

Sheep Dog Trialling 101 – Your questions answered

Who are the people on the course? The handler and the judge. The handler tells the dog what to do to get the sheep to stay on course. The judge stands or sits where he/she can see if the sheep step outside the course and if the handler makes a mistake.

How does the dog know when to go? A sound such as a buzzer, bell or hooter will indicate the start of a run. The dogs are directed to go by their handlers however many dogs learn that the sound indicates the start and they go without being told.

When does the run end? The end of a turn is signalled by the buzzer, bell or hooter either when the allocated time runs out; when the pen gate has been completely shut; if the handler elects to retire from the run; or if the team is disqualified by the judge.

How does the dog know what to do? Much of what you see the sheep dogs doing comes from their instinct or natural inclination to hunt for food. Through generations of breeding over 150 years farmers have harnessed and modified this behaviour to be useful in daily life on the farm. It is wise to always remember with a sheep dog on a farm that it is still a predator at heart and the herding instinct is modified hunting instinct. Some sheepdogs still have such strong instinct that, given half an unsupervised chance, they will chase and kill sheep.

How does the handler tell the dog what to do? The handler communicates with the dog by voice commands, a series of whistles, hand signals, or a combination of these. Just as you would label “sit” when your dog’s bottom hits the floor to teach it to associate the action of sitting with the word “sit”, a sheep dog is trained from a young age to recognise words, whistles or hand signals that mean to go in a particular direction or do a specific thing. While the sheep dog naturally performs the action (by instinct), the handler labels that action and the label eventually is understood by the dog as a command to perform the action.

What is the object of the sport? The team of handler and dog is required to complete a set course in a set amount of time and the winner is the team that has the most points left at the end of the competition.

How many sheep does each competitor get? Three sheep are let out for each competitor. The sheep must be fresh and not have been used for another competitor. This means that all teams have an equal opportunity.

What is a good score and how do they get a good score? A perfect score is 100 points. This can be achieved by dogs and handlers completing the course by shutting the pen gate, with the sheep safely inside, within the allocated amount of time and making no mistakes on their way around the course.

How do they lose points? Points are taken off by the judge for all sorts of mistakes by the dog or the handler. If the team completes the course by shutting the pen gate their score will be 100 minus the points they lost for mistakes. If they only complete the first and the second obstacle their score will be 100 minus the points lost for mistakes and minus 10 points because they didn’t put the sheep in the pen and shut the gate. If they only complete the first obstacle their score will be 100 minus the points lost for mistakes and minus 8 points and 10 points for not completing the second and third obstacles. If they do not complete any of the obstacles, they cannot score any more than 50 points.

What are some of the mistakes they lose points for? Mistakes such as the dog stopping on the way to pick up the sheep and having to be told again, also for running too close and pushing the sheep

off-line; the sheep walking outside the lines of the marked course or obstacles, the sheep travelling back the way they have already travelled on the course, the sheep going around the winding pegs on the wrong side and having to do it again, the handler influencing the sheep with any voice or body movement (shepherding), the team having to rework part of the course because it wasn't done properly the first time. Points are also taken for the distance off course the sheep travel at a rate of one point for every 10 metres.

Do they have to complete the course to score points? No. The judge will use a clicker/counter to add up the points they lose as they make mistakes on their way around the course. Points are added back if they get the sheep through the obstacles: the first one 7 points, the second one 8 points and into the last obstacle with the gate completely shut is 10 points.

Can they get disqualified and what for? Yes. The team can be disqualified by the judge for many reasons such as: the handler not removing the dog's lead before entering the competition ground; mistreatment of the sheep or the dog by the handler; the handler walking backwards or stopping on course (other than the designated points); the dog biting the sheep; the dog crossing between the handler and the sheep (called a "cross"); failure to call the dog back if it leaves before the start signal; the sheep jumping out of the competition ground

Why doesn't the handler help the dog get the sheep through the obstacles? The handler will lose points if he/she helps the dog. The course is a test of the communication between the handler and the dog and how well the dog is obedient to training.

How much time have they got to complete the course? The amount of time for the course is set before the competition starts and can be up to 15 minutes but is usually around 12 or 13 minutes.

Does it matter if they have less time to complete a course? The initial introduction of the dog to the sheep can make or break a run. When the dog first meets the sheep, he/she takes some time to behave in a way that gains the trust and respect of the sheep. Some dogs look very scary to sheep and it can take a bit longer for the sheep to relax with the dog. Handlers like to have more time so they can make sure the sheep are happy with the dog and willing to work for the dog without running outside the lines of the course and losing points.

What are the obstacles? The obstacles at Woolorama this year are the gap, the race and the pen. The obstacles represent some of the jobs that the farmer and the dog might have to do on the farm. For instance, moving sheep through small gaps between rocks or trees, through a gate, over a creek or a bridge and then finally putting them in the yards when they get home.

What are we watching? The handler stands at the "casting peg" with the dog not more than 10 metres away and waits for the start to sound. The action of the dog running out to get the sheep is called the "cast" or the "outrun". The perfect cast is free flowing, without stopping, wide around the sheep and deep in behind them so as not to disturb them.

The next part of the trial is called the "lift" where the dog must calmly and quietly "introduce" itself to the sheep and gently encourage them to move off in the right direction, a straight line to the handler.

There is a semi-circle with a 10metre radius marked to each side and out to the front of the casting peg. The working of this part of the course is called the "delivery". The handler must instruct the dog and ensure all three sheep have stepped fully into the marked delivery area before the handler is permitted to leave the casting peg.

The handler is required to walk in a straight line on the marked left-handed course, around the righthand side of the two winding pegs and stand within the handler rings at the obstacles. The handler may stop at either of the two winding pegs with a loss of one point per stop. The sheep must be on the righthand side and within 10 metres of the handler either behind, in front or to the side, for the duration of the course to minimise loss of points.

So that's all there is to it...Easy! The sport of sheep dog trialling is a fantastic mental and physical challenge. Between the handler, 3 sheep and the dog there are 5 individual minds to manage on the course, and on top of that there are the (other) unpredictable elements of weather, time of day, noise, and any other thing you may not even think of when it comes to working sheep, like a paper bag gaily dancing across the arena in the breeze or the crack of a stockwhip at the rodeo ground.

Try the sport of sheep dog trialling. You may love it enough to take up the sport and one day even have the chance to represent your State, and possibly even your Country in the Trans-Tasman Challenge against New Zealand – the ultimate achievement in Australian Sheep Dog Trialling. Train your dog and get to Wagin Woolorama to give it a go! You won't know how much fun and how far you can go until you try!