

## **Communication is the Key**

By Patrick Shannahan

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Lately I have been exploring ways that we communicate with our animals. A few people might think that we are evolving when we recognize animal communication, while others may think that it is foolishness and silly to think that we can work with on another level.

We are all communicating with animals whether we want to admit it or not. Sometimes we use conventional methods such as talking to them, other times we might use our body language to communicate to the animal what we are asking. Communication might be as simple as saying "No" when our dog does wrong, or as complex as working through a problem with others to help get the job done.

I have always said that training a good sheepdog is no more than learning to communicate with that particular animal. Most of our dogs really don't want to displease us in their training; many times they just don't understand the particulars about what we are asking. I find it frustrating when I give clinics that many of the dogs don't have an idea why they are doing the job that they are doing. They are being taught that sheepdog work is a competition between the handler and the dog and not that it is an activity that is based upon teamwork.

The main part of this article though is one I would like most people to think about. We always think about communication as between our dogs and ourselves. But there is another important communication going on out on the field: the communication between our dog and the livestock.

Now I don't want to have you imaging the picture of Babe and his colorful group of favorite sheep, but there is communication that is much like that that is exhibited on the field. A dog that is confident in his job directs the sheep or cattle to do exactly as she asks. How many times do we see a dog that for some reason can direct sheep that most dogs seem to have problems with? Or how many times have you seen a sheep or a cow just give up and fight the dog because it doesn't really understand what the dog is asking.

As a judge, I have been asked many times for a rerun from an inexperienced handler because a sheep gave up during their run. They are usually a little "barn blind" in the fact that they don't realize their dog could have done the damage to the animal. The sheep or cow has just simply given up because they don't have the strength, energy and understanding of what the dog is demanding of them. The dog has usually over worked the animals, contradicting messages that he has given the herding animals.

Part of our job is to instruct the dog and to give him the confidence to guide the animals where he wants. Those that are confused or uncertain of their task exhibit that same uncertainty in their work. When I see this uncertainty in dogs as either a judge or a handler myself, I know that the dogs are not getting the correct and clear message in what is expected of them.

Now, some of the dogs that we train seem to have a natural way of communicating from the very beginning of their exposure to livestock. Others, it seems, have a difficult time all of their life trying to master their sheep. This of course is one of the differences between a good dog and a great dog. Most of the great dogs that I have seen have an unusual knack for communicating with their stock.

Many times now when I sit back and I am either training a difficult dog or training a difficult situation, I think of the communication that is going on between myself, the dog and the stock. How can I change my communication to make the situation much more clear to the students that I am trying to instruct? Asking that question is a great way to help both the stock and dog. It helps the dog in his training and helps the stock in the fact that their job is easier and less stressful.

