

Livestock Guarding Dog: Two Tails in the Road

By Catherine Emanuel

Livestock Guarding Dog (def.): A domesticated canine bred to protect livestock from harm.

Livestock (def.): animals kept or raised for use or pleasure; *especially* farm animals kept for use and profit.

Do you ever think that we are speaking a different language? Have you ever read the lists and wondered why some farmers are more lenient than others or might have different practices in raising and selecting their guardian dogs?

As I answer questions for other breeders or inspect farms prior to placing a livestock guarding dog, there are a series of thoughts going through my head. One of the most critical of these thoughts is understanding what the new owner is trying to guard. How does the new owner define livestock? Are we talking about horses, cattle, goats, sheep, alpacas, llamas or chickens, etc.?

Does it really matter the kind of stock the Anatolian will be protecting? Yes, it does. The Anatolian was bred to originally work in the fields of Turkey, with mainly small hoof stock, i.e. sheep and goats. Here in the United States, we have expanded the use of this versatile breed by working them with virtually every animal imaginable, including Tigers (yes, Tigers). They work with horses (miniature and standard), alpacas, poultry, cattle, sheep and goats (among others). It is how they relate to the different animals that makes this a critical factor in puppy selection for a herd.

Alpacas are not a hard-hooved animal, making them truly defenseless against a predator or even a puppy with too much energy. Since they do not have horns, have a high flight drive (rather than fight), and a softer foot, the successful dog will be docile, gentle, more laid back than the rest, and well-supervised.

While this might seem like common sense, there are situations where a dog that might be more volatile can still be a successful livestock guarding dog. There are several breeds of goats, some are very docile, while others are quite difficult to handle and borderline dangerous. They can be horned, dehorned or naturally polled. Depending on the breed, the horns can span up to several feet and can be quite lethal. They have a hard hoof, but very thin skin. Some goats are bred to produce wool and have a longer coat. Breaking these details down, it is easy to see how a more aggressive breed with horns could protect itself much better and actually help to facilitate in the training of an overzealous dog. However, wool producing goats, have another challenge to overcome. Their coat can sometimes make for a fun toy to grab onto in the eyes of an excited puppy. Therefore the concerns might be very different depending on the breed of goat that the Anatolian is expected to protect. With a docile herd of Angoras, I may again look for the most docile puppy in the litter, while a herd of aggressive Spanish goats may actually require a more dominant dog to learn to navigate through the herd, without getting hurt.

These rules apply to other livestock as well. A Thoroughbred horse is much more likely to be aggressive and dominant, while a Quarter horse tends to be kinder. Understanding the mentality of the herd and the traits of the animals that the Anatolian is charged with protecting is critical to proper puppy placement. It allows us an opportunity to train better and predict the success of the individual puppy. Some types of stock will bond with the dogs and the dogs will become part of the herd, while other forms of stock are unapproachable and become part of the dog's territory. Understanding this difference can guide us in selecting appropriate fencing, training techniques and levels of supervision.

Applying these thoughts may be abstract if you are not familiar with the different livestock industries, so I thought that I would share a recent experience of success and failure. Murray was a proven livestock guarding dog with a moderately difficult herd of goats. He had successfully worked several kidding seasons and even trained several dogs. The herd of goats is a Bohr/Spanish cross with moderately large horns. The herd had always been a good herd to work with moderate supervision, since they were physically capable of assisting with the training process by correcting a dog when they overstepped a boundary. However, we moved farms, the herd went through a kidding during a rough winter in difficult conditions. The herd grew excessively aggressive. Some of the older does became unmanageable. Then Murray was moved back in with the herd, on the new property, with little supervision. While Murray started out great, the herd was crowded and Murray was battered by the goats. With little supervision, this was only observed on occasion. However, it escalated to a point where Murray was on the defense all of the time. This is a situation that breeds failure. He was butted and butted until he couldn't take it anymore and a goat was hurt. Unfortunately, during the move we could not supervise him to correct the behavior by Murray or the goats. So to prevent the situation from becoming completely unsalvageable, Murray was relocated until better supervision could prevent further unsolicited behaviors. In the meantime, steps were taken to change the tone of the herd. Older nannies were culled for meat, billies were removed and the herd was thinned. Once these steps were completed, fencing was secured and the herd's demeanor settled. While Murray is awaiting better supervision to ensure that the herd respects him, other dogs are working with the goats and ensuring for their safety.

In this situation, both the dog and the owners were experienced; however, a lack of respect for the herd's change in demeanor set up a proven dog for failure. With just a little more understanding of the herd's needs, we could have avoided a situation requiring retraining. I guess I forgot to ask myself those very same questions that I ask my puppy people. "How will the dog be able to relate to the animals in the herd?" "How do I set my animal up for success instead of failure?" "What kind of livestock is my dog working with?"

Puppy or adult, understanding the needs of the herd will help to ensure a livestock working dog success.

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