



## **Training Cow Dogs**

By MIKE FERGUSON  
Of the Baker City Herald

**Eagle Valley rancher Mitch Hoover has been training cow dogs for more than 20 years, so he was surprised a few years ago when one of his border collies wouldn't hear his voice and wouldn't follow his verbal commands.**

**Perplexed, Hoover took the dog to a veterinarian, who removed two large gobs of earwax from Hoover's prized working dogs.**

**The dog was soon back to his old self, helping watch over the cowherd and move cattle as Hoover commanded.**

**"I thought I was getting to be a pretty poor trainer," Hoover said of his dog's apparent disregard. "It was amazing how much better I got after my dog could hear me again."**

**Hoover spoke last week to the Baker County Livestock Association about his approach to training cow dogs. The large turnout was one indication that well-trained working dogs are key to the success of many area cattle ranches.**

**Hoover said he starts training his puppies young. By three months, he begins to allow them attempts at that most important of cow dog skills — hopping in and out of the bed of the pickup on command.**

**He said he always ties up his cow dogs in the pickup. "You don't let a well-trained dog get run over," he says.**

Some dog-handlers wait until five or six months to begin training, but Hoover wants to establish what's expected early in the relationship. "A dog is a pack animal, and they need to learn their place in the pack, and that you're their leader," he said.

He likes to place very young puppies on their back and roll them back and forth "until they'll submit to that," he said. Then he'll pinch open their mouths and stick his finger inside to get them used to taking worm medication without biting the hand that feeds them.

After that, Hoover will begin working puppies with a 10 to 30 foot string tied to their necks. A little jerk on the string usually brings them around to the desired behavior.

The most important verbal command at that age is "come here." "

You don't ever want your dog to be afraid of your discipline," Hoover said.

Another distinction Hoover makes clear is that working dogs are not pets. "They're not playthings," he said. "We choose to be serious with them because they're working dogs. We get along, but we have a working relationship."

Hoover never allows his stock dogs to bark.

"They're not watchdogs," he said. "You want them to go to sleep and be quiet, unless there's a coon or skunk in their kennel."

It's the rancher's job to make the dog's sleep experience as pleasant as possible.

"You can't expect them to work hard all day without food, water and clean bedding," he said. "They can't shiver all night and then be expected to work hard the next day. Kennel them or tie them up so they're not chasing cars all night long."

Hoover believes that virtually any set of verbal commands will work, even on young dogs. It's the trainer's tone of voice, different whistles — even his or her body posture — that "tells the dog a lot," he says.

"You're angry, upset, excited — they pick up on that real fast," he said. "A dog can see your eyes from a half-mile away."

### **A natural balance**

A cow dog will want to place himself 180 degrees from the handler on the other side of the livestock, Hoover said. The traditional command for getting the dog there in a clockwise fashion is "go by"; counter-clockwise, it's "away to me."

The route the dog chooses to get to that balance point — in line with the handler, with the cattle in between — can be important. If cattle get spooked and head toward a draw — say, in rough terrain that could require a half-day's work to recollect all the cow/calf pairs —

**the cow dog can cut them off before they get there, so long as the handler has given them the correct command for which route to take.**

**A "right there" command gets the dog to stop, face the cattle, and lie down, with its head resting on its extended front paws. That's a working dog's ready position, Hoover said.**

**"Look back" is another command essential to the trainer's lexicon. It means there's a calf missing and the dog better find it.**

**Sometimes Hoover will make a sound like a calf bawling to remind the dog there's work to be done.**

**"More often than not, the dog will find the missing calf before I do," he said.**

**Hoover won't let his dogs jump over or crawl under a fence unless he's given them permission, but it's a nice skill that allows the dogs to clear cattle from over-grazing along the fence line.**

**Some dogs, though, will hide out under the fence, where they know they can take a break for a while.**

**Other verbal commands are "that'll do," which to a cow dog means, "quit it; knock it off, now!," "hey," which means "pay attention; you're not listening," and a sound that comes out as "aaarghhh," which Hoover uses to mean "you are in big trouble now."**

**"I always pet them after the discipline, because their heads are down and they're completely submissive," he said. "You tell them they're a good dog the same way you'd hug your kids after you're done getting after them."**

**Since cattle are an important part of the cow-cattle equation, they must be trained to be around working dogs, he said.**

**"We'll bring dogs in during calving and have them bite the baby calves to get them used to dogs," he said. If there's one important command for a dog to learn, especially eager border collies, it's "get back," Hoover says.**

**"You don't want the dogs in the way while you're roping," during branding and other occasions, he said. "It's a hard thing for an eager dog to learn. They invariably choose the moment when you're wrestling with a calf and mama's cranky with you."**