



2009 Bundesleistungshuten
Stettbach, Germany
An Account of My Experience
Attending Germany's Premier Herding Championship
By Karen Priest

I always find it exciting to attend one of Germany's Big 3 annual events - the Sieger Show (BSZS/ Bundessiegerzuchtsschau), The Working Championship (BSP/ Bundessieger prüfung) or the Herding Championship (BLH/ Bundesleistungshuten).

This year the BLH was especially meaningful for me, because it was hosted by my friends' club, and was held in their village, Stettbach, the home of Zwinger vom Kirschtal & the birthplace of many of my dogs.

I planned to attend the event with my friend, photographer Julie Richards-Mostosky. Julie and I met several years ago, through our Kirschtal dogs & became fast friends. Since Julie is located in Michigan and I am in Massachusetts, we see each other more often in Germany than we do at home! Our plan was to travel together, and to cover the BLH together; Julie through photos and myself through an article.

I also traveled with a furry friend - my Sherry x Xenia Kirschtal daughter, Brielle, aka The Bunny. (*Those who are interested can read about "Bunny's Germany Trip" on the article page of our website www.traumhofgsd.com*)

The setting for the BLH was a step back in time; a picturesque little village surrounded by an expanse of open grazing lands and crops. Julie and I (along with Bunny) arrived in Stettbach and were directed to park in a fruit orchard, under trees still heavy with plums and apples.

We arrived as the event was opening, greeted by festive music from within the giant tent, where locals and Herding enthusiasts from all over the world had gathered.

Outside, in the fields, the Shepherds were preparing to trial.

Julie immediately set about capturing the flavor of the event in photographs. She has a talent for putting people at ease, and complete strangers were excited about posing for her. I was impressed with Julie's ability to be everywhere, not only photographing some beautiful Herding shots, but also some truly wonderful images of children, spectators, Shepherds, dogs, friends, pastoral scenes, and the unique details of the Shepherds' hats and gear. Julie managed to preserve the soul and flavor of the BLH in her photographs. (*I do not have Julie's photos yet, so I will post some of my own amateur ones, and replace when Julie sends me better ones!*)

While Julie was busy photographing, I trailed behind the Shepherds & judges, concentrating on the nuances of the course, the skill of the handlers and their dogs.

The bulk of the spectators gathered behind a man serving as "narrator". He spoke into a microphone and explained each part of the test (in German) to the crowd.

Most of the spectators were not people who worked dogs with sheep. Therefore, they saw the entirety of the picture, but much of the details of each Shepherd's test were lost on them.

I was truly awed by the work of the dogs, and the skill of the handlers.

Working with my own flock and my own dogs has given me an understanding of the pieces that make up the pretty picture the crowd was riveted by.

The Course

The course began at the pen, where the sheep were held. Each Shepherd had to place his dogs in a stay - close enough to the gate that no sheep should try to escape as the Shepherd opened sections of fence to prepare for the exit from the pen - but not so close as to start the sheep moving prematurely.

Most Shepherds work with two dogs - a Beihund and a Haupthund. The Beihund works at the Shepherd's side/close to him, the Haupthund, the "Main dog", works on the far side.

With the dogs down and staying, the Shepherd proceeds into the pen, to familiarize himself with the sheep, & hopefully, to identify the "lead sheep". When the Shepherd is ready, he sends his dog over the fence and into the pen. The dog makes a tidy leap, and then stays, still and ready.

Now the Shepherd begins to call the sheep to "Come, Come, Come" in a chanting mantra. When all goes well, the sheep move forward as if the piper has enchanted them. If they are slow to leave the pen, the Shepherd can send his dog further back along the fence, facing the sheep, to pressure them to move forward and out. The dogs must not make any large movements or the sheep will panic and run forward, scattering.

Once the last sheep is out of the pen, the dog must exit the pen, and run alongside the flock, keeping them neatly stretched out on the road, following the Shepherd towards the graze.

I noticed that the pen was set in a crop field, with no visible border to help the dog know where to place himself as the sheep exited and the Shepherd led them towards the road. I have been working young dogs regularly, and without a border, a young and exuberant dog might decide it is fair game (and darn good sport!) to dive in at the sheep. The border is a "line in the sand", not to be crossed. Without it, the dog must determine where to be.

This is a difficulty that I am certain went unnoticed by the crowd. I noticed it, and it caused me to catch my breath as each dog left the pen, but none of the dogs took advantage of this opportunity to be naughty. (I was thinking about how far my young dogs still have to go, to be this trustworthy!)

Following the exit from the pen, the sheep were taken down a road and into a narrow graze. A narrow graze is just what it sounds like - a narrow field, The sheep need to move into the graze and stay within the narrow confines. The dogs must help get the sheep into the appropriate graze, ensuring they don't wander into nearby crop fields. I noticed another subtle difficulty at this point on the course. The road leading to the narrow graze dipped downhill. Often, downward inclines get the sheep moving faster, and the dog gets "sucked in" and might be tempted to speed up and chase sheep. I held my breath here, too, but the dogs worked on with no mistakes.

Sheep are sheep, not always predictable. In a few cases, the sheep didn't "cooperate" and deviated from the routine. This was where I was most impressed with the dogs' work. In each case, the dogs quite handily gathered the sheep back up - in a couple instances, sending the sheep circling in a mini-tornado - and then set them back in place.

These things DO happen in every day flock work, and so, it was how the dogs handled these types of situations that really humbled me. It is far easier for a dog to perform a routine "pattern" than it is for him to see a problem developing, and use his training and his intuition to set things right.

The Shepherds were so skilled in handling both sheep and dogs, that many potential disasters were averted before they began, unnoticed by the crowd.

From the narrow graze, the Shepherd led the sheep down a long, dirt road between crop fields, and into the wide graze. The dogs were diligent about keeping the sheep within the confines of the road, and off of the neighboring crops.

As the flock approached the wide graze, the Shepherd signaled the dog to stay in place on the corner. The dog stood immobile as the flock flooded past into the graze. A couple hundred sheep flowing past the dog, while the dog holds his ground, is a site to behold.

Once the sheep were in the graze, the dog went directly out to the border & continued to work, trotting back and forth along the boundary.

After the sheep have settled nicely, grazing, it is not always easy to convince them to exit the graze and move on. The Shepherds led the flock far into the graze, which made gathering them for the exit more work. The Shepherd sent his dog to the head of the flock, and asked the dog to move up, slowly, and then stay. Then, move up closer again, and stay once more, until the sheep at the head of the flock began to turn. (Sheep will turn away from the dog as he approaches.) Once the flock turned, and began to move forward in the graze, towards the Shepherd, the dog was sent back out to the boundary, and the exit exercise commenced.

The flock moved down another narrow dirt road, and now the dog had to negotiate "traffic", as a van drove up alongside the flock and continued down the road. The dog put himself between the vehicle and the sheep, pushing the sheep safely over, while the 2nd dog made sure the sheep didn't bulge out into the crops field beside the road. The van reached the end of the road, turned, and came back towards the flock. Again, the dog made a safe passing "lane" for the vehicle.

At the far end of the road, the flock had to round a sharp corner and then cross over a bridge. This, too, was difficult positioning because a large flock of sheep does not corner well. Turns must be planned well ahead (and are always a challenge for me!).

In a couple cases, the sheep spread out and stopped their orderly procession towards the bridge, reluctant to move up and across. There was some nervous circling by the sheep, as the dogs worked to contain them, and the Shepherd worked to lead the sheep forward to the bridge. Once the sheep began to move, the dog had to quickly, but calmly, move up to the corner of the bridge, and stay until all the sheep had passed over. Positioned so, the dog prevents the sheep from veering off and circumventing the bridge. Once the sheep were across, the dogs filed through and took up their positions, back on the border.

In this way, the Shepherd brought the sheep back to the pen. As the sheep entered the pen, the dogs had to stay at the entrance to the pen, or alongside the flock as needed, keeping them moving forward.

When all the sheep had filed into the pen, the Shepherd closed the gate. As is customary and polite, most of the Shepherds left their dogs in a down stay, and proceeded to check that the pen panels were secure for the next Shepherd.

The Shepherd then retrieved and leashed his dogs, praising their work. The haupthund then had to pass a Protection test. A Helper approached, wearing a sleeve and wielding a stick. The dog is expected to react with courage and show defense. He is not required to grip, though many of the dogs did.

Thoughts on the Work

As I followed behind each competitor and dissected each test, I was so appreciative of the qualities in the dogs. Some of the dogs were very strong dogs, who could clearly have handled an even larger flock, and these dogs tended to be crowd pleasers. If a sheep "pushed" on the boundary, the strong dog took great pleasure in gripping the sheep briefly, sending her scrambling back into the graze. The sheep learn quickly which dogs can be "pushed on" and which dogs are serious about enforcing the "rules."

There was one dog who particularly impressed me, though he was not favored by the judges. This dog worked alone, with no beihund to help him. He was a calm dog, very poised and workmanlike, with a relaxed manner. This might not be as impressive to watch as a more explosively strong dog, but, in my opinion, it is still commendable work. As a flock owner and Shepherd, I feel there are times when such a dog is an asset. When working newly arrived sheep, I want them to relax. A more "wired" dog sometimes sets the sheep on edge. Watching this dog was like watching a well choreographed ballet. The work was harmonious, quiet, & smooth.

There were several professional Shepherds in the group of us following each individual test. I found a congenial young Shepherd named Andreas, who spoke English and was happy to talk with me. The Shepherds were pleased to hear that I tend sheep with my dogs, and am passionate about preserving the Herding Genetic in our dogs. I asked Andreas and his friend Juergen what they thought of the dog I had admired. They agreed this was a nice dog, who would be a pleasure to work with. My conclusion was that sometimes, the star in a trial might not be the easiest dog to work at home! A dog earning a lesser trial score, might actually be a superb and handy dog to use in everyday work.

Watching each Shepherd work, I began to notice differences in their style and manner. One man stood out as having a super relationship with his dogs,

who worked with sheer, unadulterated joy, and smiled when their Handler praised them. I could have watched him forever. His name is Gerd Jahnke, of a.d. Glockenbergschaferei. Herr Janke trialed two brothers of his breeding - Canto and Caro. Both dogs were strong, and impressive in the work. Not only did Gerd Jahnke impress me in his relationship with his dogs and his superb work, I also discovered he has been the mentor and trainer for Nancy Denecke, who ultimately won the BLH, and in doing so, became the first woman ever to win.

Herr Jahnke bred the dog Nancy won with, Aiko aus der Glockenbergschaferei, as well as another dog she trialed, Elan, and between the two of them they secured places 1, 2, 4, and 7.

Thoughts on the Shepherds & Making New Friends

The Shepherds faces shine when they say a dog "Has the Genetic", which they pronounce as "Yenetic." I am sure MY face was shining when past BLH winner Karl Heinz Kohlhepp (known to all as "Bobby") proclaimed Bunny was a "Super Hunde" and kept repeating what sounded to me like "Hunde haben die Yenetic."

Bobby adopted Julie and me. Every time he saw us, his face would light up. He liked having his picture taken and posed for Julie indulgently. When Bobby saw me walking along behind each Shepherd/Dog team, engrossed in the work, he put an arm around my shoulders, walked with me, and tried valiantly to converse, though he knew no English and my German is limited. A couple times, Bobby grabbed an English speaking German, and had him translate. We discussed having Bobby come to the USA to do a Seminar in Herding. Bobby was so happy to discover my interest in herding, and he wanted very much to offer me advice and the wisdom of his experience.

The camaraderie between the Shepherds was evident. They are a close knit group, and they are proud of their dogs and their work. Julie and I were quite taken with their hats, vests, and tooled leather harnesses. (We couldn't resist each purchasing a traditional Shepherd hat at one of the vendors.) We were also quite taken with them - congenial and deeply charismatic, every one of them.

Local Flavor

Julie and I managed to meet up and walk through the vendors and the demonstration stations during breaks in the event. We saw children felting,

and sheep shearing demos. There were also police dog demonstrations, a SAR demo, and girls who "danced" with their dogs.

Mealtime in the tent meant lamb dishes and a huge assortment of home made desserts, brought by club members and villagers alike.

The event was festive and fun, and we met so many nice people from all over the world. The crowd was small enough that we often "found" people we had met throughout the 3 day event, and meal times became parties with a group of our new friends.

The atmosphere was very congenial. The BLH does not draw as many spectators as the BSZS or the BSP, but those who attend are eager to talk about the work, as are the Shepherds themselves.

I find a trip to the BSZS is a little like a trip to the circus - with multiple rings active at once, throngs of people, and no way to possibly see everything. The BLH is more manageable.

Just before the awards ceremony, the Shepherds and their dogs gathered outside the tent, awaiting the call to proceed inside to be formally announced. There were many smiles and friendly conversations between them, and when Julie and I interrupted their talk, hoping for photographs, they were proud to gather for some group photos.

The Award Ceremony

The award ceremony was wonderful icing for us as spectators. Watching Nancy Denecke receive her trophy, was a special moment. Karl Fuller moved down the line of Shepherds at the podium, and shook their hands. Karl won the event many times over the years, and to see him congratulate his peers was also a special moment.

I had a wonderful time at the BLH, and before the event had ended, I was mentally planning to attend next year. Will Nancy win again? Will her mentor, Gerd Jahnke be her biggest rival for a high score? Will the Shepherds who had some "bad luck" come back next year with dogs who put in a flawless performance? I am already looking forward to finding out!





Nancy Denecke & Gerd Jahnke



Me, with Karl Fuller

