

INTRODUCING AN OLDER DOG TO YOUR LIVESTOCK

By Ray Coppinger

Two weeks ago a sheep grower in New York state called to ask when the six-week-old pup she had just bought was going to be ready to protect her flock. "I'm getting nailed," she said. "Last night was four lambs and the night before they got our new ram and before that we'd lost..." She wanted to know if the pup would start working while she still had any sheep left.

I'd been resisting telling her about the dog in our field that I'd kept from a last year's litter, one I'd picked to train and have ready for sale for serious money when someone called needing instant protection. She didn't have serious money, but she did have a serious problem. Coyotes, or maybe a pack of dogs, were batting almost .500 with her flock.

Well, Margaret, I finally said, I have an older dog named Nick, and he is a good-looking year-old Maremma. Like all dogs, Nick has good points and bad ones. He is attentive to sheep, he's not a fence jumper or digger, he knows about electric fence and he's never been out of our pasture. Nick is also shy, very spooky when people approach him. Now, are these last two facts a plus or a minus in terms of Nick transferring to your flock?

Shyness with people is good and bad. It means Nick will prefer to stay with sheep rather than with people. But it also means you won't be able to call him in for his shots or whatever. But I'd take a shy dog that is attentive to sheep over a more manageable one that prefers people any day. Farmers know how to trick sheep into going where they don't want to go; managing a dog takes the same kind of ingenuity.

But Nick is what I have, take him or leave him. "I'll take him," she said, "if you'll guarantee him." Well, now I get sticky feet. What does guarantee mean? Can I guarantee that Nick won't kill their sheep? I think I can do that, I told her. But one day a neighbor's goat came over to visit our goat, and if someone hadn't been here to hear the bawling commotion, Nick might have killed the new goat. Why? Because Nick protects his sheep and goat from everything that is foreign to him. It isn't just "sheep" or "goat" to Nick, but rather it's Ethel and Eloise or whatever he calls them. Nick knows them all as individuals and he likes everything just the way it is. Several years ago one of our dog project cooperators was having such good luck with his dog that he went out and bought another hundred sheep. The dog wouldn't let the new sheep in with the old, and for the rest of the summer there were two flocks of sheep in the same pasture. The lesson is, that in forming a social bond with the sheep, the dogs are really forming a social bond with your sheep, i.e., with Ethel, Eloise, and their colleagues. So when you ask whether Nick is going to kill his new flock and I say I don't think he will, it is because I'm counting on the fact that Nick is not on his own turf. He's the stranger, he feels like the stranger, he doesn't know your sheep yet, and it will take him time to learn who is supposed to be there. I'm very sure that he'll be trustworthy in his new flock. So, keeping my fingers crossed (for luck, not because I'm lying), I'll guarantee his trustworthy behavior.

Would I guarantee that Nick will be attentive to the new flock? Here I'm on solid ground. Yes! The qualification is: IF your sheep will let him. Nick will be disoriented when he gets there, and being a social animal he will want to socialize with other animals. Since he was socialized with sheep during his formative critical period between birth and four months, he will look now to sheep for companionship in this new and strange setting.

But how about your sheep? They are on their own turf, and they have been harassed and killed by creatures that look like dogs, and here comes another dog. Sheep also go through a critical period where they learn who to socialize with, and if they don't see a dog during those first few weeks of life, then they are going to see dogs in a different part of their brain than if they had become acquainted with a dog right after their first mouthful of milk.

I just read a study done in England that shows that sheep see other sheep with a different part of their brain than they see humans and dogs. The same thing is true of primates, who see faces with a different part of the brain than they make other discriminations with. It is probably universally true among mammals and also birds that the first few weeks of life set down a pattern in the brain where the individual handles its social needs. Other parts are reserved for recognition of its enemies. It is virtually impossible for an animal to change those perceptions later in life.

Look at the difference in behavior between sheep born on the range with no people around and, say, a bottle-fed lamb. The spookiness of range sheep is not due to their being injured by people, but rather because the human shape got cataloged under "enemies" in their brain during the early impressionable period. By the way, if you change the shape of the human by putting it on a horse, the animal's brain doesn't recognize it anymore as the enemy, and you can get much closer. The same is true of a spooky dog like Nick. You can probably crawl up to him and grab his collar, but if you walk after him he will just keep going. That's the way brains work, and if you understand this much it is a lot easier to handle livestock and dogs.

So Nick sees sheep as companions and humans as enemies (he was raised with sheep during his critical socialization period and didn't see people except at feeding time in the barn). Your sheep see sheep and humans as companions, and dogs as enemies, because in their first days they were in the lambing jugs with their mothers and they had all kinds of care-giving attention from people. You probably didn't have any dogs in there with them.

How then are we going to get Nick to stay with these dog-shy sheep? First of all, if Nick looks more like a sheep than a dog, the going will be easier. Remember those great pictures of Indians draped in buffalo skins, crawling up close to buffalo? It works for

dogs, too. If Nick keeps his head down and the outline of his body like a sheep, then your sheep will see him as a sheep and be less likely to run away. Livestock guarding dogs in a strange environment tend to take on a submissive posture (head lowered and tail down) and the fact that these guarding breeds are sheep-sized and sheep-shaped is certainly no accident. Shepherds have selected for a sheep-approved dog shape. Contrast the guardian dogs with the herding dogs, little coyote-shaped, fast-moving harassers. When a herding dog runs into the flock, the sheep are supposed to run away.

Well, Nick looks like a sheep most of the time, so I'll guarantee his attentiveness, but we have to educate your sheep first. The trouble is he is shedding out, and instead of having his usual sheep-like coat, he looks a little racy. To test him out for you, I took him to Hampshire College where we have a group of lambs that hadn't really seen a dog. I was lucky that they had just been put in a new pasture and the grass was really long. The minute the lambs saw Nick they flocked up tight and started to run. Nick was on long leash and gave not a hint of a chase. In fact, he was in perfect posture with just a little wag of the tip of his tail indicating intense submission. I let him go and he started slowly down the field towards the sheep. They moved ever more nervously away from him. Now he was totally confused and lay down in the long grass. The dog shape disappeared from the sheep's view. They relaxed but stood watching for a long time, and then a couple of scouts came forward to investigate. Nick remained where he was, lying facing me and presenting no doggy shape to the sheep. They started to mosey around the field. After a while, Nick got up and began to explore the fence line. Instant flocking of sheep. After a short while I went and got Nick because they seemed to be looking for an excuse to run through the electric fence (they are good at this). I didn't want to spend the rest of the afternoon explaining to the college administration that sheep respect electric fences on the way in but not on the way out.

Sometimes a dog that is trustworthy but not attentive is better for emergency work simply because the dog is not moving toward the sheep. This makes a big difference for sheep that have been under attack by canine predators. If the dog simply patrols the fence line, ignoring the sheep, then it may well eliminate the predation problem in the short run. But this is a temporary solution and works only in certain types of situations.

What we need to do here is to buy some time for Nick while your sheep learn to accept him. The strategy is that he has to remain unthreatening for a long enough time for your sheep to habituate to him. It is not that the sheep cannot learn to accept the dog, but rather they are just not disposed to do it. Therefore you should use any and all the conditioning techniques you can think of. You could and should try a number of different techniques. Move the sheep to a new pasture with the dog already in it. Tie the dog to a feeder and feed the sheep something that overrides their fear of the dog. Start at night so they can't see the dog very well. Or, take some of the sheep that the dog grew up with, and transfer both sheep and dog to the new flock. Or we could transfer the new flock to them, in a new pasture, and at night, at the feeder, and so forth. Young animals tend to adapt faster than old animals, which may never make the adjustment.

Another aspect of dog transferral, which doesn't apply to Nick but does to some dogs, involves an older dog with bad habits. Sometimes by transferring the dog to another flock and another owner, bad habits disappear. Dogs that grew up on one farm and learned that they can come to the house or slip under a fence, get confused when moved to a new, preferably different type of livestock operation. While they are adapting to the new environment they forget their bad habits and turn out to be pretty good dogs. Often, the farm can make the dog. We've put dogs out on emergency service that were bums on one farm and picture perfect on the next. Sometimes I can tell in advance what will happen. A dog doesn't have much of a chance on a farm with stuff lying around everywhere, fences in bad shape, sheep in poor shape, nobody there during the day, and the farmer who says, "dump the dog over the fence and let's see what it can do."

Meanwhile, I'd decided to lend Nick - and five of our sheep - to Margaret. It would be a chance to test the "send the dog's sheep out with the dog" hypothesis. When we all arrived at her farm, first I just let Nick out of the trailer. He looked at the sheep, looked nervously around, and started tentatively toward them. They were staring at him, ears up, stomping their feet, ready to flee. In their experience, dogs were the enemy. When Nick got too close, the sheep fled. Nick turned and trotted decisively back to the trailer. I let him back in, let everybody settle down a bit, and then I opened the ramp and let Nick's sheep out. Nick came out with them. The five new sheep had no compunctions about immediately ranging out and helping themselves to the grass. Nick stayed right with them. The resident sheep got interested in what the new sheep found so delectable, and meandered over to take part. Nick, now in with his own flock, was no threat to them. Both flocks grazed peacefully, although separately.

I closed up the trailer and headed home. A week later Margaret called and said the two flocks were still separate, but Nick traveled back and forth between the two. Within a few weeks I would be able to reclaim my sheep. Nick could stay there until the pup got some size on her.

Will he be able to stop the intense predation? That remains to be seen. The first hurdle was to get Nick to stay with the new flock. The system of moving a few of Nick's sheep into the pasture along with Nick accomplished this. The sheep have adjusted to the dog even more quickly than they adjusted to the new sheep. And Nick, given half a chance, has expanded his responsibility to include the new sheep.

Above article appeared in the Anatolian Times 2008 volume 2 and the Ins and Outs of Livestock Guardians compilation September, 2008