

Kid's KOrner

Border Collie Works With Penn State Sheep

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UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Rocky has worked at Penn State for nearly three months, and he loves every minute of it. He was able to avoid the interview process altogether and has absolutely no interest in a retirement plan. And instead of a paycheck, Rocky gets on-campus housing and free meals. When he's not actually working, he naps, plays Frisbee with the students, or just hangs out.

Known to his friends and co-workers as "Rock," this Penn State is a four-year-old purebred Border Collie born in Scotland. When local residents George and Margaret Downsborough decided to move from their township farm last fall, they felt Rock would be happier doing what he loves to do — working with sheep. So they donated the dog to Penn State, and he now resides at the Department of Dairy and Animal Science's Sheep Center.

"Rock's direct descendents go back to superior international breeding stock in Perth, Scotland," says Dick Kuzemchak, sheep flock manager. Breeding sharpened the Border Collie's herding instinct, the desire to stalk its prey. This makes the Border Collie perfect for working with sheep, cattle, and even poultry.

Ward Studebaker, the department's horse herd manager, is helping Kuzemchak and Rock learn to work with one another. He remembers his dad's Border Collie catching a chicken for Sunday

dinner. "Dad would point to a chicken and, even if the bird ran into the middle of the flock, Scotty could pick it out and take it to Dad," he says.

"Rock is friendly, gentle, quiet, obedient, and keen on working the sheep," says Studebaker. But it's going to take some work to get Rock used to working Penn State sheep. Sheep at the Downsboroughs' were used to Rock and didn't challenge him. The University's sheep have never been worked by a dog, so they tend to be more resistant. The only canines these sheep have seen are dogs who occasionally wander into the pasture with mischief in mind." Standing up to them will come quickly to Rock, according to Studebaker. "It just takes a little work each day and lots of encouragement," he says.

Because his own children boarded their sheep at the Downsborough farm, Kuzemchak and Rock have been friends since the dog was a puppy. But now, Kuzemchak has to get used to depending on Rock in a working relationship. "Sometimes I find myself doing things the old way out of habit, and then I remember that Rock can help me move and hold sheep," he says. "Using a dog to manage the sheep requires fewer people and pens. Rock and I can often do what used to take three or four people."

In a recent demonstration, Kuzemchak put Rock through his paces. There is no question that this dog loves working the sheep. As the pair moved into the open



The newest addition to Penn State's Sheep Center — a 4-year-old Border Collie named Rock — works the sheep.

pasture and approached the distant flock, Rock used every bit of restraint he could muster to avoid rushing the sheep. When his approach was too enthusiastic, Kuzemchak said only, "There, Rock," and the dog stopped and waited for the next command. As they moved along together, Kuzemchak whistled or used short one- or two-word commands, and Rock immediately responded.

"Come by, Rock," says Kuzemchak, sending Rock out clockwise to bring the sheep back to him. (To move the sheep counterclockwise, Kuzemchak uses a "way to me" command.) Rock makes a wide swath, moving out near the fence line to make sure all the sheep are together and none have been left behind. As Rock comes in behind the flock and begins moving them in Kuzemchak's direction, the shepherd occasionally shouts "easy," or "walk in, Rock," signaling the dog to bring the sheep to him, but not so quickly that they begin to scatter. When the sheep line up a just a few feet in front of him, Kuzemchak gives the command, "down." Rock drops to all fours while Kuzem-

chak looks over the flock.

"I can get much closer to the animals with Rock's help," he explains. "They would rather move closer to me to avoid the dog, which lets me check each animal for injury or illness." This would take much more time and effort without Rock's help, requiring several people and a series of pens to get near the sheep. Rock fidgets, eager to once again move the sheep, but he never takes his eyes away from his charges. Border Collies can communicate with the sheep without ever barking, relying on body language and eye contact to manipulate and control the animals.

All of Rock's commands have equivalent whistles, used when the dog must work at a distance. But Studebaker noticed that when he tried whistling, Rock seemed confused. When a friend in Scotland sent him a recording of Scottish whistles, he realized the whistles they used were slightly different from those used in the United States.

Gaelic phrases used with Border Collies in Scotland are also somewhat different from those

used here. For instance, our "way to me" is the equivalent of the Gaelic, "quay to me," and our "down" sounds much like their "doon." These subtle differences may create a period of adjustment for Rock, but he's working hard.

As the sheep once again turn and move away from the pair, Kuzemchak says, "That'll do," and Rock heads for the University's familiar blue pick-up truck. Back at the sheep center, he runs ahead, tail wagging, head high, as Kuzemchak conducts a tour and shows where Rock eats and sleeps. The dog stops to greet a few resident cats and occasionally waits for Kuzemchak to catch up.

As a student at Penn State many years ago, Kuzemchak studied and worked with Carroll Shaffner, who served from 1950 through his retirement in 1971, first as an assistant in animal husbandry, then superintendent in sheep, and finally as shepherd. Shaffner was an avid breeder, trainer, and user of Border Collies. Not since his retirement has the University enjoyed the benefit of a dog as fine as Rock.



Penn State sheep flock manager Dick Kuzemchak is shown here with Rock, the 4-year-old Border Collie donated to the University by George and Margaret Downsborough.



Five-year-old Brett Treichler takes a bite from a fastnacht made by his grandmother. Traditionally, Fastnacht Day is celebrated on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, which this year falls on February 23. Brett is the son of Keith and Sue Treichler of Berks County.