



Dog trialing season starts in Western Colorado

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AS TOLD TO CHERYL HEBENSTREIT

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Hotchkiss, Colo., opens its arms to working dogs on Mother's Day weekend, as it hosts the 9th Annual Hotchkiss Sheep Camp Stock Dog Trials. This community driven and organized event is a spring highlight for anyone seeking some Sheep and Dog thrills!

Range sheep producers on the Western Slope provide sheep, usually yearling ewes, for trials. Larry and Janet Allen offer their range yearlings for the Hotchkiss Sheep Camp Trial. Whereas, Julie Hansmire and her son Lynn Campbell, provide sheep for the Meeker Classic, a post-Labor Day trial in Meeker, Colo.

Merino ewes are the foundation of Campbell Hansmire Sheep. Range operations (herded, few fences) are a traditional style of sheep operation in Western Colorado. Most range operations, such as Julie and Lynn's, migrate from the winter country to the summer country. The Campbell Hansmire Sheep spend winter and spring on the range in Eastern Utah and migrate to the high, lush mountain pasture above Eagle, Colo., for the summer and fall. Their summer herds range from North of Eagle, Colo., to high pastures above Vail, Colo.

Ewes are drop lambed on the range, where Lynn Campbell takes the lead in their operation. Drop lambing essentially means that as ewes lamb, they are separated (horseback) from their counterparts, which are moved on to the next area. Daytime lambing can be fairly simple, as ewes become acquainted with their newborn lambs. However, night time lambing under the stars, is, needless to say, "a bit more hectic," according to Lynn Campbell. Before daylight, he and their Peruvian shepherders are poised to determine whose lamb is whose ... Just catching a ewe that needs assistance, without disturbing other developing pairs of ewe and lambs, takes skill and patience.

"Merino ewes have added 'personality' to our wool clip," offers Julie Hansmire. "These are not old-style, small Merinos. They are big, bold ewes that shear a 12 pound fleece, yielding over 60 percent soft, very white, clean wool." Julie states that with new processing techniques combined with the natural characteristics of wool, you can throw a wool T-shirt or sweater in the washer and dryer. "I wear wool 12 months of the year, and not just because I raise sheep. I like how wool wears and looks."

Julie gives tribute to Rifle, Colo., sheep producer John Jewell, who is not just a leader in the sheep industry, but also has helped other sheep producers understand wool. "He has helped many sheep folks, including us, improve our wool clips, while maintaining our lamb crop."

Livestock Protection Dogs have helped sheep operations battle predator losses. "Mostly coyotes hit us, but mountain lions and bear too, take a toll on our numbers." Livestock Protection Dogs are on duty 24 hours, seven days a week. We raise them with the sheep, and they become bonded to the sheep." Julie has raised and trained Livestock Protection Dogs for over 20 years and placed her started dogs with livestock operations throughout the country. "With Livestock Protection Dogs, we can manage our grazing better. We can bed our ewes where we finish grazing for the day, and not have to bring them back to a central location. Also, we can graze in areas that previously were unavailable, due to traditionally high predator losses."

The general public may encounter sheep herds in their adventures across the West. "Livestock Protection Dogs will most certainly be there too," says Julie.

We appreciate it when folks do not try to catch or pet our dogs. After all, they are on duty. And, if folks have a dog, they need to keep it under control." Julie offers some other advice, "Wait for a herd to pass or go around a herd of sheep, not through the middle. And, if you are on a bike, don't try to outrun a Protection Dog. Just stop, and walk your bike away from the herd."

In the late 1970s, Hotchkiss sheep producer, Larry Allen, took 'a leap in faith' and imported some of the first Livestock Protection Dogs from Turkey, mostly Akbash Dogs, into the country. "We all thought he was crazy, but watched his operation carefully," Julie noted. It wasn't for another 10 years that the use of Livestock Protection Dogs for predator control took on as a more common practice. "Now, Livestock Protection Dogs are an integral part of our operations. They rarely kill a coyote, but they prevent coyotes from killing our ewes and lambs."

When asked about the future of the sheep industry, Julie and Lynn are optimistic. "Sheep are underutilized for their ability to manage vegetation. Sheep produce wonderful lamb and wool, but they can also be a vital part of noxious weed control and brush management,

replacing or assisting herbicide treatments.”

“I send Livestock Protection Dogs to California, where they exclusively use sheep and goats to manage the brush under power lines,” commented Julie “Sheep are compatible or often add to wildlife habitat. We often see deer and elk preferring to graze regrowth of grass in late August and September where we previously grazed in June or July.”

Although Julie has traditional training in Range Management, she credits her late husband, Randy Campbell, for helping her and their son Lynn, about managing sheep herds. “Randy saw a lot of country, from Redvale, to Silverton, Muddy Pass and over to Eagle County,” providing different experiences with the range. “He could read the range and know how livestock were going to move or how they could be moved,” says Lynn.

Julie and Lynn use their border collies in everyday work. “We used to have to catch a horse and literally rope an errant sheep off a golf course in Eagle County. Now that we are learning more about how to use a border collie, we can trust our dogs to fetch or drive sheep” notes Lynn. “We have been used to moving our larger herds, and now, we are learning from veteran dog handlers associated with dog trials, how to better manage our dogs,” adds Julie. “If we find three or four sheep up on the Forest, we can easily get them home.” Not that horses are getting replaced by border collies on this outfit. But they do help.

Want to see these border collies in action? Come to Hotchkiss, Colo., this Mother's Day Weekend (May 11-13) for an enjoyable time at the Hotchkiss Sheep Camp Stock Dog Trials. Sheep shearing and wool spinning demonstrations will be held all day Saturday. Also, you will be able to see a number of sheep camp wagons used by herders when on summer range.

For additional information, please visit www.HotchkissDogTrials.com.