HARD-WORKIN' DOGS

They don't want to be petted, they just want to run the ranch.

BY PAUL McHUGH

IT'S NOT A FREDERIC REMINGTON painting or the cover of a Louis L'Amour novel, but it comes close. In stained Stetson and work-faded denims, mounted on a rangy sorrel horse, Frank Sagehorn is silhouetted against a blue sky fretted with silvery cirrus. A swirl of dust and the echoes of a bawling calf drift slowly through the autumn air as the herd of cattle parades ahead of the horseman, up the ridge toward the weathered corral. There is such a sense of calm, timeless movement about the scene that it's startling to note that a small part of the picture is actually moving quite rapidly.

Sharp barks pierce the crisp air as three lean, muscular dogs dart about the heels of the lumbering cattle. Leaping nimbly out of reach when a cow turns to face them off, they join forces to drive the maverick back into the herd, gradually bunching all the cattle against the corral gate as Frank dismounts to swing it open.

"That's Molly," Mary Sagehorn says, pointing out a dog from the hay-laden truck she is navigating up the ruts of the steep trail. "Molly's the matriarch of the clan. And Nick, from her first litter. Called him that because he was born the day after Christmas. And Tam-o'-shanter. He's one of Molly's cousins."

Paul McHugh's last feature was "Salmon, Inc."—a study of salmon ranching.

As the redwood gate, green with lichen and algae, swings open, the dogs immediately turn to working the herd into the corral, responding to Frank's infrequent commands, his hand signals, and an intuition formed by years of helping to run this Northern California ranch. "These are my three best dogs," Frank tells me after the cattle are penned. "Most times, I have to go out and gather cattle by myself. The dogs are vitally important. It's hard to put a value on them—they're more useful than an extra man."

Frank marvels at the thought of it. "These dogs are eager to work. They won't hardly quit, they always want to be doing something. When Molly was just a little pup she'd try to herd the chickens in our coop. Just drive 'em around and around. It's great to see the traits show up that early."

I wonder a little about Tam, who is passing his break lethargically stretched out on a hay bale in the truck, but Frank assures me that, besides his general competence, Tam excels at driving off coyotes and treeing an occasional bobcat. In the meantime, like any good energy-conscious American, he conserves.

When Frank and Mary enter the corral with oak staffs to sort out the weaning calves and salable steers, the dogs' basic passion to be of service reignites. They obey Frank's order to stay out of the corral, but even with a fence between them and the cattle, the dogs continue to double, dodge, and feint around the herd as if they were actually inside and helping with the cut. They descend from several long and tangled lines of stock dogs, woven together at the whim and preference of generations of Mendocino County ranchers. One important strand appeared when border collies were brought in by a Scotsman named McNab to a ranch south of Ukiah in the mid-1800s. What became known as the McNab shepherd retained the compact body and intelligence of these forebears and a tendency toward black coats with white markings. But they developed other characteristics that made them more suited to the rugged Mendocino range—a short coat to beat the summer heat and shed burrs, lighter bones, short pointed ears that flop over, tough feet with bunched toes, improved stamina, and an indefatigable lust for herding animals.

This last can be the death of them. In scorching summers on the dry range, handlers must take care that an enthusiastic dog doesn't run itself straight into heat prostration. Should a working dog's temperature pass a critical 106 degrees Fahrenheit, its body's methods for cooling itself begin to break down, sending the animal rapidly into fatal shock. If a dog has the sense and the opportunity, it will seek

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVE SMITH

Seventy-two-year-old Herman Sagehorn knows the ropes of dog handling and is passing them on to Tracy and Tia Ford (ages 12 and 10) at the Ford D ranch in Mendocino County. Chink, the dog at left, is a McNab; Rocky (center) is a border collie; Snooper is an Australian blue heeler.

"Bring 'em on, Shine!" shouts David Summit, as his favorite McNab helps him cut cattle at the Floyd Johnson ranch in Anderson Valley. Above, left to right, are Leo Ielmorini with his prizewinning dog Sissy, Frank Sagehorn with Nick and Molly, and coyote controller Sully Pinches with his "superdog," Poncho.

out water or cool mud to lie in when it feels this happening.

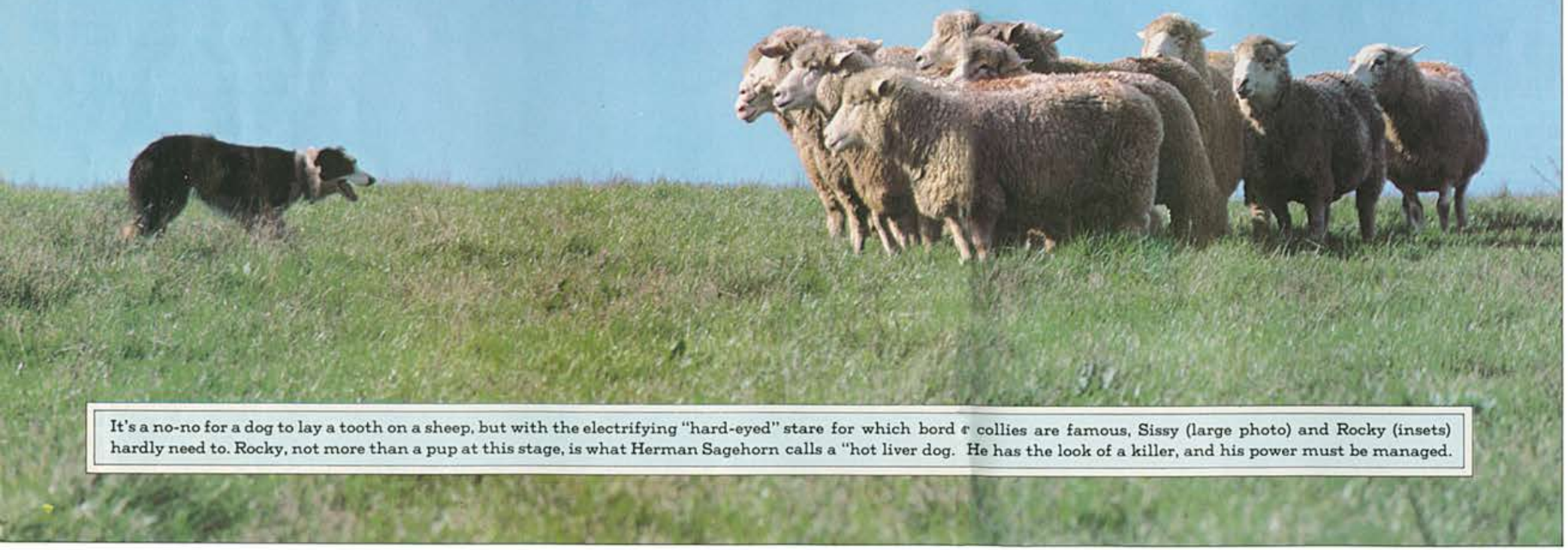
But not working hard enough or wisely enough can also be fatal. Laziness or craziness in a stock dog has never been tolerated here. Pups that don't make the grade are often "sent off to doggy heaven," "given a quarter ounce of lead," or simply "culled." The euphemism varies, depending on whom you're talking to, but the message is the same. A selection process that has been operating for centuries has made these dogs what they are today, and "lames" have not been kept around to consume food and clutter up the gene pool. It seems ruthless at first, but there is a completely different psychology at work here than that which produces a purebred simpleton or a cuddly house pet.

Molly, scarred from the tusks of feral pigs during hunting trips, missing teeth as a result of the kicks of recalcitrant cows, already old at the age of eight from hard work and one bad brush with overheating, is a case in point. Frank Sagehorn can only work her in cool weather now, even though she howls to be taken when he saddles up and leaves her behind. But Molly will never be culled. She has earned a place to stay for as long as she can get around. She's a "superdog" who has not only inherited gleams of canine brilliance and exhibited them herself but demonstrated an ability to pass them on in litters of increasingly valuable pups.

TO UNDERSTAND A LITTLE MORE about Molly's world, I drive north from the Sagehorn Ranch to a pasture and trailer outside Laytonville, where hounds on long chains dance on the worn earth in front of their hutches. This is the home of Sully Pinches, a famed Mendocino dog man.

Sully is a robust 63, with dark hair combed straight back from his round face and ready grin. For the last 30 years he has been a professional hunter and trapper for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. His work occasionally involves eliminating a marauding bear or mountain lion, but these days the main problem is coyotes. "Definitely, them coyotes is getting the upper hand," he says, "because there's so many places that don't really care to see them bothered."

On the coyotes' side are not only some environmentalists but timber companies, which like to think that coyotes eat rabbits that eat young trees, and ranchers who imagine that coyotes can eliminate excess deer on the range to the benefit of their cattle. Sully has bad news for almost everyone. Since the big changes in poison and trap regulations, resurgent coyote populations are driving many sheepmen closer to ruin and encouraging thoughts of turning ranches into subdivisions. Cattlemen are discovering that although coyotes really do "clean up on fawns," once that's done they start to clean up on calves. Or



It's a no-no for a dog to lay a tooth on a sheep, but with the electrifying "hard-eyed" stare for which bord r collies are famous, Sissy (large photo) and Rocky (insets) hardly need to. Rocky, not more than a pup at this stage, is what Herman Sagehorn calls a "hot liver dog. He has the look of a killer, and his power must be managed.

house pets. Or children. The death by mangling of a toddler in a hilly Los Angeles suburb last summer is a recurring topic among the dog men of Northern California. They see that tragic event as an unfortunate but important message to city dwellers about merciless forces the dog men have had to deal with all their lives.

Dogs have been important tools for them and for their families before them. Sully has definite ideas about the qualities that are valuable in dogs and the kind of training that will bring them out.

"Most people like a dog that's a little rough, who'll bite a cow on the nose to turn her or nip her on the heels to make her come up. But with sheep you don't want a dog that'll even get that close. Like your border collie strain. Those're dogs that'll work back a ways, and when the sheep turn and look at them, they'll crouch and lay down.

"The main thing with a stock dog is a dog that does get ahead and hold the stock up so they don't run off and leave. Most of 'em work at your command, though the best ones can figure things out for themselves.

"A hound is on his own from the moment you turn him loose. They've got to learn to follow a track the right way. Some dogs'll spend all day tracking a bear backward to where he used to be. But a smart dog will just run a trail back a hundred yards before he throws his head up, turns around, and goes right.

"In a bear dog, you have to have a lot of guts. She can't get whipped out easy, even if she gets crippled. One time I took a bear that had a dog about half swallowed. I was right there, and I poked the gun up against the bear and let him have it and then the dog rolled out. I thought that dog was dead—couldn't move her neck or anything. This was a female redbone. But, hell, that dog healed up, and she was a good bear dog after that. She didn't get whipped out."

Brains and tact, stamina and fearlessness. A dog excelling in one quality will be best for a given function. A dog with it all is a superdog, a dog that can do anything—hunt bear or boar, herd sheep or cattle or even fragile, scatterbrained animals such as turkeys. The dog recognizes the demands of what it is dealing with and shifts behavior accordingly. Conventional concepts of breeding do not apply in the search for a dog with sensitivity and intangible ability like this. Since most of Sully's work requires a hound's strong nose, these days he primarily runs walkers, blue ticks, black and tans, or redbones. But Sully could care less about papers and purebreds. "If a dog does his job," he says, "that's all I care about." In fact, the only dog Sully has right now that he would call a superdog is an interesting mix of several lines.

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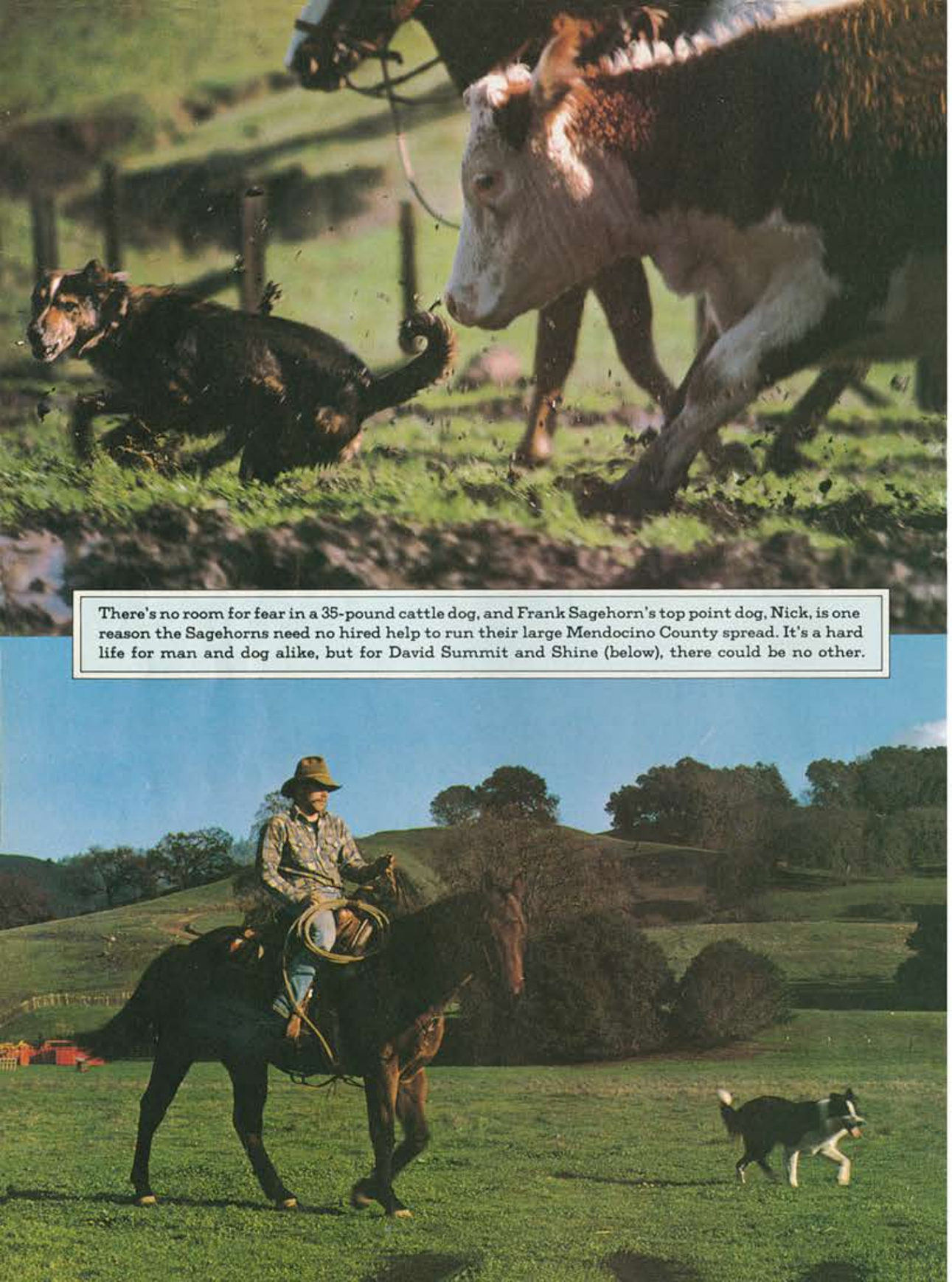
We go outside in the winter rain to meet Poncho, a gray veteran, blind in one eye, who stretches slowly in his hutch and then emerges to greet Sully quietly. "Poncho's mother was a black and tan, and his father was a quarter pointer and the rest just mongrel shepherd, probably some McNab. He was the only dog you'd need to catch a bear, or anything. He's strong and smart and fast—and tough. He's the only dog I ever saw in my life that pulled a cyanide gun [a coyote trap] and survived.

"He's caught more coyotes than any dog I've ever owned, seen, or heard about. Most dogs are not good much after nine, and he's fourteen! I took him out early this spring, and he got two coyotes for me.

"But I hardly take him out anymore. He can't hear, and I don't think he can see too good. He's just too old. I turn him loose and let him run around here for exercise. I'll keep him until he dies, give him a good home."

There's affection and pride in Sully's voice, but he doesn't touch the dog or even look at it directly. The dog doesn't request attention, either, but simply waits in the



There's no room for fear in a 35-pound cattle dog, and Frank Sagehorn's top point dog, Nick, is one reason the Sagehorns need no hired help to run their large Mendocino County spread. It's a hard life for man and dog alike, but for David Summit and Shine (below), there could be no other.

rain for something to happen and when nothing does limps with dignity back to his hutch and lies down on the straw with a sigh. The cool intimacy between them reflects the harshness of a cattle dog's training. He's more of a colleague than a friend.

"I don't think I ever had a dog that I didn't use," Sully explains. "Never just a pet. Most good stock dogs that I've ever seen, people do like I do. They take good care of 'em but don't hug and kiss 'em. My dogs don't expect it, either. If I take them out in the woods and show them some animals, that's what they like!"

There's something else about these Mendocino dogs that I don't quite understand. I suspect it has to do with breeding, so when Sully concludes our visit by telling me that one of his best dogs ever was a McNab he got from Herman Sagehorn, I follow the looping road back down to Willits.

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SOON I AM IN HERMAN SAGEhorn's kitchen, sipping coffee, eating his wife Albertine's fine apple pie, and listening to Herman, Frank Sagehorn's 72-year-old uncle, recount grand moments from the history of the Northern California working dog—like the Great Christmas Turkey Drive.

"It was right after the hard winter of 1889–1890 that wiped everybody out. They say the big white owls came out of Canada down as far as Wyoming that year, and nobody had ever seen that before. Everyone was hurting, so Louis Felton's dad, John, and my dad got the idea to buy up turkeys and take 'em down to San Francisco before Christmas to sell 'em."

The men acquired some 600 birds from local farmers and headed south, their dogs protecting the huge flock from raccoons and bobcats. When they arrived in San Rafael, though, they realized they had a problem, in the form of San Francisco Bay. Herman remembers the solution. "They caught every turkey and cut the feathers off one wing. They knew if they got out on the water and those turkeys spooked and flew off, that'd be the end of 'em. But their plan worked. They drove those clipped birds onto a boat and got 'em across the Bay. Then they drove 'em on to the poultry yards, and they said people was standing on all different corners laughing and cheering and watching them dogs work them 600 turkeys all the way down the line. It must've really been something to watch. My dad and John Felton got something to make their Christmas a little brighter that year, too. But they couldn't have done it without those dogs."

Once he gets going on dogs, the eyes under Herman's shaggy black brows light up, and one gets the feeling he could expound on the subject all night. Stories dovetail—a dog's name, once remembered, evokes that of his handler, the name of a ranch, the history of a family or a line of dogs, a particular trip a given dog went on, what happened to the stock or game pursued, and how the weather was. A recurrent theme is the observation of some flash of bravery, persistence, or brains in a dog that persuaded Herman to try to breed some of that fire into his line. The greatest compliment one dog man can pay another is asking for some pups by his dog—a request not always granted if the admiration for the dog to be bred isn't reciprocated. In Herman's case, apparently, it often was.

Recognition and pursuit of the qualities of the superdog gave the lineage of Sagehorn dogs their distinction. Molly's ancestry traces back to the Felton line of McNabs on one side, probably to one of the dogs on the Great Turkey Drive. Another line goes back to the Dougal McKeller sheepdogs from Humboldt County, and to Old Bruce, who won Herman's respect by keeping an immense boar at bay up on the steep side of a remote canyon. The dog held the boar all night by himself until the men could work their way around on horses the following day.

But genetics only provides a place to start. Herman's vision of the discipline needed to mold a working dog's behavior is of a piece with Sully's, as the story of Joe illustrates. Joe was acquired from a dairy man in Redwood Valley who had trouble handling his high-energy dog. "I'd turn Joe into the pasture at milking time," Herman says, "and that dog would run around, just about eat them cows up, and bring them into the barn at a dead gallop!"

Herman was going to give Joe a chance to realize his potential. The first range cattle he put the dog on were soon scattered all over the mountain. "I tried hollering and chasing after Joe on my horse, but you could no more stop him than a flood. Finally, after he got wore down a bit, I took a rope with a slipknot and hung that dog on a limb and got me a limber switch, and I really worked him over. After that, when I hollered, 'Joe!' he stopped right in his tracks."

To the citified, Herman's actions might seem cruel, and he readily admits that one can be too severe on a dog. "If you make a mistake and beat up on a timid dog, he might quit you and never work for you again. You have to respect him, and he has to respect you. Dogs know when you know your stuff, and if you don't, they won't have much to do with you."

With Joe, the disciplining paid off. "After that, I could even bring in wild sheep with him. I worked him wide, and I worked him close. It got so you could work that dog pretty near to the inch." As a sign of the ultimate approval, Joe was permitted to sire Molly's first litter, from which came Frank's top point dog, Nick.

What Herman knew about Joe, what made him worth all the trouble, was that he had coyote blood in him. In fact, he says, in the old days aggressive male dogs were frequently bred with captured female coyotes. "You've never seen a good stock dog work until you've watched a coyote cut out two or three sheep and drive them off to kill them," one old handler told me. Herman agrees. "Coyote mixes are superintelligent, have super senses, super eyesight. Coyote blood gives 'em extremely good stamina, exceptionally good feet. You want dogs standing up on toes that are pinched together, with tough pads, like a coyote has. Not flat-footed. But mostly, a real super dog has to have those natural instincts, that *ambition*."

THE SHEEPDOG TRIALS AT THE fifty-fifth annual Mendocino County Fair and Apple Show gives me a chance to see some superdogs in action—of a sort. Some knowledgeable locals sniff that the trials "nowadays" are less for real working dogs and more for "mechanical" dogs, recent imports that specialize in corrals and pastures, that constantly look to their handler for commands, that have, in fact, been trained primarily to run trials, and that fall apart if given tough sheep or an unusual situation. Still, there are a lot of old-time handlers here to pick up on the show. Art Korpela, an affable rancher who has judged the past seven trials, takes me under his wing and introduces me to Marvin Herreid, a taciturn individual with a carved-hickory face. Art says that if the trials were held out in the hills, Marvin's McNabs would win paws down.

"I wish we could go back to them days on the hills," comments Curtis Beebe, who used to work for Korpela on an Anderson Valley ranch. "You can always go down to the city and just make money. But we had fun. And we didn't have to take anything from anybody, did we?" With the steady

demise of the big ranches there's less call for a man with Beebe's skills, and he has had to take a job at a sawmill. Nevertheless, he continues to raise and train dogs on the side.

But there's no time to dwell on it. A bagpiper in Gordon plaid who has been warming up on "Amazing Grace" leads the parade of sheepdog finalists into the arena. There are six border collies, all black and white, looking like peas in a pod. The leaden skies drop a rain that varies back and forth between blowing mist and showers. No one cares. Rain is what it does here in the wintertime. It will bring out the new grass, to the delight of ranchers who have had to truck in hay for their stock since August, and it will keep the air cool for these long-haired dogs while they are working. It may even remind them of home. Border collies originate from the border area between Scotland and England; they became a distinct breed some 300 years ago. The dogs in this arena represent a fairly recent importation to this county. Local lines, such as the McNab, have adapted to the area, mingled, changed, the dramatic tension between the wild urge and human training rising to a higher pitch, suitable for dealing with a newer and wilder world.

But that tension is still here in these dogs. "Coyotes ain't a bit worse to kill sheep than these good border collies, even the ones you see work here. They're all potential killers," Claude Rose, an elderly wrangler, tells me. "If they get loose they'll get together and go out at night and kill sheep if they can. Next day they'll go back to being good, and they won't touch the sheep if you're watching."

So that delicate balance between the wild and the civilized is here, too, and I watch it go into play as the first dog runs the length of the arena and returns driving three sheep ahead of him. This is the "lift." Then, while his handler moves from station to station (a series of white painted tires on the ground), the dog must maneuver the sheep through gaps in two sets of fence panels, down a chute, across more open space, and into a pen.

The sheep have a tendency to clump together and flee the dog, though they'll scatter if he gets too close. The dog has a desire to chase the sheep according to a pattern set out by his handler, the master of his pack. The judges watch it all very carefully, picking up on nuances of behavior discernible to the trained eye.

The trial is a hunt elevated to an art form, a kind of interspecies psychic ballet. Border collies are "hard eyed," McNabs are considered "loose eyed." A McNab works less through eye contact and more with motion, displaying its body and threatening with its teeth. A collie works wide, establishes eye contact with the sheep, uses the force of his stare to intimidate the sheep and induce their movement. If the sheep get nervous, the dog promptly lies down in the grass until it's time to exert his presence once more. The sheep and the dog are like two magnets on a sliding surface, positive pole to positive pole, with a charged atmosphere between them that thickens with repellent force the closer they get. The interplay among sheep, handler, and dog as they manipulate this charged space, maneuvering around the fixed constants of the obstacles, is fascinating and beautiful.

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The trials are timed, but much more than time is considered in the judging. What wins the blue for Leo Ielmorini and his dog Sissy—even though she takes twice as long to run the course as the fastest dog—is that balky sheep compel her to work in a manner that shows she could be a real working dog and not one trained just to run trials. She has what judge Dyno Bouscal calls good "fadeaway": she captures the sheep's attention, applies pressure, backs off, changes sides, appears, vanishes in an exquisite, sensitive dance. There's even a moment, out of sight of her handler, when Sissy must deal by herself with sheep who have wedged themselves in the outside corner of the chute. Feeling secure, they refuse to budge. The dog crouches and stares, slowly moving closer as the seconds tick by, finally bringing her bared teeth within inches of the stalled flock. The dog has applied the force of her predatory presence so precisely that when the sheep finally do move, they don't break and run but slide docilely along the side of the chute and enter it properly. The crowd erupts in cheers and prolonged applause.

THE APPLAUSE STILL RINGS IN my ears as I drive away, but it cannot dispel a hint of gloom in the twilit countryside. Thirty years ago Mendocino County had 160,000 ewes and lambs but now boasts less than a third that number, reflecting a nationwide trend. Caught between coyote predation on the hills and attacks by domestic dogs in the valleys, many ranchers are either going to cattle or out of business. "You can make $3 on sheep for every $1 on cattle, and you have a fifth invested," one ex-sheepman told me wistfully. Some 2 million acres here is prime sheep country, but only 28 percent of it is so used, and that amount is declining steadily because of subdivision, speculation, and brush encroachment. The McNab ranch, where Molly's ancestors arrived more than a century ago, has been divided among 200 landowners, and the valley bottom has been planted in vineyards. The lady at the land sales office has no idea where the McNab family has gone.

The line of dogs they brought to this country remains much in evidence, however, and the hard-won breeding of the McNab may prove a valuable legacy for the rest of the West. Already sought after by knowledgeable ranchers as far north as Alaska, stock dogs are coming into wider demand in other western states as ranchers there realize that increasingly expensive human help can be effectively replaced by smart and energetic dogs. Herman Sagehorn noted that at the Red Bluff Bull Sale some of the dogs used in trials on cattle were selling for $2,500 and more (though he didn't see any dogs that impressed him).

As the McNabs fan out across the West, the future in their county of origin seems to belong to the reintroduced border collie. Rod Shippey, the county farm adviser, says he is actually optimistic about the livestock situation there. One reason is that coyote-specific traps are being developed. But the main reason is the advent of small landholders he calls the new pioneers, who are interested in reclaiming lost skills and adding new technology. These people want to run some quality stock on their small parcels. The border collie's preference for working pasture and corral suits it for that type of situation. And they make better pets. By several accounts, a housebound McNab is miserable, while the more placid collie can handle the dual role.

In any event, the applause for the sheepdog trials is not the only sound from the fair that stays with me. I also remember the faint, sweet, ghostly singing that emanated from the grandstand as the arena speakers blared the national anthem and the mounted cowgirl stood before us with the mud-spattered flag leaning out from her stirrup. We are always recreating our country. The free-wheeling days of the wide open range may be at an end, but if the new pioneers are careful, something nearly as good may take the place of those days. And no matter what happens, it seems that hard-workin' dogs are going to be a part of the Northern California rural scene for a while longer. ■