

The Trials of Dog Trialing

By Ian Skea

This is the sad, but true tale of a black and white collie Border collie bitch, called Bess, and our tribulations at one of the major three-sheep trials in Queensland. Three-sheep trialing is an increasingly popular sport developed in Australia over the past one hundred years.

The sport is conducted in a secure enclosed arena, any thing from one to three hundred yards in length and one to two hundred yards wide. At one end there is a flock of sheep penned up outside the main arena, enough to allow for three fresh sheep to be slipped into the arena by the "put out" men, for each competing dog, when the judge, who is at the other end of the arena, gives the signal to release them. There are five obstacles in the trial, in the form of various gates and a pen, which the handler has to negotiate within the rules of the competition. Each competitor starts the course with one hundred points. As he proceeds and incurs faults, the judge deducts points accordingly. The handler with the fewest faults wins. Skilled dogs control sheep by the position and movement of their bodies and their eyes. A very strong-eyed dog will some times slow down or even stop, in order to gain control of the sheep, but if all four animals come to a standstill, the competitor is heavily penalized. Bess is one of these "sticky-eyed" dogs.

At past trials I had some bother with my trousers slipping down. Admittedly the trousers had been around for a long time, as I have little use for trousers in Queensland's sunny clime. Long trousers are only worn at weddings, funerals, bull sales and sheepdog trials, and my physical shape had changed. The backside had diminished and the belly expanded. I solved this problem with the purchase of a new pair of green trouser suspenders costing all of thirty dollars.

Bess has been trained on whistles. It is impossible to whistle if your mouth goes dry, as it can on a trial field. A good friend advised me to try chewing gum, which I purchased. My name was called. I unleashed Bess, inserted two sticks of pink chewing gum into my mouth and walked over to shake hands with the judge. The judge in question was highly respected, as both a judge and handler. Over the years he had seen it all.

I walked over to the starter's peg, and indicated that we were ready to go. I bent down to pat my dog. A rear clip in my flashy, trouser suspenders sprang from its position of responsibility. The starting bell rang. I signaled Bess away. When I tried to whistle to her, only a hissing noise came. My false teeth were stuck together with chewing gum! Meanwhile the dog was tearing off pilot-less, down the wrong side of the flat. I raised my arm to try and call her back. This quick arm movement caused my expensive suspenders to spring up behind my ears, and my trousers to slide downwards across my backside.

There seemed to be no dignity or future in remaining in that position. I signaled my retrieval to the judge, who by this time was staple-shaped with mirth. Holding up my trousers with one hand, and trying to separate my teeth with the other, I managed to get the dog back, and slunk out of the nearest exit gate. I put Bess back on her chain, gave her a drink, and then proceeded, with haste, to source a very large one for myself.