

Meeker Sheep, Past and Present

Albion Urdank looks at one of the great American trials



The familiar Meeker skyline

Back in the days when Gus ran Meeker, the sheep started out notoriously tough. "The sheep flee from people, and dogs of great presence they fight; escape to the hills, break back to the pen, or headlong they charge..." ran one ditty, by way of description. To be sure, every handler fixed his or her gaze on the first run of the first day, to gauge what the sheep promised to be like; and, with rare exception, both dog and handler failed catastrophically. In fact, the first 10 or so runs were usually disasters, and needless to say the sheep, for most of the preliminary round, were virtually impossible to pen. But gradually over the course of the trial, even in the preliminary round as the weather warmed, they settled somewhat, and by the semifinal and final rounds, they became positively heavy and most difficult to move offering a different sort of challenge, though they became easier to pen. Meeker vendors used to sell cartoon postcards, depicting a sheep sitting as judge at a high mounted desk with a border collie hauled in before the court for trial and sentencing! And Gus himself used to root openly for the sheep, as did many a Meeker spectator. In those days it was a real contest between the handler/dog team and the sheep, with all of their local fans shouting support from the stands. These were Meeker sheep, after all, and they naturally wanted them to win!

But in the last three years or so, all of that has changed. In fact, a great reversal in this pattern has taken place. The shift was most evident this year (2008) (I overheard one old timer lament that these were not the Meeker sheep of old).

What exactly did he mean? Well, the first runs of the day were typically among the best to be had, the sheep moving smoothly, a tad on the heavy side, but light enough for the dog to establish a workmanlike pace, and this despite the coolness of the morning, which typically on fresh range ewes used to make the flock very skittish. As the weather warmed, however, the sheep got friskier contrary to expectation, even inclined to run, in the mid-afternoon, when typically the sheep slow down to graze (their favourite time of day to eat). And though skittish, they never seemed to fight the dog. They were quite easy at the pen too in the early runs, and throughout most of the preliminary round; but by the semifinal round and especially the double-lift final round, penning became increasingly difficult. In fact in the final round, three seasoned and very competent handlers managed to

lose the collared sheep, they had successfully separated from the unmarked, because the sheep reacted to the pen pressure with peculiar wildness, breaking to the shed-sheep which had been left at a reasonable distance so as not to draw them. The only handler actually to pen (with both dogs), Dennis Gellings, had to move the unmarked sheep off to an unusually far distance, before having success at the pen, and even so in his last pen, a sheep bolted unprovoked to the gate as he closed it, slamming itself into it. No one any longer roots for the sheep at Meeker; now spectators sponsor individual dogs, which from the handlers' point of view may be a welcome change, morally because one would want the crowd on the side of the dog, and financially because it creates a larger purse (now at \$20,000!). But still, something of the old charming raucousness has gone.

I puzzled over this great reversal. I had been told on an earlier occasion that the trial's new sheep supplier handled the sheep, with the use of a dog, before delivering them to trial, unlike the old supplier, who used to bring them down straight from the hills without benefit of shepherding by dogs. Then on my way back from dinner on the second evening of the preliminary round, I passed the parking area at the lower end of the field, where the sheep spent the night, and saw a volunteer with two dogs working the flock to be used the next day; the dogs were running round the sheep, keeping them in a tight circle, while spinning them around like a top, winding them up. This action was clearly intended to break the sheep, to make them lighter, so that they would move more easily off the dog. Perhaps the sheep had started out too heavy, because they had indeed been handled by the supplier in the normal course of delivery, and seemed to need additional breaking to simulate the wildness of the old fresh Meeker sheep, which had become the trial's historic signature. This breaking would account for their easier movement in the early morning runs, not being as heavy as they might have been otherwise, and their progressive wildness as the warmth of the day loosened them further (it never got too hot to slow them). I queried the appropriateness of what I had seen to a director present at the trial whose response was simply that this wasn't his trial, implying that while an event sanctioned by the Handlers' Association, the host had carte blanche to manage the sheep as he or she saw fit. The volunteer who had been working them later told me that she had permission to do so with the clear implication that she was carrying out the trial hosts' instructions.

This breaking of the sheep, I believe, had unintended consequences which created a deceptive impression of the difficulty of the trial, for it biased the outcome, ironically, in favour of the softer dogs. By "soft" I don't mean "weak", but only dogs whose presence the sheep feel more lightly and therefore read as less of a threat; this reaction would incline the sheep not to break as hard as they might otherwise in the presence of a harder dog, or one with strong "eye". And the sheep at Meeker do break, first back to the holding pen from which there is strong pressure, and secondly to the handlers' right along the fetch line in the direction of the parking area. The natural incline of the field, tilting south-easterly, partly explains this draw to the parking area; but its intensity is compounded by the way the sheep are managed after delivery. Typically, they are moved from the holding pen in the North East corner, down the field on the right side of the fetch line; allowed to graze generally in the field; and then gathered at the end of the day to be delivered to the parking area where they spend the night. The movement down the field creates a track on the right side of the fetch line, because sheep leave an odour, which will attract other sheep who follow; and allowing them to spend the night in the parking area will draw them there, especially when under pressure from a dog on the trial course, because it is where they feel safest. The softer the

dog, the weaker the draw, relatively, and the easier therefore for the dog to hold the line, however imperfectly. Now this practice of moving the sheep down the line and overnighting them in the parking area had always been followed at Meeker, but when the sheep are artificially broken, as apparently in current practice, the draw becomes that much stronger, particularly for harder dogs, or dogs with strong "eye", which range ewes find especially threatening. These dogs in other words are placed at a disadvantage as a result, and yet may be the more worthy dogs from the standpoint of testing the true working ability of the dog, or finding the best working dog, which historically has been the purpose of the sheepdog trial.

Apart from not breaking the sheep, it would not have taken much to manage the sheep upon arrival in such a way as to minimise, or indeed neutralise altogether, artificial pressures on them. One could have housed them overnight in the old holding pen, in the NW corner of the field, used when Gus ran the trial, after allowing them to graze generally in the field, and then move them in the morning to the new holding pen in the NE corner of the field. Not only would the sheep have no notion about the location of the parking area in the SE corner, but the draw to the old holding pen would be cancelled by their presence in the new

holding pen from which each packet would be set for trial.

Once at Coalinga, CA., I mentioned to the judge, Jack Knox, how I thought working the range ewes before trial just a little might make for a better trial, since these were particularly hard sheep, and I noted that this was increasingly the practice at trials that made use of range ewes in order to provide some approximation of shepherding. I recall his reply vividly, and it convinced me instantly, because it made intuitive sense: the right thing is to take the sheep as they come to trial and to let them sort the dogs. This in my view now should also hold true for the condition of the trial field: let the natural conditions and complexities of the field operate unimpeded, without human tampering, once the course itself has been set. The late Max Bywater from northern Utah once described to me how in planning a trial he had solicited advice from the late Ralph Pulfer about how to prepare the Columbian/Rambouillet crosses he was going to use for trial; they wintered in the mountains and had never seen a Border Collie. Ralph, he said, told him not to work the sheep, but just to walk his dog on leash through the large flock two or three times, so that they could see what a dog was, and to leave it at that, and let nature take its course. Sensible advice.

Obituary: Geoff Billingham

Geoffrey William Billingham, successful sheepdog triallist and talented artist, died in November, aged 81. His funeral took place at Roucan Loch crematorium, Collin, Dumfries.

A patient man and a quiet handler, Geoff had a great sense of humour and a feeling for nature which was clear in his sketches of sheep, dogs and wildlife and the finely engraved shepherds' crooks which he made.

Born to a non farming family in Northampton, Geoff took to farm work when he left school and moved to the North East of England after the war. He worked at Church Farm, Redmarshall, near Stockton for over 20 years, eventually becoming farm manager. He started trialling during that time, and also entered ploughing competitions and won prizes for hedgelaying.

Geoff moved to Otterburn in Northumberland and then Wolsingham, Co Durham, for a short time before crossing the Border into Scotland to work for the Duke of Roxburghe at Bowmont Valley in 1973. He stayed for 13 years until faced with redundancy in 1986, when he took on a small hill farm at Tweedhopefoot, near Moffat, and ran it as a working farm, with a tearoom. Sheepdog demonstrations were staged for the public.

Geoff was a successful brace handler, most notably with litter sisters Jed and Trim, with which pair he represented Scotland three times at International level, coming second with the pair at Bala international in 1980. In 1981, when Jed and Trim were 10½ years old, Geoff won the Scottish National Brace Championship with them, going on to take the Brace Champion of Champions at the Royal Welsh Show and the BBC TV's One Man and his Dog brace class. Geoff had previously been in the English team with their mother, Meg (T Watson's Jeff, R Short's Gay) who finished fifth in the International.

Geoff's first trial dog was a blue bitch, Marrick Jed, with whom he won his first (English) National team place when the bitch was 11 years old. She finished third in the Supreme.

Geoff had a great affection for Jan, his "bionic bitch", bred by Les Morrision of Redesdale. He claimed she was the fastest thing on four legs. Jan won three trials in one week, but she died early in her career and never had the chance to fulfil her potential.

After Geoff and his dogs featured in a global advertising campaign for whisky, the National Geographic Society made a documentary on his life as a hill shepherd and the start of the new venture at Tweedhopefoot. His proudest moment was when he was presented to Her Majesty the Queen at Broughton



when she opened the Borders General Hospital.

Geoff retired to Peebles, but as his health failed, he moved back to England, to be near his two oldest children in Peterlee. Missing the Scottish countryside, he returned North and moved into a nursing home in Biggar and died two years to the day after his return.

Geoff is survived by his three children Alan, Lynn and Geoff jnr, three grandchildren and four great grandchildren.