense concentration but fairly free in movement, body posture usually upright to some extent.

Strong-eyed indicates a very intense concentration with a stalking, pausing approach.

usually with a lowered body stance.

WEARING

- ☐ shows wearing
- ☐ a little wearing
- ☐ no wearing

This indicates the side-to-side movement the dog makes to keep the stock together as it moves the stock forward. A larger group of animals, or animals which keep wanting to split, may increase the dog's tendency to wear. A dog may wear in wide arcs or in shorter arcs. Some dogs wear constantly, others in response to particular situations. A dog which shows no wearing will often allow splits in the group.

BARK ☐ Works silently

- ☐ force barks
- ☐ some barking
- ☐ sustained barking.

The dog which works silently may give an occasional bark in excitement or for another reason, but essentially is quiet.

The dog which force barks is fairly quiet but will readily bark in an attempt to move stubborn stock.

In some cases the dog simply has a natural tendency to bark a lot. Some smaller dogs will use their voices to help make their presence known. When working large groups of animals, some dogs will bark in order to have an effect on the animals which can't see the dog. Dogs with a natural barking style, called "huntaways," are used to force sheep from hiding places in rough pastures; huntaways should be so noted, and will generally also be very loose-eyed, somewhat pushy dogs. Often, barking may be due to excitement, frustration at uncooperative stock, or lack of confidence, in which case barking will lessen with experience. The comments lines should be used to note the nature of the barking.

TEMPERAMENT

- ☐ readily adjusts
- ☐ a little distraction
- ☐ easily distracted
- ☐ apprehensive of situation

The dog which readily adjusts adapts to the situation quickly and turns its attention to the stock. Such a dog may pause a moment to size up the situation, but shows no signs of nervousness. The dog may have some very brief moments of distraction, particularly at first, but the dog's interest quickly and steadily builds to the point where the interest is definite and sustained.]

Some dogs may have definite interest in the stock but be diverted by a scent on the ground or by something happening outside the ring. In some cases the dog still may be passed provided that the incidents are brief and the dog readily returns its attention to the stock. On the other hand, if the dog shows only a little interest in the stock and is very much more interested in other things, it is not demonstrating the consistent, sustained interest that would be necessary for preliminary training to begin, and it should not be passed. Some dogs, particularly young dogs, may show strong interest for a minute or two, then lose interest entirely. If the interest reawakens the dog may

be passed, provided the interest is then sustained, but if not, the dog should not be passed at that time. Further exposure and retesting should be recommended because dogs which are easily distracted often progress to strong, sustained interest with more experience.]

In some cases a dog which is apprehensive of the situation or initially shows some reserve or timidity may still pass if its confidence level readily increases. As with the easily distracted dog, further exposure and testing often increases the dog's confidence level. The dog which, despite encouragement, shows continuing fear of stock or situation should not pass.

INTEREST

- ☐ sustained interest
- ☐ very keen interest
- ☐ some interest
- ☐ no interest

Sustained interest - the dog definitely and consistently keeps its attention on the stock although there may be some glancing about or very brief periods of distraction.

Keen interest - this is self-explanatory and should be used to indicate those dogs that are especially keen.

Some interest -- the dog evidences interest in the stock, but to a lesser extent or more intermittently; because the extent of the interest will be variable, these dogs may be borderline cases and careful thought will need to be given whether or not to pass them.

No interest -- self-explanatory.

POWER

- ☐ sufficient for stock
- ☐ forceful, appropriate
- ☐ excessive force
- ☐ lacks power to move stock

Sufficient for stock -- shows power suitable for stock. If the stock proves stubborn, the dog attempts to continue working but may show some hesitation, often due to inexperience.

Forceful, appropriate -- the dog approaches the stock boldly and confidently. The dog may occasionally attempt to nip sheep or paw ducks, but not to the extent that it constitutes a threat to the stock. It will be apparent that the dog is very interested in the stock and desires to control its movement, but it does not intend to harm the stock. Even if excited, the dog will accept the tester's guidance to encourage it to temper its actions toward the stock. The type of stock (different kinds, different individuals within a kind) will require different degrees of force. The dog should show enough force to control the stock, without being rough.

Excessive force -- the approach is very strong, with the dog lunging at the stock and sometimes attempting to grip. The dog shows little or no tendency to tailor its actions to suit the type or behavior of the stock. Such a dog may still be passed only if it responds to the tester's intervention to get it to behave in a more self-controlled manner.

Lacks power to move stock -- the dog shows interest in the stock and will circle it or

follow it if it moves, but if the stock does not move, the dog stands and watches it or looks to the handler. Ideally, the dog will respond to encouragement and gain self-confidence with experience. In some cases the stock may simply be too stubborn or uncooperative for an otherwise adequately powerful but inexperienced dog, and this should be noted.

RESPONSIVENESS

- ☐ responsive to guidance/control
- ☐ somewhat responsive
- ☐ unresponsive
- ☐ inhibited by guidance/control

Some dogs quickly show willingness to accept training, although their actions may be of an unrefined nature. They may need to be shown several times, but soon adopt the desired behavior. Other dogs simply persist in their behavior, despite attempts at guidance, or appear to take little notice of attempts at guidance, or may even stop working and sulk in response to attempts at guidance. Some dogs may be inhibited by attempts at guidance. Extra care may be needed in the handling of an especially sensitive dog.

GROUPING OF STOCK

- ☐ keeps stock grouped/regroups
- ☐ does not regroup
- ☐ singles out individuals/splits
- ☐ chases stock
- ☐ loses contact with stock

Ideally the dog moves to keep stock grouped if some animals attempt to break away. Some dogs may make attempts to regroup in some instances and not others, and some may make little or no attempt to regroup. There are dogs which deliberately single out an individual repeatedly, while others may chase one individual or the whole group with no attempt to control the direction or composition of the group. Some dogs may run in response to stock movement, but then begin running for running's sake and lose contact with the stock. Too little effort to control the movement of the stock may indicate chasing rather than herding.

BALANCING STOCK WITH HANDLER

- ☐ adjusts position
- ☐ some adjustment
- ☐ no adjustment

This section concerns balance in the sense of the dog's movements in directing the stock in relation to the handler's position (balance in the broad sense includes the dog's distance relative to the stock's "flight zone," encompassing the positioning used in directing and controlling the stock). Some dogs clearly change direction in response to the movement of the handler in order to keep the stock in a position relative to the handler's position. This is clearest in gathering dogs where, if the dog is circling the stock and the handler moves around the stock to meet it, the dog will change direction to keep its position opposite the handler; if the handler is moving or giving round in a particular direction and alters the direction, the dog will move to one side or the other to cause the stock to change direction. A driving dog, while taking stock away from the handler, will be aware of the handler's direction of travel and adjust its own position to cause the stock to move in that direction. Some dogs, while moving the stock and keeping it grouped, do not take the handler's position into consideration, while some may simply circle the stock repeatedly in one direction, or hold the stock against a

fence.

COMMENTS:

The comments section is particularly important. Strong points and areas needing improvement with regard to the dog's performance and the handler's handling should be noted, suggestions given, and notations made of the difficulty or cooperativeness of the stock -- anything that has a bearing on the dog's performance and the understanding of what transpired during the run. Overall comments are to be made in addition to comments under the different sections.

STOCK EVALUATION

☐ cooperative
☐ controllable
☐ uncooperative
☐ uncontrollable

The behavior of the stock should be noted to provide background regarding the dog's behavior, because the nature of the stock can have a strong bearing on the dog's reactions, especially the less experienced dog. With regard to uncooperative stock, it should be indicated whether the stock was still controllable, or not only uncooperative but of such a nature as to be uncontrollable.

Herding instinct tests should take place at established herding facilities whenever possible, utilizing experienced stock regularly worked by the tester. Such facilities will be set up for efficient stock handling and the stock will be more relaxed and cooperative. If a test is held at a facility other than that of an established trainer, it nonetheless should utilize experienced stock, preferably stock that is regularly worked by the tester.

The resting area for the stock should be some distance from the trialling or testing arena in order to avoid confusing the dog being tested as to which group it should keep its attention on, and in order to prevent stock in the arena from hugging the fence near their flock-mates. Vision screens must be set up if two adjacent arenas are being used or if the waiting area can be seen from the trialling/testing arena.

Tests should be held in a private setting. Trials of fully trained dogs are the proper showcase for herding for the general public. The stock must be gentle and accustomed to being worked by a variety of dogs, free-moving but not inclined to run. Stock which may work for an experienced dog may not be docile enough for inexperienced dogs.

Calm, cooperative stock, accustomed to being worked by a variety of dogs, will remain well grouped and move freely but not too fast, giving a dog the best opportunity to demonstrate instinct.

Stock must be healthy and in good condition; unhealthy or unsound animals must be withdrawn immediately and given any necessary care.

There must be at least three, preferably more, groups of each kind of stock with which to rotate so that the animals have ample time to rest between runs. Hot weather or other factors may require more frequent rotation and longer rest periods. The tester should halt a testing session at any sign of stress on the part of the stock.

Safety and humane treatment of the animals are of utmost importance. Rest, water,

shade, and where necessary protection from wind, must be provided for stock. Waiting dogs should be kept away from the resting area for the stock. Dogs, too must be cared for properly, and water and shade must be made available for dogs. The tester and those concerned with the test must make every effort to insure that neither stock nor dogs come to any harm. Careful attention must be paid at these events to the public's perception of what is happening to the animals. **ANIMALS ARE TO BE TREATED RESPECTFULLY AND RESPONSIBLY BY EVERYONE CONCERNED.**

There should be herding demonstrations by the tester or other qualified individual at the beginning of the test and educational talks regarding herding in general. Demonstrations and talks given early in the day should be repeated for the benefit of later arrivals. The tester should invite and respond to questions from participants and the audience.

EDUCATION IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF TESTS. Testers must be able to work well with people, showing an ability to communicate pleasantly and clearly, always being willing to answer questions and provide comments both to participants and the audience. Participants must be given the necessary guidance to provide a positive experience for both owners and dogs. There must be education aimed at increasing the knowledge and involvement of the inexperienced owner, both relative to herding in general and with regard to preparation for the next steps in herding training. The overall impressions given at tests are very important.

The tester has to be flexible in administering a test, but should also conduct the test in a reasonably standardized format.

The owner or owner's agent should bring the dog into the enclosure on lead. The tester will ask the owner some brief questions regarding the dog's background and the owner's experience, and whether this test is for the dog's first or second leg.

It is strongly recommended that the dog have prior supervised experience before coming to a formal test. It is especially recommended that the dog have solid training to stop on command (sit, down or stand) and recall reliably with distractions.

The tester's active and/or advisory participation is important at all times. Initially, the tester may do most of the handling of the dog, or may closely guide the owner in so much as to the amount of handling. Inexperienced owners will need close guidance because they will not know the techniques that help develop proper habits, nor will they best be able to see potential problems. More experienced owners may do a larger part or all of the handling. When the tester and the owner are both in the enclosure, they should be in close proximity to one another in order to provide the dog and stock with a single reference point.

The stock should be well settled, preferably away from the fence and not in a corner. Initially, the dog may be walked on lead around the stock, keeping to the outside and moving along the fence with the stock being encouraged to stay toward the middle.

The tester may carry a 6- to 10-ft. bamboo pole or light PVC pipe to be used as an aid in guiding the movements of the dog or when necessary to block the dog from coming too close to the stock. The pole should be flexible, with the ends wrapped with tape or otherwise padded for the sake of safety. Wooden staffs or poles should not be used by testers; however, experienced owners handling their own dog may carry a standard shepherd's crook. While the dog is working smoothly the pole is held discreetly out of the way, and may be set down entirely if not needed or if a dog is inhibited by its

presence. It should not be overused nor used inappropriately.

A long-line may be used. The dog should not be allowed to strain against a leash or long-line, nor should it be guided extensively by a leash or line. The dog may pass with a leash or line dragging, but not with the leash or line held throughout the test.

When the leash or line is dropped or removed, the dog should not simply be left to its own devices while the handler stands by. The handler (tester, or owner under the guidance of the tester) must be actively participating at all times to help develop good working habits. The handler must move about the field, giving ground to the stock, creating a place for the dog to move the stock.

There may be some basic, simple training activities by the tester, because part of a dog's herding ability is the ability to learn and take directions. Such basic training at tests should be general in nature. It must be kept in mind that the dog is to be allowed to reveal its natural tendencies and should not be forced into a particular behavior corresponding to a preconceived idea of "breed style." Commands should be kept to a minimum in order to determine the dog's natural manner of working. It is to be expected that there will be some differences as well as some overlap in style between breeds and between individuals. Many acceptable variations in style occur in herding dogs, which should be accommodated.

Ideally, the dog will quickly show strong interest, attempting to keep the stock grouped and trying to control the movement of the stock relative to the position of the handler. The dog will show boldness and self-confidence without excessive aggression, naturally keeping a good distance from the stock rather than repeatedly rushing in too close. In practice there will be many individual variations, including less-than-ideal reactions often reflective of the dog's inexperience.

For the most part the stock should be encouraged to stay out in the open, giving more room for maneuver, although there may be some cases where the tester may keep the stock along the fence for a brief time for a particular purpose. There may be some cases where the tester will keep the stock along a fence for a brief time for a particular purpose, but for the most part the stock should be encouraged to stay out in the open, giving more room for maneuver. Inexperienced dogs usually do not know how to handle fence-hugging behavior by stock, and may end up repeatedly holding it against the fence or charging it because it is "cornered." With guidance and experience, the dog will learn how to handle such situations.

The passing dog should show good, sustained interest of such a nature that the dog appears to be ready to begin preliminary training. Strong desire and a well-adjusted, willing attitude should be demonstrated. The overall impression should be that the dog has the potential to be a useful, practical working dog. Constructive herding activity, not chasing, should be evidenced. Whether or not to pass borderline cases must be a judgment call by the tester. As a general rule, such dogs should not be passed at the time. It should be kept in mind that retesting on another day is available and recommended.

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Herding on the Web

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