

Education Through Watching

By Patrick Shannahan

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In my clinics, I have had several students ask what makes a great trainer and handler. I tell them if I could use only one word to describe a good trainer, it would be observant. Those people that observe everything that happens around them are more likely to see what effects both they and their dog have while working livestock. Those that pay attention to their entire surroundings will have more success at training and trialing.

So, in my observations of handlers at trials, I find it interesting to see the many different types. There are those, who sit and watch the trial from start to end. A few only watch a limited amount of runs, work their dog and leave. And there are quite a few in the middle, who observe some while they socialize.

At clinics, I also see some really interested people watching each dog and trying to see and understand each concept and dog. I also see trainers that are there only to see their dog, and pay no attention to anything but their own dog. Learning only about your own dog, limits you to you and your dog at that moment. Observing other people and their dogs opens you up to training for the present and more importantly, the future.

It never ceases to amaze me to watch people come here to the farm for lessons. Frankly, I think most of them miss a huge opportunity that is free to them. That opportunity would be to watch me work my young dogs. Many a student comes here for a lesson, is only interested in their lesson, and either leave or disconnect when it isn't their time. They would gain so much more if they asked if they could watch me work a few young dogs, preferably in the stage that their dog is in or slightly past their dog in training. Watching someone more experienced work a young dog, you can pick up the rhythms and language that speak to good dog training.

If I was lucky enough to see some of the great trainers in the past or present at their own home, I would want to watch them work young dogs. It is there that I could observe the instructor (trainer) and student (dog) in an ordinary learning situation. There wouldn't be the rush of a clinic, or the excitement of others, it would be the everyday training that is so important. At the same time, if I could ask a few questions, my fantasy dog training would be complete.

Dog trialing is a culmination of all those observations. Watching your dog. Watching the sheep react. Watching how your dog is able to communicate, and enhancing the communication with the sheep, dog, and you.

To become really good at training though, you have to watch and observe all types of runs during the trial. Personally, I think some of the Novice people have taught be as much as some of the experienced people. Novice handlers usually are not tainted with the tempos and habits of the established sheepdog crowd. Novice handlers many times have a fresh approach to an old sport.

At the same time, I am always disappointed to see the Novice handlers leave immediately after their run, not staying to watch the more advanced trainers. So much can be gained through observation of dogs, sheep and handling. The consistent winning handlers and dogs are not lucky with good draws of sheep; they make the draws good with proper stockmanship and dog work.

The next time you decide you want to learn something about either trials, or training your dog, think about learning through observation. Concentrate on what is happening. If your friends are too distracting, then move to a different area for a bit. Catch up on socializing with them later, or at dinner. Your education can come through verbal or written communication, but much of the finest education comes through watching.