

A WOOLLY TALE

By Barbara Malone

Many years had passed since there were youngsters in our household and I had fallen into a comfortable pattern of enjoying the old guys sleeping at my feet dreaming of the glory days of obedience trials. Now the house was alive with two energetic youngsters, the only problem was I had “matured” a bit and didn’t have the energy of the glory years, but I longed to get back into the performance end of Chows.

I always had the desire to take my Chows herding, something they were used for according to the history books. The only problem was finding an association that would be willing to test Chows for natural herding abilities. Most times I was answered with, “we don’t use cows, we use sheep or ducks”, with which I quickly responded, “no, I have ‘Chow dogs’, will you test them?” which was always followed by “NO”.

A few Chow friends told me they went to Slate Belt Herding Organization at Raspberry Ridge Sheep Farm in Bangor, PA, where they are open to testing all breeds, finally a positive response! It took some persuading to convince my husband that the two and a half hour trip to the farm would be a wonderful experience for the Chows. It was a cold and wet rainy November morning as we drove to the farm, all the time my husband was muttering and sputtering, this is gonna be a waste of time. He kept procrastinating, “these are Chows and they are not going to do anything but look at you like you are nuts! I don’t care if they were used for herding in China, this is the good old USA and they are American Chows who love to sleep on our bed”.

After two and a half hours of listening to him, I was starting to believe him, especially when we arrived at the farm and I took the Chows for a walk out by the sheep. I kept telling them, “look, sheep!” Tai yawned, April laid down and fell asleep; they were more interested in the donkey.



Within the hour the other breeds arrived, Tai was the first to be tested. Four sheep were brought into the testing area by Jack, the resident Border Collie. I was instructed to release Tai from his leash, with much reluctance I did. He pranced over to Jack and gave him a “hello, how are you greeting” and then just stood there looking at me. My heart sank, my husband was going to be right, there was no natural herding instinct in this Chow. After what seemed like eternity I walked up to Tai and whispered in his ear, “don’t you want to chase the nice woolly sheep around?” He flashed me a look as if to say ‘you mean it’s ok?’ so I replied, “yes it’s ok.” He was off in a flash.

Tai was guided by a staff, he was nipping at the sheep and coming back with mouthfuls of wool, I kept shouting “NO”! To which I was quickly instructed to stop, the word NO was not used here, it would only escalate the biting, instead the staff would guide him. She would not let him be hurt, nor would she allow him to hurt the sheep. Tai is a rescue who was badly beaten and I feared the staff would bring back bad memories I had worked so hard to rid him of. There was no fear of that staff in him. He

was much too interested in the sheep to worry about the stick. Well shut my husband’s mouth, there was a little black Chow out there herding sheep from one end of the area to the other, moving them where they were suppose to go. Now for the big test, could I call him off, would he come when called? I gave the command to come and come he did, boy was I proud of him. Some obedience training paid off.

April was the third dog to be tested. She had been waiting behind a wall of bailed hay ‘hearing’ the herding, but not able to see. Fresh sheep were brought in, and being the novice that I am, I thought the one with horns was a goat. I explained my concerns that April was a very “soft” submissive Chow and I didn’t want her hurt, they explained the “goat” was a Scottish ewe and she should be fine with April.

Into the testing area we went and off with her leash; she didn’t stray from my side, her obedience training was overriding her natural herding abilities. In our yard she would be sent out to round up Tai, when he was being his stubborn male Chowness, and herd him back to the house. I whispered in her ear, “go bring the sheep

home,” down went her head, and she was off in a flash. She was quiet, very lady like, moving sheep from one area to another, not like her voicetress brother. The Scottish ewe picked up on this. The next thing we knew the ewe stopped short, put her head down and rammed April square in the head, flinging her four feet back.

Poor April just stood there shaking her head. My feet were frozen; my brain kept saying “move feet move, go rescue her”. Before the brain could make my feet move, April reacted, she circled the ewe nipping at her heels and barking what I swear was “OK missy, so you want to play hard ball, well I can play hard too!” She drove the ewe back to the herd and into the holding area. The ewe was promptly removed from further testing.

April did an excellent job of handling the aggressive ewe and surprised her mom; she

could stand up for herself. Both Tai and April passed the herding instinct test with flying colors. We stayed and watched the other breeds being tested; we may be a bit prejudice, but we truly feel the Chows did the best job that day. I am so glad we got them on videotape.

All the way home I listen to my husband saying “told you so, they were just great”. But I could swear that I could hear April and Tai singing all the way home,

“Baa, baa, little Chows do you have any wool?

Yes Mom, yes Mom, several mouths full!!!”

giggle, giggle, giggle.

Tai and April were the third and fourth Chows to be tested at Slate Belt Herding Association; they were very impressed with

the Chows natural herding abilities. I know my Chows had a great time and impressed a lot of “nonbelievers.” I am very grateful that this organization is open to “all” breeds and is willing to give each dog a chance to be tested.

If you are looking into something fun to do with your Chows, why not check with the herding associations in your area and see if they are open to testing all breeds? If your Chow shows interest in chasing “critters” in your yard, they most likely will have a natural herding instinct. Please remember you must have some control over your dog. If you cannot control your dog, please do not allow the sheep to be injured. Oh yes, if your dog kills or injures the sheep you are responsible for paying for the damages.

Thank goodness we didn't have to eat lamb all winter. ■

