

The Art Of The Packed Pen

By Pat Taylor

Fellstar Bouvs

The main reason for working your stock dog in a packed pen is to teach the dog to move around stock comfortably and be mentally off-contact while getting into position. A dog has to be mentally Off-contact to achieve big, wide flanks, square flanks and nice out runs. This exercise also teaches patience to both dog and handler.

A packed pen generally consists of a smaller square or rectangular pen, which size is anywhere between 10x10 to 20x30. I prefer the pen to have square corners and be dog proof so when you start working a dog off leash they cannot get out. A sturdy pen should be used that will hold sheep pushing into the fence. I have several smaller pens that can be used for packed pen work. My favorite pen size to work this exercise is about 20 feet long and 15 feet wide so I have a long side and a short side. The pen is small enough that I'm not too far from the dog and when I move to off leash work I'm still close enough to help the dog immediately.

I only use sheep for packed pen work. No ducks or cattle. Reasons should be obvious. In my 20x15 pen I'll pack it with between 30 and 40 good-sized sheep. The sheep don't have to be knee knockers but should not react to the closeness off the dog with total panic. Dog broke sheep make it safer for both you and the dog. Anytime you are in a pen with 30 or 40 sheep there is an inherent risk of injury to the human from sheep bumping and pushing so keep your knees bent and stay safe. With approximately that number of sheep I have a lot of movement inside the pen but it's not so tightly packed that a dog doesn't have room to get around along the fence line and the handler can move through the sheep to get into position as needed.. Actually when done properly the sheep will start huddling in the middle of the pen and the dog will have about 2 feet on the fence line for a path. Whatever size pen you have make sure you have the number of sheep to allow for the dog to move freely around the perimeter IF the sheep move out of his way. The sheep are NOT packed like sardines in a can.

The object of this exercise is to pattern a behavior in the dog so that it becomes an ingrained habit. You want the dog to learn to go into a pen with confidence and to work the perimeter of the pen and follow the fence line. The dog should NOT pick fights with the stock in the pen even when that stock stomps at the dog or turns to face the dog. You want the dog to move quietly along the fence line mimicking a wraith floating around the pen, insubstantial to the sheep. The dog should continue to move until told to down.

This does not mean the dog isn't allowed to grip. If sheep get balled up in a corner the dog should be allowed to grip to open a pathway for the dog to continue flanking. But the dog has to remain on the fence line when gripping. You are not taking power away from the dog but you are defining the parameters for such behavior to be acceptable. Sometimes the sheep simply don't get out of the way fast enough. If the sheep is there when the dog gets there it is acceptable to grip but not ravage the stock. If the stock is trying to get out of the way simply Down the dog and patiently wait for a path to clear. Then restart the dog. In allowing the grip AND using the Down when a moment is needed to open a path for the dog; you are teaching the dog patience and to wait on the stock to respond appropriately.

There are many reasons to do the packed pen exercise. Examples for the need for this exercise are:

- ❖ The dog is mentally working stock when flanking causing the dog to have poor flanking skills and poor out runs, e.g., slicing into the stock on its flanks; running close; running down the middle; refusing to take flanks while the dog is in motion, etc.
- ❖ The dog is aggressive with stock in close quarters.
- ❖ The dog won't go into a pen to remove stock without causing a wreck or gripping.
- ❖ The dog is "sticky" and won't take flanks. It just stares at the stock as if mesmerized.
- ❖ The dog is fearful of stock.
- ❖ Simply put, the dog has self-control issues.

I would hope that you have demanded respect from your dog from the first breath the dog took in your presence. You should have taught such respect with the dog understanding that it should walk on a loose leash even with distractions present. It should Recall even with distractions present. It should Down even with distractions present. Yes, Respect can be taught while working stock but it would be easier on the dog if the dog understood those commands prior to stock work.

To start this exercise you will walk into the pen with your dog on leash. As you get to the gate you ask for respect from your dog by telling them to Down at the gate before entering the pen. You will open the gate toward the sheep and your dog should remain down until you invite him to come through the gate and join you inside the pen. After the dog enters immediately Down the dog inside the pen. The dog should remain down until you've secured the gate and turned around to start walking.

As I start, I tell the dog, "That'll do. Here." I have just commanded the dog to walk WITH me and ignore stock. The dog is NOT formally heeling but should walk on a loose leash without diving at sheep or lunging ahead. Its attention should be on you and he should maintain a position against the fence and at your side while you walk around the pen. The dog is ALWAYS on the outside. The picture should be stock in the interior, then you then dog then fence.

You should NOT round your corners but make your dog walk into each corner. Your body posture and positioning should reinforce the dog having to walk into that corner. If you have your stock stick put pressure on the dog to go deep into the corner. As you make the turn and walk out of the corner you should take a couple of short steps then Down the dog. You should Down the dog a step or two past each corner when you first start this exercise.

If the dog is lunging on the lead you should change direction (turning into or toward the fence to execute the turn). Turn every time the dog lunges so that the dog hits the end of the loose lead about the time you turn around to go the other direction. The about turn makes the dog correct itself with a jerk on the lead. You MAY repeat your "That'll do. Here." Command. I do. But it isn't really necessary. I'm just giving the command to re-establish what the dog is supposed to be doing. Continue walking the fence line.

If the dog is powerful you may have to use a choke chain or German Pinch Collar on the dog to get an effective correction for the lunging. It depends on your skill level and how out of control the dog is as to what equipment you may need.

DO NOT and I repeat, DO NOT scold the dog for bad or inappropriate behavior. You may give a leash correction but DO NOT give a verbal reprimand. The dog will not take the physical correction personally but it will take a verbal reprimand personally.

It is imperative you keep a loose leash in this exercise! You HAVE to let the dog make mistakes so that it learns that the inappropriate behavior results in some type of discomfort.

You should progress in this exercise to walking at a brisk pace and the dog ignoring the stock. Do a lot of about turns to keep the dogs attention. Do a lot of stops and starts. Make it a happy exercise but do NOT make it a formal heeling routine. Change your speed and the cadence of your walk. Praise the dog. SMILE ALL the time.

When you've progressed to the dog walking deep into the corners and downing swiftly and happily, now you repeat the exercise with the dog dragging the leash... Then repeat the same pattern totally off lead.

After the dog walks comfortably off leash at your side e-v-e-r-y time you enter the pen put the lead back on the dog and let him drag it. Start walking and drift away from your dog, inserting your stock stick between you and the dog and ask the dog to yield away from you to start flanking around the stock. Just ask for a few steps to start with then Down the dog. Repeat. When you Down the dog keep walking. (Down in motion with the dog ahead of you.) Continue walk to catch up to where you downed the dog and as you step past the dog say, "That'll do. Here". Repeat flanking the dog ahead of you while you continue walking. Eventually you should be able to flank the dog and stop with the dog continuing to follow the fence all the way around and right back to you. (A 360° flank.)

Now you work on standing in one place and flank your dog around the perimeter. Stop and start him. Reverse the dog while in motion. Teach inside flanks.

When the dog is reasonably trustworthy you start back on lead and calling the dog through the stock. First you call the dog to you while you stand on the near side of the stock. Then you step back into the stock and call him to you again. You repeat this until you have made your way through the stock to the fence line. The dog may flounder as the stock flow past him. Down the dog in the pressure and stand quietly while the stock move out of the way. Do this until the dog ignores the stock on his recall.

When the dog is comfortable being called toward and through the stock as you made the hole to call him through, you start the exercise by standing on the opposite side of the stock and calling him to you. I bend over and point my stock stick at the dog's chest. As he recalls I pull my stock stick toward me with the tip down. The dog is now having to make his way through the sea of moving bodies and come to me without working stock.

The aforementioned exercise may take a while to perfect depending on how much you cheat in your training. Perfecting this exercise will help in perfecting a square flank.

There are a few things I want to mention about working off-contact exercises, especially this one.

Do NOT use the command "There" when doing this exercise. Many people will combine the Down with the There command. The There command is an on-contact command. Its entire purpose is to orient the dog to the

stock in preparation of moving the stock with the on-contact command, Walk Up. You negate the purpose of this exercise if you tell your dog There as he I now mentally on-contact and working stock. Being on-contact is a reward for the dog and counter productive to the exercise,

Also, if this is the only exercise you work for a while your dog will quit working stock. Work other on-contact exercises at a different time or even on another day but NOT in the same training session.

When the stock get jammed together and there is no path for the dog it is your job to keep/hold the dog in the pressure. The dog may do several different things in reacting to pressure. It may grip. It may bounce out of pressure. It may just stand there and wait. Never try to drive a dog through pressure. Use the Down to hold a dog in pressure. Be patient and allow time for the stock to move and make a path for the dog. If the dog won't walk into pressure (sticky or bounces out of pressure) go help the dog. Pull sheep to one side if need be to help create a path for the dog. Put the dog back on lead if need be to hold the dog in pressure. In a square pen the stock should not ball up in a corner unless the dog isn't on the fence, allowing the continuous flow of stock around the pen, or you may be blocking their path. Never throw the dog to the wolves, Go help.

This same exercise should be applied to larger and larger areas, e.g., an arena.

You will go back and use this exercise repeatedly during the lifetime of the dog to help with different problems that may crop up when a dog is "working" on its flanks.

Remember a flank is a positioning exercise and is NOT for moving stock. It is an off-contact exercise to position the dog in preparation for moving stock. If the dog is mentally working stock while flanking the dog is on-contact. Stock can read the dog and thus there is a greater likelihood of the stock moving off the pressure of the dog prior to the dog reaching the correct position. TEACH your dog how to mentally turn loose of the stock and give you softer, wider flanks.

Patisms

- *The art of Training is actually the art of Communicating. Treat it as such. Be a better communicator to become a better trainer.*
- *All training is pressure/release training whether you think it is or not.*
- *It's not the pressure, but the release of pressure, that trains the dog.*
- *Make what you want easy and what you don't want hard.*