

STOCK HANDLING AT TRIALS

By Kyle Trumbull-Clark

Since we're coming into the big "Spring Trial Season", I thought it might be helpful to send out a little reminder about one of a club's hardest workers at a trial - the stock handler. Whether you are the Trial Chair/Course Director, the stock handler or an exhibitor here's some things to keep in mind. As the Trial Chair/Course Director: You are hiring the **very best** and most knowledgeable person and dog team you can find to work in your pens. You know that the quality of every run that day starts with how the stock for each run is set. You want each set to be equal and set out as close to the same as possible. You want them handled and set as quietly and calmly as can be - as that can have a direct effect on the runs. In other words, your stock handler can make or break your trial. Whether it's your animals or you've rented them, you are ultimately responsible for them and how they are handled/cared for. You must have complete trust in who you have hired to handle them that day.

Well in advance of your trial, confirm with your stock handler what time you need them there, what the parameters of the job are (types of stock to be handled, the estimated number of runs, etc.) and how they will be paid. Before your trial make sure that the pens are suitable for the intended stock and can hold them safely and be safe for the handler and dog to work in, too. It is not the stock handler's job on the day of the trial to be continually fixing a jerry-rigged pen that's collapsing. Strong enough fencing is a must and loose nails or sharp protruding objects need to be taken care of. Water hoses should be laid out and easily accessible to the stock handlers to keep waterers filled and the stock dog's cooling tank filled. Hay for set out should be close at hand. Your stock handler's job is to be at the pens and ready for anything, not to be running around the area trying to find another hose in order to get water to the hot and thirsty stock. It would be helpful to leave a bucket with a pair of pliers, wire cutters, a hammer and some baling twine at the pens so in case of emergency, something can be fixed quickly.

Having some sort of shade or rain cover for the stock handler should be considered. Since your stock handler can't just dash over to the hospitality table (like almost everyone else), put together a cooler with drinks and some snacks. You might even ask them what they like to drink or eat! Make sure the cooler is at the pens at the start of the trial. Every hour or so, check with the stock handlers to make sure they have everything they need and see if they need a break for the restroom, etc. Fill in for them, or find someone who can, if they do need to take a quick break. If your judge decides to take a break, make sure you let the stock handlers know that is happening. Especially for lunch! A majority of the time, lunch is all that the "hired hand" is being paid. So make sure they are well aware of when their "pay day" happens. (Have walkie-talkies that work!) If you are smart, you will make sure your stock handlers eat first, or jump them

ahead in line, as they need to be back to work before anyone else. If the judge chooses to work through lunch, bring food out to your stock handlers. At the end of the day, make sure you personally and *sincerely* thank each stock handler. That's about all we ask for after the heat or rain we've worked in, the dust we've eaten, the bruises we've gotten and the sore muscles/feet.

As the Stock Handler:

You are a very important part of the "team" of running the trial. You and your dog have been hired due to your experience with stock and trialing. How you handle what goes on in the pens makes a huge difference in how the trial runs. The Trial Chair/Course Director is counting on you to know your job in order to keep the trial running smoothly. The judge is counting on you to make sure each run is set as closely to the same as possible so they do not have to account for a "bad set" and to be "at the ready" if trouble occurs. The exhibitors are counting on you to give them all a fair shake at a good set out and to have their stock as calm and settled as possible. Bring the best dog you have for the job at hand. This is not the time to train your young, barely controllable pup. Having a dog that must be on a lead in the pens does not inspire confidence in your ability to handle the job. Everyone is looking to you and your dog to be professionals.

Arrive at the site with plenty of time to check the pens to make sure you know how the system works and for safety issues. Make sure your stock has water available (and you know how/where to get more) and none appear injured or lame. Know where the set out hay/grain is and where to get more. If there are any problems or questions, go directly to the Trial Chair/Course Director and discuss them - that's your "boss" for the day. Meet with the judge and find out exactly where they want the stock set and when to set them out. In certain venues you will also want to discuss options of whether you and your dog are inside or outside the ring for set out. It might be helpful to organize a "signal" in advance that lets you know if the stock need to be picked up. Sometimes it's unclear if a run is over or not when you're back in the pens. If there are a series of holding pens, ask the judge which pen to start with. That will ease everyone's mind that maybe the stock handlers are "hand picking" sets for certain people. (Though, we know you aren't!)

Calm and quiet are the words to remember on trial day. Yelling, hollering or screaming at your dog, the stock or another stock handler is NOT acceptable. (Cuss under your breath if necessary.) It only signals to the world that there is trouble and puts everyone on edge. There should be no crashing or banging the pens, gates, etc. It is true that in some pens noise is just going to happen due to what they are made of (aluminum gates are the worst), but do your absolute best to keep it as quiet as possible. You could be the cause of a bad run if an exhibitor's dog is startled or distracted by all the hullabaloo in the pens. A huge cloud of dust arising from the pens is always a bad, bad sign... The calmer and quieter you and your dog are, the better the stock will be. If the stock

are sent out acting like they are there for a walk in the park or a picnic, you've done your job well!

You are the caretaker of the stock until the run starts. Then it's up to the judge to make the call to stop a run or give a warning for wrongdoing by a dog. It is not your job to yell (as a "correction") if a dog bites stock unless it's absolutely mauling and happens right in front of the set out gate and you don't feel the judge can see it. If an animal is returned to the pens and is obviously injured by the dog, you should quickly - and quietly - call the judge over so they may inspect it. Stock handling can be an extremely rewarding experience. Spending a day with your good dog buddy, good stock and having nice people around can be quite enjoyable. Knowing that you did your best to help others get those qualifying scores is icing on the cake.

As An Exhibitor:

Please remember that we are there working hard to help you have the best run possible. We've been in your shoes! Please don't yell at us or get angry when you haven't taken the time to check out how to open the gate.

We will be happy to help you if you are having a problem - we know some latches are tricky - just nicely ask (no matter how frustrated you are from your run). Banish the thought from your mind that we are "hand picking" certain stock for certain people. We just don't have the time for that! Usually, we don't know who's coming up next and we've already sorted out the next bunch, or the pen to be used has already been established. If you see one of us running madly to the port-a-potty, please let us go ahead of you...we need to get back right away to putting out your stock! A little "thank you" to the stock handlers as you shut your re-pen gate is always greatly appreciated.

I hope that all of this will make everyone's trialing and stock handling experience a little better. A smile, a thank you and some respect goes a long way for us all!