

Who really cares about sheep?

Believe it or not I actually had someone say that to me when talking about dogs. To not care about the very reason Border Collies are in existence, is a crime as far as I'm concerned. If it weren't for sheep we wouldn't even have these dogs. Everything that we look for in a great dog is there because of sheep. The shepherds all those years ago that started breeding dogs, knew exactly what was needed to help them in their everyday job. This wasn't just so they could have straight lines, hit gates, and get their pictures on the cover of magazines. Their livelihoods depended upon it. They needed a dog that could outbalance, overpower, and outsmart, (yes I said outsmart, if sheep are so stupid why does it take the most intelligent dog there is to work them?). To take sheep out of the picture when working with these dogs makes everything so much more difficult. Why would you not use the one and only reason we have all of those qualities that we love. Sheep come into every aspect of Border Collies as far as I'm concerned, whether it's training, competing, or judging. I know a lot of people are probably saying, well of course they do, but I think there are a lot of people that aren't using the sheep, and don't even realize it. When someone asks me a training question, my first reply always is, what were the sheep doing? Most of the people cannot answer that, they have no idea what the sheep were doing at the time. It's hard for me to give an answer, if I don't know why the dog was acting the way it was. Dogs usually act in accordance to what the sheep are doing, so in training, it's so much easier to read the sheep, and train accordingly. I know not everyone will be able to read sheep the same; it comes naturally to some, and has to be learned in others. I think anyone can improve on their stock sense if they apply themselves to it. Whether you're a more natural handler, letting the dog have it's sheep and only correcting or guiding when needed, or a mechanical one, that tells the dog every step to take, if you can't read sheep you're going to be in big trouble. A handler that has stock sense can help the dog be on the proper pressure point. If you don't have any idea what or where the pressure point is, even the most natural dog in the world is only going to be able to do so much. When you're watching a trial, it's usually the handlers that can read stock that do well, whether they are mechanical or natural, doesn't mean that they won't have wrecks, just means they can handle their way through a wreck more efficiently, because they are reading their stock. How often have you seen a top team go to the post when the stock has been very tough, and they make it look easy? I've even heard people say, look at that they got a tremendous packet. Do they honestly believe that the stock just magically transformed into a dream packet? Actually when you watch closely, you can see that at some point the stock has tested the dog, but the dog knew where to be to make them settle, or the handler knew where to hold the dog, to make them settle, and so the stock stops trying to escape or fight. Again it all goes back to reading the stock. Like I said earlier I think anyone can improve their stock reading, it might not come as easily, as the person that it comes naturally to, but you can certainly improve on it. I've often told people to put their dog away, and just go move sheep around. I know no one ever does this, but I keep telling them to in the hopes that someone will. I don't mean chasing sheep around, I mean get them in a small area, and see what it takes to quietly move them from one side of the pen to the other, or put them quietly through a gate. It will help in knowing where the pressure point is, and where your dog needs to be to be effective.

Reading stock is a major part of judging as well in my opinion. We have held our annual trial now for many years, and have felt very honored and privileged that we were able to get overseas judges. These people with their vast knowledge and first hand experience with sheep, can read a situation and know whether it's dog caused, handler caused, or sheep caused and judge accordingly. If the sheep are tough, they look for workmanlike runs, if they are easy; they look for a bit more finesse and polish. They can look at tough sheep and know whether the dog has done everything in its capabilities to make the sheep better, or done everything to make it worse. I've heard some handlers say, well I had the exact same run as so and so, and look at how much more I have off then him. I think this handler isn't looking at the sheep at all in this instance, I think they are just looking at whether or not they made a gate, or got penned, etc. A judge that reads stock can look at those two situations, and know that even though they looked similar, maybe the one dog did everything it could to keep a straight line, and just slipped the gate, and the other wasn't holding the pressure point properly and missed the gate, big difference in my book. That's where again the sheep sense comes into it, and you just can't take away from experience when it comes to that. I don't mean in trialing either, I mean in day to day working with sheep, that most of us over here just will never get, myself included in that. To take that a step further, when we see a trial that has an overseas judge advertised if it works into our schedule at all we try to get to it. I think you can learn so much from running under someone with this knowledge.

We like to go to trials that have tough sheep, versus real dog broke sheep for this very reason. You can learn so much from watching these sheep run after run. Each packet will usually try something at some point to either outbalance, or overpower a dog. When you see a dog run that can put everything that's been bred into them to use, and make these sheep look broke you learn. I also like to run on sheep like this, because it shows me my dog's strength and weaknesses, that dog broke sheep just won't show me. A lot of times a dog can get away with murder on real dog broke sheep, so you maybe don't see a problem area until you get on tougher sheep. Most of the time the problem lies in distance and the proper place for the dog to be on the pressure point. Again real dog broke sheep just won't show you this, they'll let a dog be very tight, and not get upset, or try to outbalance them, and this again is where sheep sense comes into judging. A judge with stock sense will look at that and know that dog got away with a tight move only because of the sheep, so they will point accordingly. Someone who isn't reading the sheep will look at that and think they've been hard done to and it just isn't the case. If you want to improve as a handler, trainer, or just make things easier for yourself at home, look at the one thing that gets overlooked to often. The stock, your dog will thank you for it.

