

Sheep dog trials take place in Metchosin this weekend



By Goldstream News Gazette

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The 20th annual Metchosin Sheep Dog Trials are taking place this weekend, July 21 and 22, at the farmland at Taylor and William Head roads.

Martha McHardy is organizing the event, which will feature some of the top skilled dogs and handlers from B.C. and Saskatchewan as well as Washington and Oregon in the U.S.

McHardy has worked with sheep dogs for about 20 years and has trained and competed with five generations of dogs. She will be competing with three young dogs this weekend (Ken, Rick and Sylvie), as well as organizing the event.

The first trials started in Metchosin when McHardy and other local sheep dog handlers wanted to host an event so they could learn techniques from experts taking part.

With an excellent flock of sheep available, and some truly picturesque farmland to hold the trials on, McHardy figured Metchosin is a perfect venue.

It may look smooth and easy to spectators but when a handler is working with a dog to herd sheep there are many things going on at once. The dog is listening to the handler for instructions, but is also reading the sheep to predict what they will do and using its own intelligence to work with them. The handler knows generally what the dog needs to do but must also trust it to use its own sense to guide the sheep.

"When you watch a good team work and the magic between them and their ability to control sheep and make it look easy, the better the run the easier and smoother it will look," McHardy said. "When you see the subtlety and skill of a really good dog with a really good handler, it's a real joy to watch it."

The best working border collies come from long lines of top quality working dogs. Their intelligence in dealing with the sheep comes from instinct passed down through generations. At times, trainers must work against that instinct, such as when training the dogs to drive sheep away from the handler, rather than towards them. But it is that natural ability that makes a great sheepdog.

"We select them to be very astute and observant and responsive, and to have a strong desire within their genetics to want to please you and work with you," McHardy said. "True there's training and learning, but there's no trainer that could substitute for a lack of genetic aptitude in the dog."

Karen Child of Oregon, another international sheep dog competitor, will be judging the competition. Dogs and handlers start with 100 points on a run and are then docked points throughout for technical errors or imperfect control by the dog. Should the dog nip at a sheep with its teeth the dog is automatically disqualified.

Admission to the trials is by donation. Trials take place from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., both days, but the more interesting runs for spectators will take place generally between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. There will be a raffle and a poster for sale by local artist Kay Lovett. Awards will be presented both days and overall awards on Sunday afternoon.

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