

16th ANNUAL FRENCH STYLE HERDING TRIALS

BY TERRIE VAN ALEN & LINDA ROEM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLORIA ATWATER

October 31st-November 1st, 2009 was the 16th year the Northern California Shetland Sheepdog Herding Club (NCSHC) has sponsored the *Parcours à la Française*, which is sanctioned by the American Herding Breed Association (AHBA) for Ranch Large Flock (RLF) titles. The trials, modeled after the traditional large-flock trials held in France since the 1890s, have been held at various locations in Northern California and at Gardnerville, Nevada, throughout the years.

This year's trials were hosted by the Three Quarter Circle Haase Ranch in Gardnerville, Nevada. At the base of the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, the morning temperature was crisp and the landscape was splashed by the bright yellow fall leaves of the native Quaking Aspen trees.

Breeds represented were: Shetland Sheepdog (3), Australian Shepherd (5), and Border Collie (3). The trial filled with the maximum allowed runs for sheep and geese. Sheep and geese runs were alternated, with six sheep and four geese runs per day. For sheep, the distance covered and complexity of maneuvers require up to 35 minutes for advanced runs, so dogs must be physically fit and mentally strong. The goose course is shorter, but provides its own challenges. Geese require just the right amount of pressure – not too much, not too little – for a smooth run. There were no Level II entries. The Level III (Advanced) runs used a flock of 65 sheep and Level I sheep used 25 sheep. A flock of 20 geese was used for all levels.



"Girli" driving on the road to the open field



Girli guarding geese as a wagon passes

continued ➤

French Style, cont'd.

Details of courses and the order of elements vary from year to year and from location to location, but certain standard exercises are required. The layout for Gardnerville this year was as follows:

COURSE DESCRIPTION FOR SHEEP:

1. Protection work: The livestock is closely packed in a holding pen where the dog must clear a path for the handler, reflecting a situation where the handler would need to distribute food without the flock climbing all over the handler.
2. Exit from the pen: After the conclusion of the protection work, the dog and handler exit the pen. The dog is then sent back inside to bring the sheep out, while the handler waits outside. It should be done in a quiet manner without livestock banging the gate or posts.
3. Stops: There is one stop in Level I and two in Level III. Before crossing a road, the dog comes to the front of the flock and stops its movement, holding the sheep near the edge of the road until the handler can come forward to check the road for traffic.
4. Narrow Y-Chute: The flock is lined up and moved through a chute that allows only one sheep to pass, so they must file through without spilling around the sides. This was one of the two most difficult



"Merlin" moves geese through the Y chute

passages.

5. Sort: The flock is taken to a holding pen and 10 (including three marked ones in Level III) are held out, while the others are exhausted into the pen.
6. Trailer: The 10 sheep are loaded into a trailer. The flock is then consolidated by bringing the larger group back out of the holding pen and to an area near the trailer, then the sheep inside the trailer are let out without allowing any of the waiting sheep to jump into the trailer.
7. Narrow bridge: The flock is maneuvered across a creek on a narrow, open-sided bridge, then turned sharply to be taken along the road to the grazing area.
8. Drive and Graze: After taking the sheep into the pasture, Level III dogs must drive the flock at least 120 feet to

the designated graze area. Level I handlers can fetch to the graze. At the graze, the flock is settled and held until signaled by the judge to move on.

9. Outrun, Lift, and Fetch: In Level III, the handler and dog return to the handler's post from which the drive started, and the dog is sent to gather the sheep from the graze. Level I dogs start their gather from the edge of the graze, and then bring the sheep, accompanied by the handler, to the handler's post.

10. Hold and Catch: After passing the handler's post, the flock is stopped and the dog holds the flock to the handler so a sheep can be caught. In Level III, one of three marked animals must be caught; in Level I, any sheep may be caught.

11. Stop, Road and Vehicle Pass: After a brief stop while the handler checks the road, the flock is moved onto the road to begin the return to the original pen. In Level III, the dog must manage the flock while a vehicle passes, moving between the vehicle and the flock to keep the sheep along the side of the road until the vehicle has passed. In Level I, the flock is taken past a parked car. Due to the narrowness of the road, the vehicle pass proved to be another very difficult task.

12. Re-pen: The flock is returned to the pen from which they were taken.



Girli begins her drive to the graze

continued 🐾

French Style, cont'd.

COURSE DESCRIPTION FOR GEESE:

The course was shorter for geese, but consisted of similar elements. After the dog cleared a path for the handler in the pen, the geese were taken from the pen and onto the course. After crossing the bridge, they had to pass a small utility wagon on the road (pulled by a person in Level III, left parked in Level I), then they were taken into the large field, where the drive, graze and gather requirements were similar as those for the sheep classes, except at half the distance. After the gather, the geese are held stationary a moment in lieu of one being caught, and then they are taken through a narrow Y-chute. After the chute, they are stopped at the edge of the field, and then taken back onto the road and returned to the pen. For the geese, the sort was at the re-pen, with five geese being sorted into the pen first and the gate closed, then the gate was opened again and the remaining geese were penned.

For both sheep and geese, the course proved to be very challenging. The 'difficult passages' were exactly that. In the case of the sheep, the Y-chute was a particular challenge, as the lead sheep, once in the narrow chute, were content to hang out there rather than moving on to make way for the sheep coming along behind. Good timing and patience were required, especially at the advanced level where the handler was to remain at the entrance to the obstacle. Because these sheep are used to being hauled, the trailer was not as difficult as it usually is, but some care was still required to bring the sheep smoothly to the open door and up into the trailer. The sheep were fairly willing to be driven to the graze area, but didn't always stop there, so the dog had to be quick to go around and stop them if need be and return them to the designated area. The car pass was especially tricky, with the road narrow and bordered on one side by a ditch and creek, the other side by a fence. The dog needed to help stretch out the flock so that the vehicle



Lacey drives to the graze

could pass without stopping. (Safety, always an important consideration, requires the vehicle to move very slowly, and instantly stop if it appears that a sheep or the dog is about to get in the way.) The distance available to move the sheep to the side as the vehicle approached was quite short, but very realistic and illustrated how dangerous moving livestock on a road can be.

Both sheep and geese were excellent. They were in good condition, calm-natured, but ready to go their own way if the dog wasn't in the right position or applying just the right amount of pressure.

All handlers and owners received a

crafted memento of the event. Qualifiers, HIT, and RHIT received rosettes. HIT Geese and HIT Sheep received a gift basket, and RHIT Geese and RHIT Sheep received a special gift. In addition to earning a leg toward the AHBA Ranch Large Flock title, if qualifying according to the AHBA requirements, special Parours certificates are mailed following the event with the French system ratings of Excellent, Very Good, Good, or Fair.

While all French-style trials are RLF trials, there are differences from other RLF trials in that specific elements featured in the trials in France are used (for instance, exercises such as "protection



Lacey fetching from graze to handler

continued ➤

French Style, cont'd.

work,” catching a sheep, a vehicle pass) and the scoring set-up and scoresheets are the same as those used in France, with a total of 150 points available for Level III, 100 for Level II, and 75 for Level I. Scores are converted by the appropriate percentage to determine AHBA qualifying scores.

SHETLAND SHEEPDOG RESULTS:

Dancer’s Highview River Run HXAsd, HICs, STD-sd, HTD-IIsd (breeder, owner, handler Terrie Van Alen) finished her RLF IIIge and earned 1 HTCh point on Level III sheep. “Girli” won RHIT Geese and posted an Excellent rating for all three of her runs. Girli’s health and stamina are holding solid at almost 11 years of age. Those moments of excessive enthusiasm are now admired.

Northlight Blue Magic HXAsd, OTD-s, STD-d, HTD-Is, HRD-Is, “Merlin” (owner, handler Vicki Chalk) qualified both days to finish his Level III Sheep title. He had the top score on the two most difficult tasks, the chute and the vehicle pass. His working demeanor was perfect for these sheep and he showed the desired initiative of independent thinking without requiring excessive commands.

HC, HTCh Northlight Color Me Wild HXAsd, ATD-s, HTD IIIs, HTADs.ge (breeder, owner, handler Linda Rorem) earned the first leg toward her RLF IIIge. “Lacey” ran non-competitively since Linda was judging the Geese Trial, and received an Excellent rating for a very smooth run. At age 9, she is in excellent condition and a very reliable worker. She has always been a very biddable dog. After returning to Linda Rorem when her owner tragically died, she made a remarkable readjustment in her original home. She is a family companion at home and a working ranch dog.



Merlin and Vicki set up for Y



Merlin’s first stop



Merlin holding the graze

continued ➤

French Style, cont'd.

HISTORY OF THE CALIFORNIA FRENCH-STYLE HERDING TRIAL

The Parcours à la Française has been sponsored by the Northern California Shetland Sheepdog Herding Club since 1994. It was the idea of Linda Rorem, who called and asked if I liked the idea and might consider organizing this herding event that would be quite different than anything being done in the U.S. at the time. I studied her translations from the French Ministry of Agriculture Herding Trial regulations and thought it was a very well-constructed program, comparatively speaking. However, it was a program limited to professional shepherds or flock owners. We had to make a few adjustments to accommodate all herding breeds, including the smaller ones, and non-professional handlers. In France the trials are held using sheep and cattle. We have introduced geese to the trials.

A couple of years later, we were lucky to have our invitation to the director of all Companion and Performance dog sports in France accepted. He came twice over the years to teach us about the French trials and to learn about the various all breed herding programs for the non-professional herder in the U.S.

Another professional French shepherd also judged and gave clinics twice. Since our original interest in the French herding program, Linda's translations have been used world-wide as the accepted English version, published in France. Our adaptation is affectionately known by our French judges as the "French Trials à la California." Since that time, a foundation has been set for all herding breeds to participate with non-professional handlers in some European countries. These programs are still evol-

ing and organizers are continuing to evaluate similar programs in the United States and Canada before finalizing the structure of the trials. Linda has recently judged AHBA trials in Sweden and has been invited to Finland next year. Several ASCA trials have also been held in Europe.

For more information on organizing a French Style Herding Trial and obtaining AHBA sanctioning, contact Linda Rorem at pacific19@aol.com. Consult www.ahba-herding.org for other course and title information.



Vicki and Merlin loading the trailer



Note bucket of water provided for geese at the graze. Water was also available at the handler's post for dogs.