

Cynthia Mills DVM

Dogs have been a prime focus for me for a life time. As a teenager I began training a golden retriever for obedience and then for field trials. I continued training field trial Labradors through college and veterinary school. Once I began working as a veterinarian I found I lacked the time (and the money) to continue competing, but I still owned dogs that swam, fetched and took hand signals to blind falls.

Almost 12 years ago I found myself with a red heeler pup. I chose her because I was sure I wanted just a companion, a pick-up truck dog—one that would guard the cab vociferously, taking great amusement in frightening passers by. But the dog I ended up with, Mango, had bigger plans. Mango dragged me along into herding sheep, ducks and cattle, and ultimately into owning strong-eyed dogs (mainly kelpies) that can't quite match Mango's power but do a prettier, more nuanced, job of moving stock.

Those last twelve years I have sought to learn from stock dog trainers of every ilk, gathering pearls of wisdom everywhere I can. My dogs have competed successfully in AHBA and are getting mostly numbers (and fewer letters) in USBCHA trials. Mango is retired from herding but two dogs, a kelpie and border collie kelpie cross, keep me busy. I have had the honor of having been chosen to help teach the campers at Fido Farm's herding camp for several summers.

I am of the opinion that dogs don't really want to please us—they aren't servants or slaves. Instead, I believe they want to team up with us. They look to us to tell them where we want the stock, and how fast we want it there and for the rest they hope we realize they can do it themselves. Our job is to teach them our directions and to set the young dogs up with opportunities where they can learn from the stock. It is when we realize that letting dogs learn on their own works best, that we become better dog educators, instead of merely dog trainers.