

San Diego Highland Games Trial



Highland spectators



The field



The Maltese Cross

The 36th annual Scottish Highland Games of San Diego (California) were held in Vista CA, a suburb of San Diego, June 27th and 28 2009. The games are a celebration of Scottish heritage and include many traditional Scottish tests of strength and endurance, such as the "caber toss." Chief among the games is a sheepdog trial staged by Terry Parrish and her San Pasqual Stock-dog Association. Ms Parrish, an active trainer and nationally ranked US Open handler for more than two decades, has been staging this sheepdog trial for about as many years. The trial course is not unusually large, with an outrun of approximately 200 yards; but the terrain and course set-up are quite complex, offering an intriguing challenge to both handler and dog, while the sheep (a mixed breed flock of rambouillet, dorper and kathadin crosses) with their savvy alertness, added an additional dimension of difficulty. Thirty-five handler/dog teams, in all classes combined, went to the post, and the purse for the high combined winner and placers of the two one-day Open trials was a generous \$1000.00. The crowd of spectators seemed unusually large, with many, in Highland regalia, spread out on the green behind the judge's tent (see photo 1). The crowd followed the action with rapt attention, often cheering, as the announcer, who provided a running commentary, sought to educate listeners about the intricacies of the work they were witnessing. Mrs Terry Pelkey, from Poway, CA., an Open handler for many years, debuted as Open class judge.

The outrun proceeded up a very steep hill which narrowed at the top (see photo 2). A thick wood lay to the handler's left. Although out of sight, the exhaust nevertheless acted as a strong draw to the sheep once they got to the base of the hill, and especially if they happened to be fetching even slightly off-line to the handler's left. Even if the dog hugged the fence line on its outrun to the left (the direction all handlers sent their dogs), there remained a good chance that the sheep might bolt down the fetch line and to the handler's left. So great care had to be taken by the dog or bitch not to be drawn in toward the sheep as s/he proceeded upward on the outrun, and not to over-flank at the top, nor lift too hard. The sheep were set on hay with a spotter at hand and at as far a distance as possible to the handler's right; yet the pressure at the top was strong enough to overcome these restraints if the dog were wrong. The placing of the sheep meant that the fetch, too, would be a small dog-leg to the North-South opening of a Maltese Cross, which served as the fetch panel for the Open class (see photo 3).

Given the pressure on the fetch, negotiating this opening was tricky indeed, and it sometimes happened that the sheep would pass through the first half of the opening but go out the side gates; and so the dog needed to be placed in such a position that this would not occur.

Once the dog finished the fetch, it began a left hand drive. The drive away was short, but the pressure to the left was strong owing to the proximity to the opening to the exhaust area. This meant that the dog had to hold the line, frequently by pacing to the left of the sheep. The passage just beyond the drive-away panel contained a small unfenced opening through which sheep might escape, if the dog pressured them even a tad too much. The cross-drive was of more normal length and required the dog to move the stock against strong pressure, coming from the opening to the exhaust area, which provided a good test of the animal's power, and which many accomplished with good success. Following the cross-drive in both Open and Pro-novice (intermediary) classes, the handler and dog proceeded to the Maltese Cross to negotiate the East-West gates; Open handlers, additionally, had then to ease the sheep back up through the North-West gates before proceeding to the pen.

The sheep were used to dogs, as Ms Parrish uses them for training purposes, and so they remained heavy unless the dog pressured them too much, in which case they ran toward the exhaust draw or otherwise tried to escape, sometimes back up the fetch line or into the wood. The pen lay closer to the exhaust draw and so the sheep coming out of the Maltese Cross tended to scamper in that direction. Fortunately, they were happy to be penned in most cases, even without much presence from the dog. The shed, for the Open class, however, proved more difficult, because the sheep would often hang closely to the handler, and close ranks quickly once an opening was made, while the dog needed to remain at a good distance if the sheep were to settle at all. Still, many handler/dog teams accomplished the shed, if not always on the first try, with Angela Akers, of Valley Centre, CA performing two exceptionally elegant sheds on the first try, with her bitch doing all of the work.

The complexities of both the course and terrain, and the pressures emanating from the relative smallness of the course, made this dog trial an especially challenging event. But handlers left with a sense of accomplishment and gratitude for a trial well-staged. Scores are available at Ms Parrish's website: www.actionk9sports.com.