

Flanking Off Balance

by Sheryl McDonald

Now that your dog is stopping on balance and fetching to you, it is time to step up the training to the next level. After warming up the dog performing some circle exercises to widen out the outrun, we start by asking the dog to stop somewhere else other than 12 o'clock. Think of flanking as the face of a clock. The sheep are set in the middle of the clock and the handler is standing at 6. Try working on stopping a flank at a number on the clock like 10 or 2 o'clock. Send the dog around the sheep and stop at a number of your choice other than 12. Then send the dog again the same direction and stop the dog on the other half of the clock from the first time you stopped him. Then try sending the dog the other direction and repeat. Remember that flanking is not about moving sheep. So if the dog is going around too close and the sheep are moving off, your dog is too close. Give him an out and restart the exercise. When you ask for the flank the first few times, your dog will want to automatically stop at balance, 12 o'clock. Before he gets there, repeat the flank in the direction he is going in and you may have to repeat it again to get the dog to go all the way behind you and around.

This exercise is designed to do several things at once. It will help make the dog and the handler learn their flanking directions. It will also make a good listener of the dog which is very important when we move up in our training. We need good instant response to make sheep moving happen. It will also help the dog trust you in your judgment of making the commands to the dog. As you gain confidence in what you do, the dog will trust you as well. Another thing this exercise will do, is cause some stress to the dog (and probably the handler) due to learning something new. But that's OK as the dog will gain confidence through a few repetitions and learn the job. This is how the dog will get better too. They need to work through different things to gain confidence and feel comfortable.

After the dog seems to relax and feel comfortable going around both ways and stopping off balance at different points, we are now going to stop the dog behind us and ask him to walk up on the stock. We can actually stop the dog anywhere and start asking him to walk up on the stock but sometimes behind the handler is easier to start this. This will become the drive. So pat your leg nearest the dog and say "Walk up" and then you move forward with the dog, (this helps his confidence), and face the direction you want the sheep to go. Watch the dog's head and make sure it doesn't bend to go into a flank. If it does, then ask the dog to lie down and walk up again. We are also going to ask for a "steady" or "easy" when he is walking up, as necessary, and this will help the dog "rate" his stock and stay off of the sheep rears. Just do a little bit of these walk ups at a time. You can send the dog on a flank and stop him off balance and ask the dog to walk from there as well. Make sure you always turn your body in the direction the sheep are going to help your dog not have to cross any pressure lines that you are creating. For example, the handler stands at 6 facing 12 and asks the dog to stop at 9 and to walk up on the stock which are in the middle but we want them headed toward 3 o'clock. The dog will soon be coming up on the pressure line that we are making from 6 to 12. Dogs sometimes find this line uncomfortable to cross and may turn in the other direction. To help the dog, we will simply turn our bodies toward 3 o'clock and now there is no pressure line for the dog to cross. Let the dog walk up a little bit and stop him. Call him to you with a That'll Do and you are finished with this exercise which is the start of driving. Good job!