

Just So.

Watch Your Sheep – Part 1

Elizabeth M. Jarrell • Kensington, Maryland

Part 1 originally appeared in the January-February 2024 issue of *Aussie Times*, pp 54-55.

Part 2 originally appeared in the March-April 2024 issue of *Aussie Times*, pp 56-57.



September 4, 2023: First Herding Lesson

Although I usually introduce my dogs to sheep at a younger age, Maisie May was introduced to sheep on September 4, 2023, at the age of 18 months. You never quite know what a young herding dog will do when the dog first meets sheep. One thing is for sure, they will always surprise you.

I remembered to bring a buckle collar. I also brought a lot of water in a cooler, both for Maisie May and myself.

Maisie May's obedience instructor nicknamed her "Biker Chick" for her behavior in class. I signed the waiver promising to pay \$150 for each dismembered sheep, hoping that all sheep would remain happy and healthy. Three sheep add up quickly to \$450, which is a lot to pay for lamb chops. That said, these were by far the tallest and widest sheep I have ever seen – more like cows in sheep's clothing. There were, in fact, "heavy sheep," meaning sheep not prone to be too fast in order to be easier for an inexperienced dog to handle.

True to my herding tradition, the weather was entirely dreadful. We were in an intense, multi-day heat wave with afternoon temperatures reaching 100 degrees. We arrived for our 10:00 a.m. lesson with a temperature of around 91 degrees and full sun. No one – people, dogs, or sheep – does well or lasts long in such heat.

Much to my delight, this facility actually had bathrooms in buildings, not the usual port-a-potties. I have used many a port-a-potty in my life, but using one in extreme heat is never a pleasure. So I was thrilled. Because of the intense heat and lack of rain, the grounds were dry, very dry.

I had never met Karen Chandler, although I have been instructed by her associate. Like many stock people, she is a woman of few words. She is also extremely patient and kind.

She repeated several times to watch my knees. Her words caught my attention because she was wearing a knee brace, the result, she explained, of her dog colliding into her at exactly the

same place as it had previously. It is not easy watching Karen, Maisie May, three sheep, and my two knees, but I did the best I could to scan about all suspects.

Since Maisie May's other obedience instructor is always talking about her supposedly very high prey drive, I was worried that I might have to purchase at least one sheep, if not all three. I told Karen that Maisie May has a high prey drive but was also so submissive that she grinned at people. Full disclosure is always best.

At home, I cannot water the garden without Maisie May leaping about catching water from the hose until she is soaking wet. She loves to chase water from the hose. Before entering the small ring, Karen asked if Maisie May liked hoses, so I said that she did. Well, Maisie May took one look at the hose and did not wish to be bothered with it. She also refused to drink from the large bowl outside the ring. I have to admit that none of my city dogs will ever drink from a communal bowl in the country. None will ever take a dunk in a baby pool either. I think they are just much more interested in all the fascinating things going on about a farm.

Karen had me attach a long line to Masie May, who entered the ring and did not start foraging for sheep poop, which I viewed as a very positive sign. I expected her to run full-tilt at the sheep, but of course she did the opposite. She looked at the sheep and the sheep looked at her. None of them knew what to make of each other. Everyone was panting heavily.

Karen and I walked to the heads of the sheep and started walking backwards, leading the sheep. Maisie May was confused. She looked around and then thought maybe she should heel a bit. With a lot of encouragement, she managed to get behind the sheep who promptly stuck themselves to the fence line. I had to put my hand in Maisie May's collar and bring her up to the sheep to move them off the fence. We repeated this process several times.

Maisie May made one or two passes at the sheep, who remained unimpressed. She did manage to circle behind them a time or two. We stopped the lesson on a high note.

"Has she been discouraged from chasing?" asked Karen.

"She does beautiful outruns in the back yard whenever she sees a bunny," I replied. "But she has been taught not to bother with another dog's toy."

"She'll do better next time," said Karen.

And so we went home, extremely hot and not terribly encouraged. My biker chick did not display the herding instinct I had expected, but I also know some dogs need an exposure or two to sheep to turn on. And, as a dear friend pointed out, there were no deaths.

October 1, 2023: Second Herding Lesson

We had a beautiful fall day, sunny and in the upper 70s, for our second herding lesson, so I was able to bring William along with us to go herding. The sheep are at a very large facility that also offers dock diving, Fast Cat, and other dog sports. This day was a Fast Cat trial full of dogs, people, and a lot of cheering.

As Karen was putting on her knee brace, she once again reminded me to watch out for my knees. Message heard and received. She reminded me that the first rule of herding is to protect your sheep.

Once again, we started Maisie out in a small pen and on a long line, which we quickly removed after a minute or two when

it became apparent she was not going to create any lambchops. Our sheep were the same would-be cows, the biggest, broadest, and tallest sheep I've ever encountered. All were easily taller and longer than my puppy girl. I might also add that when one of these sheep who would be cows ran into my thigh with its head, I felt it. Sheep have very strong heads.

I walked backwards, or tried to, leading the sheep while Karen pushed Maisie out a bit and behind the sheep to get her started. Maisie actually showed interest in the sheep. She did not weave back and forth behind them, but she more or less managed to stay behind them a good part of the time. When the sheep got stuck on the fence, Karen instructed me to bring Maisie up by the collar and the recalcitrant sheep moved off the fence.

A few times, a sheep decided to bolt around like a fool and Maisie had no issue taking off running after the sheep. She just didn't quite know how to get to the runaway sheep back with the other two.

The sun got very hot, very quickly. Soon Maisie's tongue was hanging out of the side of her mouth and the sheep's sides were heaving. We gave everyone a short rest while we talked a bit. Karen emphasized that Maisie was more confident and more interested so this was progress.

I realize that no one wears fashion statements while herding, but I am always interested in proper footwear. Anyone in dogs or horses knows that good feet are critical and that taking care of feet is even more critical. I walk my dogs about 500 miles a year on concrete, excluding any training or other activities, so I am always interested in good shoes.

I looked down at Karen's shoes. "What kind of sneakers are you wearing?" I asked.

"Sneakers," she replied.

We resumed our lesson. Maisie circled behind the sheep for a turn around the small pen. Karen, as always, ended on a high note. I asked Karen about her question the last lesson concerning whether or not I had taught Maisie not to chase. She said that dogs quickly differentiate between not chasing forbidden objects and herding sheep, which, of course, is not supposed to be *chasing* sheep anyway. We booked another lesson for the following weekend.

William was pleased to be back in the country, having been born in the country. We strolled around the grounds together a little bit and then went home.

Watch Your Sheep – Part 2

Elizabeth M. Jarrell • Kensington, Maryland

October 8, 2023: Third Herding Lesson

The day of our third herding lesson was a crisp fall day somewhere in the low 50s with 25-mph winds. I later found out that these conditions make for particularly odiferous sheep poop. Once again, we were in a small pen with three heavy, and I mean rather pudgy, sheep.

This time, I worked William for a few minutes. Although he had not seen sheep for six years, he instantly behaved like a trained

herding dog. He was wearing, responding instantly to “come by” and “away” commands, while being calmly in control of his sheep. He never herded so well in his life; he was positively brilliant!

Maisie, meanwhile, was in the van with the back door raised so that she could watch William. Jealousy is a potent motivator.

I put William away in the van with many a “good boy.” Then I took out Maisie.

We started her without a long line. She immediately began to race around with wild abandon which, of course, is chasing, not herding. Karen said to put her back on the long line and hold her a minute.

Karen, a tall, thin woman of a certain age who is tough as nails mentally and physically, grabbed the spotted sheep. The sheep protested with violent kicks. Karen then deftly flipped her over.

“It seems like we have had a coyote incident,” said Karen.

Karen had noticed that the sheep had wounds on her belly and side. No, not from Maisie, but from a coyote. She then escorted the sheep out of the pen. We were down to two sheep. One of the remaining sheep had red lines down her neck which she determined came from eating berries.

Karen switched from a stick to a wide paddle that made noise to convince Maisie to settle down.

“Watch your sheep!” commanded Karen.

At which point, Maisie discovered the culinary delight of sheep poop.

Herding is all about watching. The sheep. The dog. The instructor. The long line. And the many piles of sheep poop. Meanwhile, in a small pen, you are essentially walking around in circles. It is not for the faint of heart.

“Look at the sheeps’ heads. They will tell you where they are going,” reminded Karen. True enough, but the sheeps’ heads will not tell you the speed at which they may decide to bolt – straight at you.

And that is how I got stepped on, twice, by a very large, plump sheep.

“That sheep stepped on my toes. Twice!” I exclaimed.

“That’s OK,” said Karen. “The sheep didn’t step on your dog. You chose to be here. She didn’t.”

Herding people are tough as nails.

At that point, that same sheep decided to stomp its foot rather belligerently at Maisie, who appeared momentarily taken aback.

“Stop stomping at my dog, you sheep!” I said. Great, I was now talking to a sheep. Karen blinked. I stopped talking to the sheep and we resumed our herding lesson.

“That sheep does not respect your dog,” said Karen.

If you think about it, all dog sports are about respect. Dog sports also build confidence especially in a young dog. Karen agrees.

Maisie even managed to get the sheep off the fence herself a time or two. We ended on a high note.

“She did better this time,” said Karen. “I see glimmers of something.”

October 15, 2023: Fourth Herding Lesson

Our fourth herding lesson was another lovely fall day, 58 degrees with 25-mph winds. The trees on the drive were showing their colors.

We started Maisie out on a long line. She could not have cared less about the sheep. She was, however, decidedly interested in sheep poop. After about five minutes, Karen called the lesson over.

“She simply is not turning onto sheep,” said Karen. “Since her nose is on the ground, perhaps we should try her on ducks, which we cannot do until a month from now.”

So we put William back on sheep for the remainder of the lesson. Dogs will always surprise you. William, always a perfect gentleman, for the first time ever, charged into the sheep and tried to pull wool. We fixed that immediately and he ended on a high note.

Karen walked with me back to my vehicle.

“Some dogs never turn onto sheep, their instinct never kicks in,” she said. “At the end of the day, they are our pets.”

Karen is an exceedingly kind and gentle soul. She said that she enjoyed working with me and I certainly enjoyed working with her. Maisie is the first of any of my dogs not to be able to herd. Perhaps after Maisie has grown up a bit she will become interested in sheep. We may return later to see.

Just so.

Elizabeth M. Jarrell of Bon Ami Australian Shepherds has won six Maxwells from the Dog Writers Association of America (DWAA), including two for her “Just So” column, one for books, one for editorial, and one for online feature, plus a Certificate of Excellence from the Cat Writers Association. Liz won the AKC Family Dog Award, from the DWAA 2018 Annual Writing Competition. This award is for the best writing (including books, articles and blog posts) about any or all of the good manners programs under the AKC Family Dog umbrella, including AKC Therapy Dog, AKC Trick Dog, AKC Canine Good Citizen, AKC Community Canine, Urban CGC and AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy. Previously, she had also won DWAA’s 2016 AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy and Canine Good Citizen Special Award.

