

PHOTOS BY CAROL HUTCHISON

Driving Directions

Australian Shepherds find a job, and dog trainer Linda Bell shares her passion for the sport of herding

Linda Bell gives soft commands to Trip, a two-year-old Australian Shepherd, as he herds sheep about and through obstacles in a working arena. “Away to me... steady... walk...,” Linda directs. The sheep yield to Trip’s subtle movements as he walks quietly behind the sheep, dodging back and forth to guide them. The intense look in the dog’s eyes says he is on a mission. “These dogs love to work,” says Linda, herding dog owner and trainer. She keeps four working dogs on her immaculate Georgetown farm, where they herd sheep, ducks, chickens, guineas, and sometimes cattle. While doing their job, they’re also training for competitions. It’s serious work.

And Linda is just as intense as her dogs. She had a double knee replacement just a short time ago, but she is determined to work her dogs and make it to Wisconsin for the Australian Shepherd Club of America Nationals in September. Training these dogs is her life and her passion.

After working as an agriculture and science teacher for a few years in California and Mexico, Linda began to get serious about

working with and training herding dogs. All of her current herding dogs are descendants of her first Australian Shepherd, Winslow, who earned national titles in three herding events: cattle, sheep and ducks. Winslow passed away in November. Linda remembers affectionately, “He taught me, and we learned together.”

“I absolutely love the sport,” explains Linda, “You learn something new every day.” She competes at the national level and teaches at the international level. But she has a heart for people getting started with herding dogs. Linda holds lessons and clinics for dog owners who have a serious desire to compete in herding trials as well as learn basic obedience techniques, which she believes is the foundation to any competition.

Eli, a seven-year-old Aussie, gets his turn. He’s been off a while, due to Linda’s recent surgery. Eli gets to take the ducks out of their enclosure. They quack and waddle quickly into the large working pen. While Linda sets up the field for a demonstration, she leaves Eli unattended. On his own, he efficiently drives the ducks into a corner pen, then lies

down and stares, never taking his eyes off of them. It is evident that these dogs have a strong instinct, and Linda shows them just what to do with it. Training a herding dog is taking the prey drive instinct of a dog and molding it into something useful. Left to the dog’s own devices, his prey instinct could take over and he might pull a sheep down and possibly kill it. Linda’s method of training teaches the dog to merely herd the livestock, not hurt them.

Sitting in the cool breezeway of the barn, Linda speaks passionately about the connection between human handler and dog. For Linda, dog training isn’t about the dog alone. It’s about teaching the human to communicate so that the dog can understand. There is no doubt that, with all of Linda’s passion and spunk, she will continue to spread her knowledge and help humans and dogs alike steer their way to the sport of herding. ■

BY
CAROL
HUTCHISON

For more information,
please visit Linda’s Web
site: www.winslide.net



Linda Bell and her herding dogs