

Herding Sport and Tradition Preserving in Hungary

by Ferenc Skobrák

Hungary is the country of origin of Mudi, Puli and Pumi breeds, and the breeder clubs are also host organisations. The responsibility of Hungarian sheepdog breeders is to breed suitable dogs with excellent appearance according to the standard of breed. It is necessary to show, for those who are the fans of our breeds and for those who has an interest in our breeds, how do they like in appearance of Hungarian shepherd dogs.

Breeders and owners have to focus on that their beloved dogs are working dogs too. These three Hungarian breeds had been selected by Hungarian shepherds such as: herds, shepherds, swine-herds for a special task, namely for herding. They were endeavour to increase their work in herding to meet the shepherds aim as much as can and keep their appearance to be attractive, as well.

The respect of the past and traditions was not popular in Hungary after the second World War. During the next difficult decades unfortunately prevailed against the haphazardness and negligence in all areas of life even between the shepherd's work who were famous on their bound by tradition. What was the consequence of this negligence for Hungarian shepherd dogs? The shepherds was getting pay little attention gradually on the appearance of their dogs, the required readiness to work became less essential. The necessity of the shepherd dogs was significantly decreased with the appearance of the electric fences. Hungarian shepherds widely kept mixed dogs, which accomplished herding tasks more or less, but their appearance became more different from the well-known appearance of mudi, puli and pumi.

In the middle of the 1980s we realized that the purebred Hungarian sheepdogs were hardly take part in stocks herding, their place was occupied by mixed dogs with unknown origin, whose appearance was varied and their working method was unreliable.

It was important for our breeds to replace them beside the Hungarian shepherds which they deserved. However, our breeds were well adapted to the urban way of life, we aimed to keep their inherent eagerness to work beside their pet role. For this we realized the necessary steps to be done. In April 1997 within the frameworks of MEOE (Hungarian Kennel Club) and the Hungarian Puli-Pumi-Mudi Club, we started to examine the herding instinct of thoroughbred Hungarian sheepdogs in Hungary.

We tried their herding instinct using our native sheep. These dogs might either come from the downtown from the eighth floor of block of flats, either from a village or from a farm. Conditions of participation were then like now the same: Hungarian sheepdogs have to have official pedigree of the MEOE-FCI, and to be able to accomplish the basic obedience tasks, mainly the task of recall.

As a result of the examinations we have realized that the majority of the Hungarian shepherd dogs preserved their original and the most important ability till nowadays: the high affinity to herding instinct. This instinct, as the regulation of the Hungarian Instinct Examination requires including the ability to move the flock, and the instinct of keeping together the flock and the going them around. Those dogs which does not show interest in sheep, or who hunts a detached sheep from the flock, „egyelték”, are ruled them inappropriate for herding.



Figure 1. Ferenc Skobrák in work

He is giving the opening speech on the National Herding Championship held in Hortobágy this year.



Figure 2. Merino flock in the “gate” obstacle.
 Jónás shows an excellent eye contact.

On the examinations we have found many dogs with excellent abilities. Owners of these dogs required to know which is the best among them. Therefore on 10th October in 1998 we organised the first Hungarian Amateur Shepherd Championship in Nyíregyháza and it is continued till nowadays. Lately there are qualifying rounds needed to absolve before dogs application of competition for the ‘Hungarian Champion’ title.

We organize these qualifying rounds nationwide from east to west in every year. On these events beside the shepherd competitions, visitors are entertained by different programmes, such as: Breeding

Quality Reviews, Herding Instinct Exams, Dog shows, Herding competitions, Obedience competitions and Character tests. There is an increasing interest in these events there is an increase in participants as well as in number of visitors both from Hungary and from foreign countries. The competitions and events are organized by the Hungarian Kennel Club (MEOE) in cooperation with Duna-Tisza Hungarian Shepherd dog Tradition Preserving and Sport Association, which is well-known and respected in the whole country. Anybody can read reports of previous events on this website: www.magyarpasztorkutya.hu. This Association working on popularizing Hungarian sheepdogs and aiming to preserve and familiarize the Hungarian shepherd and folk cultural traditions for all the visitors who interested in. We aim to demonstrate the old Hungarian shepherd culture and shepherd traditions by wearing traditional cloth, by using herding tools, by our exemplary original behaviour as well as by the devoted work of our dogs.

Can we find a difference between the work of the Hungarian herding breeds and foreign breeds in use? Of course there have to differ because of the difference of tasks as well as exercises with sheep moreover in my opinion because of the breed of sheep and the difference of the temper of sheep. It is not my task to write about the habit of foreign shepherd dogs and sheep, I feel this, because their duties are totally different from the domestic ones.



Figure 3. A personal conflict
 There is fight for the superiority between a disobedient merino sheep and Jónás

My point of view, based on my experiences and my knowledge, the duties of herding work of Hungarian sheepdogs basically need different way of working, adopting to the local features of Hungarian fields and considering the specific Hungarian agriculture conditions even if we take attention to the sheep herding only, and ignoring the work of cattle and pig herding. In Hungary the widely used way of the pasturing sheep keeping was the extensive method during the past centuries and even today. Hungary is possibly the westernmost edge of keeping pasturing livestock of Europe. I was lucky to recognise the different herding methods of characteristic regions during roaming about the country.

Sheep and cows are penned out to the field early in the morning and they are penned in at night irrespectively of the weather. Shepherds do pen out and pen in as well as guarding by using only one or two shepherd dogs. Pen out and pen in is carried out between different agricultural vegetations, sometimes they cross roads and railways. It is easy to realize that this task can only be done with no chance of any mistake, the shepherd dog must be totally obedient to its owner and the dog must be well trained having a tenacious body structure and a balanced nervous system. Ability or a good herding instinct alone are not enough, a shepherd dog have to unit all the above-mentioned abilities, too. That's why selecting dogs for herding work starts at their age of 5-8 weeks.

I hope it can be realized reading my article that the way of life of people and animals on the steppe or the fields is really hard even if I did not described in detail. Ancient Hungarian sheep breeds, such as Racka, Cigája and the others are genetically stable and the Merino sheep had adapted to the special surrounding and all of them can bear well this. It is common in Hungary that a dog has to guard and herd 500-600 sheep alone day by day. Moving and keeping sheep in a flock and directing them requires so much running and Hungarian shepherd dogs carry out this task either under the control of vocational commands or by their own decision but in



Figure 4. Barking and running – main tools of a Hungarian sheepdog to control the flock
Sári is barking and running around the Racka flock. This picture was taken by Melinda Mészáros

most cases they do this with loud barking. They express their superiority on a disobedient sheep by biting or a pinching them without causing any hurt. They would not carry authority on sheep if their habit would different. If realize Hungarian sheep that the dog expresses any fear or weakness, they turn against the dog and in extreme cases they trample the dog who may be injured seriously by the horn of sheep. Keeping the flock in check requires this habit of the shepherd dogs meanwhile it is unimaginable that a well-trained dog ever bruise the sheep. On the basis of previous experiences after some refinement and changes in the text we created the valid Hungarian Shepherd dogs' rules for traditional herding trials which is also acknowledged by the FCI. This regulation reflects to the way of the domestic real herding work.

We organize herding competitions in order to popularize our breeds everywhere, also we would like to achieve, that the Hungarian ranchers use thoroughbred Hungarian shepherd dogs in increasing number during the real work. Competitions provide a good entertainment and useful spare-time for the dog owners. In addition to this, competitions also help in selecting Hungarian shepherd dogs to save their herding instinct and keep their ability to work by involving the best individuals in breeding. Nowadays it is more important for the nations to preserve their traditions and their ancient knowledge, to be allowed to forward them to their descendants, and to preserve the variety of the World such a way we can use this knowledge again and again.

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