

# ONE MAN AND HIS DOGS

...and his sheep

By Adam Porter

Photos by David Porter

I was born at the foot of the stunning Sperrin mountains and raised on the outskirts of a small town called Maghera. It was growing up here that I developed my love for sheepdogs and pedigree sheep which led to the establishment of my 'Braeburn' pedigree flocks of Crossing Leicesters and Suffolk sheep.



**purchased** my first Suffolk in 2014 from my close friend and well respected West of Ireland breeder, Gerry Killilea of the Carragh Flock, at the premier sale in Roscrea for 2000 euros. This was a ewe lamb full of Solwaybank breeding and one which gave me the bug for breeding Suffolk sheep, just like the bug the rest of you reading this have caught!

However, as much as I have great enjoyment from my pedigree flocks, the sheepdogs have always been my main priority and the area from which I get the most satisfaction. My parents say my love for sheepdogs has been bred into me, with both grandfathers having kept working dogs all their lives, so it was almost inevitable that I would fall into this way of life at some point.

I began training dogs at the age of 11 with 'Lucky', an unregistered bitch pup. As you can imagine, it was myself that needed the training more so than the pup. After a lot of trial and error, reading countless books from beginning to end and watching DVDs over and over, I managed to get Lucky, (who was no superstar if truth be told) to a decent working level. I sold her the following year for £300. At 12 years old, this amount of money was huge! From that day, my interest moved up to the next level, with countless hours invested in my next registered dog, 'Rex'. He was sold for £1000, when I was 14.

Throughout my time at secondary school, I often told my parents that I planned to train sheepdogs once I had completed my time in education. This was something which neither of them believed

would be possible and they tried to discourage me from this idea, in place of what many would deem a more professional career. Determined to follow the work I loved, I had the foresight and sense to ensure I completed my A level exams. I went on to ascertain a degree in agriculture from the SRUC Campus at Edinburgh University, just in case my plan didn't come to fruition. I graduated in the summer of 2017 and since then I have been training sheepdogs for myself and farmers throughout the length and breadth of Ireland alongside my sheep shearing business during the summer months, which currently stands with a run of just over 10,000 sheep.

This way of life is not something that I think of as a 'job', due to the fact that I get such satisfaction from training working dogs to a standard of work that myself and other farmers can use them for daily tasks around the farm. This satisfying element of the job ensures that I actually wake up each morning looking forward to the day ahead.

### **A BRIEF OVERSIGHT ON THE BASIC TRAINING OF A SHEEPDOG**

Patience and a realistic outlook are two key traits I believe any individual needs when working with sheepdogs. I often feel like dogs are very similar to children, in that they all have different levels of intellect and physical capabilities. I believe this needs to be taken into consideration and it must be remembered that no matter how much we wish for our dog to be a great sheepdog, many dogs can fall short of this expectation. Many people have brought young dogs to me for





training which they have either been given for free or bought cheaply and then they wonder why their dog has not miraculously turned into a great worker. This would be the same idea as a Suffolk breeder purchasing a purebred Suffolk ram lamb which is not up to scratch, one that is effectively a fat lamb and then wondering why he didn't breed those show winners or lambs which achieved good prices at the sales. Yes, some of these might develop into a decent farm dog but with the law of averages you would expect that ten well bred higher priced pups when compared to ten cheaper pups, as a group, would out class the cheaper pups considerably. This effectively proves the point that you only get what you pay for.

I find that training a sheepdog is often similar to breeding pedigree sheep, in that, unless you have the finances to buy yourself to the top in a short period of time you will have to be prepared to gradually build yourself up to the level you wish to achieve over time. You will do this by learning from your mistakes along the way, to enable you to become a more well-rounded handler. Many people make the mistake of trying to rush the training of their dog which can lead to problems further down the line in the training. It is vitally important to get the basics right and to have these basics well instilled into a dog, so when they do eventually get further away from the handler, they have the knowledge that allows them to deal with any difficult situations they find themselves in.

Generally, I will take pups to sheep from three months old. I find doing this once a week up until the age of nine to twelve months is enough to keep them interested, but not too much that it bores

them at their young age. I want them leaving the field happy and keen to return to the sheep again. I begin by encouraging them to move around sheep in both directions (it is not uncommon for them to favour one side over the other at the beginning, however, putting them on the outside of a round pen containing the sheep may help resolve this as it can help to break things down and do so in a calm manner), getting them balancing the sheep to me wherever I go around the field without putting much pressure on them to do so, with the main objective being fun in the early stages. Once the pup comes the age of proper training I start them gradually with 2-3 short sessions per week and increase it as and when I see fit to do so.

Every handler has different ideas on how to go about training their dog. There is no right or wrong way as such, it is a matter of finding the method which suits both the handler and the dog best. No two dogs are the same. I personally tend to avoid putting a 'sit' command on a pup until it knows how to pace nicely behind sheep first. I do this for two reasons; firstly I find that a pup can get into the notion of wanting to sit itself over time, if they are taught to pace nicely. By doing this, the benefit is that it avoids unnecessary confrontation with the pup. Secondly, I find when a pup is taught to sit and is then commanded to walk onto the sheep, it can be prone to darting up quickly towards the sheep causing the sheep to split and resulting in the pup getting excited which means it is not taking sufficient time to think about what it is doing, leading to problems.

As a rule, I tend to start training the pup on 3-5 quiet sheep that will move freely avoiding a stand-off between both parties, allowing the pup to grow in confidence (you wouldn't match a future boxing heavy weight champion of the world with the current heavy weight champion of the world in his first fight, he has to build up experience and confidence over time). I often see farmers taking a young dog to cattle or sheep which will stand their ground and fight back, this is a recipe for disaster and one which many do not seem to realise the damage they are causing by doing so.

Often the inexperienced handler can be tempted to blame the dog for problems which arise in training but in fact the handler themselves are usually the cause of the problem. I find this is usually the case if a farmer has purchased a pup

or sent it to a trainer. Those farmers don't mind buying the pup or sending it off to be trained, but they don't actually put any time into improving themselves as handlers or holding their hand up to their own short comings as a handler. I often compare this to the same concept of someone buying a car but not investing the time or money into driving lessons to teach them how they should drive the car correctly. To me, the inexperienced handler blaming a pup for not performing as they would expect, without questioning their own abilities first, would be like blaming a piano used by the famous pianist Beethoven for not allowing the individual to play a melody the way Beethoven did. It would be ludicrous to even suggest this, but this is the scenario many dogs find themselves in.

I would urge purchasing a book, DVD or taking lessons from an experienced handler as the first port of call for the inexperienced handler as bad habits can be difficult to rectify in a pup and in some cases, these habits never can be rectified.

Thank you to all who have taken the time to read this article and I hope this brief introduction helps the working relationship between yourself and your pup.

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