

The Great Debate

*Which working dog is “top dog”?
Words and photos by Cynthia Baldauf.*

The comical-looking dog gazed back at the group of cowboys and cowgirls as they inspected him. His hair stuck out in all directions giving the impression of an old toy left out in the rain for days on end. If appearances counted, he seemed to be of dubious heritage, and during his conception there may have been contact with an electric fence. Before anyone could say anything, his owner gestured proudly, “He’s an Idaho shag.” And the debate among the group began—which is the best working dog? McNab. Hangin’ Tree. Nevada fuzzy. Idaho shag. Or maybe the smartest dog on the planet—a border collie?

The true answer: there may be more than one “top” dog. The tough conditions found in California such as heat, burrs, foxtails, and rugged terrain may call for a McNab with its slick coat and tough pads. Maybe Idaho or Montana is ideal for the Idaho shag with its crazy hair and grit. Over the years, many ranches have developed their own line of crossbred dogs to suit their needs according



ABOVE: “A Rose in the Saddle”—Dan Coon of Wisdom, Mont., placed his pup, Rose, on the saddle of his gray horse. She was too young to defend herself from the big dogs. LEFT: “Good Girl Goldie”—Timmy Reynolds of Palisades Ranch in Fishtrap, Mont., is always giving his dogs a pat or a scratch for a job well done. At just seven months old, Goldie is a little shy and always looks to Timmy for approval.

to weather, the location and livestock. Some of these lines have become quite famous, such as Hangin’ Tree.

Cowboys and ranchers take a great deal of pride in their dogs and consider it a partnership. They often pack young dogs on their saddles to water tanks or creeks so they can cool off. Or keep an old dog home when working seven days straight might not be in its best interest. At the end of the day, he takes care of his dog and horse, long before he sees to his own needs.

One cowboy with a good dog or two could easily handle several hundred head of cattle with only a few phrases and gestures necessary to get the job done: “That’ll do.” “Get back.” “Down.” “Go ’round.” “Get ahead.” “Bring ’em.”



Check out the ads for cow dogs in western livestock publications and you will see what characteristics ranchers and cowboys are looking for: works smart and bites hard; good bone structure that can take the abuse from being kicked and ran over; never barks; great head dog to send to the front. Super

endurance and grit and loyalty are accolades oft repeated. Some phrases indicate buyer beware: Works sheep and cattle with equal skill (may mean neither); listens fairly well (maybe only at dinner); needs more finesse in working environment (may mean has never worked livestock); wants to get in the middle

“Faithful Three”—It had been a big day for Ruby (left), Annie and daughter Kit, working since dawn with countless other dogs and cowboys bringing almost 3,000 pairs out of the high country for fall weaning. Rider Kevin Small was giving his dogs a breather in a little bit of shade under his horse. It took all day for the riders and dogs to separate the cattle for five different ranches, inspecting the brands one by one in Medicine Lodge, Idaho.



“Pip and Spade”—Proud owner Mykal Kirkpatrick says Pip (in front) is tiny but will bite hard on the nose! Her partner, Spade, is good everywhere you put him and makes up for all of Pip’s neurotic downfalls. It’s the perfect partnership in Fishtrap, Mont.



"It's a Five Dog Day"—Timmy Reynolds and his crew are bringing in the herd for preweaning at the Palisades Ranch in Fishtrap, Mont. Dogs abound of every size, shape and color. The beautiful Pintler Range is the backdrop.

"Never too Old"—Gradually a dog just wears out from long days of travel and plain hard work. Even then, you have to use trickery to keep them home. They may show up at the corrals 30 minutes after the herd, but show up they will. Their desire never weakens even though their bodies do. Bree Coon gives her old dog, Flea, some serious love at the Daniels Ranch in Wisdom, Mont.

and work (probably stands in the gate); and the list goes on and can be fairly entertaining if you learn to read between the lines.

Some claim these special dogs take the place of an additional hired hand. Admittedly, a dog cannot dig a post hole, doctor calves or drive a tractor, but dogs do show up for work with enthusiasm every single day—rain, snow or shine. Countless ranch dogs don't just work outside all day but come in at night, taking their places as a part of the family. Many tears are shed on a ranch when their top dog takes its last breath.

Without the dogs it might take four or five people to drive the herd and possibly a lot





of shouting and waving. And heaven help you if you are working in thickets or willows with no dogs. More riders and horses equal more production cost. One cowboy admits, “The ranch manager just wanted to hire my dogs, but ended up saying I could come, too.” ■

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Goldie, a mix of Kelpie, border collie and McNab, is young and still shy with livestock. She sticks close to her owner, Timmy Reynolds of Fishtrap, Mont., for guidance.

► *Alby, Cate Hirschy’s Idaho shag, is a great cow dog with a happy vibe in Big Hole Valley, Mont.*

► *Liddy, a red border collie, belongs to cowboy DJ Egan of Dubois, Idaho.* ► *Theo is an Airedale-border collie cross. Owner Mykal Kirkpatrick of Palisades Ranch, Fishtrap, Mont., says Theo is a goofball whose claim to fame is swooping in unexpectedly and saving the day when the other dogs are screwing up.*

BELOW: “Palisades Corral”—Dennis Kirkpatrick (left) and Timmy Reynolds push the last of the herd through the gates of the Palisades Ranch. Only half the dogs made the picture. Thankfully the grass was good and a successful season was drawing to a close.

