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Is Your Dog an Athlete?

By Kenneth Miller/Vincent, Calif.

On a raw Sunday morning in the desert uplands north of Los Angeles, 15 disciples gather by a wire fence to absorb the teachings of a visiting guru. "Are you nervous?" the guru asks Katie Stangler, 16, in his thick Scottish brogue. Katie nods. "Ah, you don't have to be. Just do your usual thing, and forget I'm here. I'll come in and help you if you're struggling."

Katie is struggling within seconds. Her Border collie lunges at a trio of sheep, sending them skittering in panic. "Down, Tess," she yells, to little effect. The guru takes her elbow. "We'll try to dispense with some of that energy," he says. Within 10 minutes, aided by a flexible wand and a set of arcane commands--Come bye, Away to me, Take time--he has woven girl, collie and ewes into a graceful choreography of pursuit and capture. The next time Katie calls "Down," Tess prostrates herself smartly. "Look at that," the guru exclaims. "I thought you said that dog didn't know how to lie down!" On the sidelines, the disciples cheer.

The guru is a handsome, 40-year-old Highlander named Alasdair MacRae, widely regarded as the most dangerous of all "dangerous men"--the insider's term for virtuoso sheepdog handlers. The son of a tenant farmer, MacRae is a newfangled sort of celebrity. In centuries past, those who handled sheepdogs were known as shepherds, and their occupation was so humble that many fled to America to escape it. These days, however, competitive sheepherding ranks among the fastest-growing outdoor sports in the U.S. Fifteen years ago, perhaps a dozen sheepdog trials were held each year; now there are more than 250. Tens of thousands of prosperous suburbanites, like those here, spend every weekend training their dogs to usher scatterbrained sheep into formations of almost military precision. And each handler dreams of being the next MacRae, who for the past four years (three of them with Nan, the Michael Jordan of Border collies) has dominated the U.S. National Finals.

There is little money to be had in sheepdog trialing; even the richest purses fail to break \$3,000. Nor, for the less than dangerous, is there much glory. "You get knocked down," says Adrienne Paier Wienir, 55, an artist from Encino, displaying a fresh bruise on her forehead. "You get covered with dust and sheep snot."

So what's the attraction? Part of it is nostalgia. "Sheepherding harks back to an age when life was less complicated," says Wienir. "There's that ancient sense of pastoral peacefulness." Harried aristocrats from Marie Antoinette onward have unwound by playing peasant, and in flush times the middle classes follow suit.

But herding's biggest draw is undoubtedly the dogs. "If one of our dogs fell in a river, we'd jump in and save it," says Ted Ondrak, who runs the San Fernando Valley Herding Association with his wife Janna. The Ondraks are professional trainers and breeders, but their clients--movie stars and sales analysts, attorneys and seismologists--tend to feel the same way. Most get hooked on herding after buying a dog that needs a job. "Border collies are incredibly smart, but they get psychotic if they don't have work," says Lilliam Cummings, 42, whose two dogs devoured carpets, sofas and a Don Henley CD before discovering sheep. Typically, the pet is given an instinct test--introduced to livestock under controlled circumstances. If the dog has the genes, its joy in the chase proves irresistible. "When we saw the look in his eyes," says Ted Ondrak of his Bouvier des Flandres, "we said, 'We've gotta try this.'" The Ondraks wound up buying the ranch where today's workshop is being held, along with a hundred sheep.

Such dedication is typical of sheepdog trialers--and it is reciprocated. "Dogs give you their all," says MacRae, sipping black coffee. "They return any affection tenfold. They're not gonna say nothin' behind your back." A grin creases the guru's windburned face. "On the whole, they're just nicer than folk."



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