

A stockman's greatest asset

HE WILL work from daylight till dark if necessary, in any weather — he is eager to get on with the job — he is smart, shows initiative and responsibility — he thinks and acts like lightning to keep his charges under control — he asks no favors and is supremely grateful for any praise and no-one is better qualified to handle stock — he is a working Kelpie.

And when the day's work is almost done and he is footsore and weary and yet another crisis looms, he will call on all his energy reserves to bring a wayward beast back to the fold again, because it's his job and he loves it.

His female counterpart is equally sharp and the best of the breed are a picture of precision in their work alongside their masters, for whom they have great respect and unspoken understanding.

Such rapport between a man and his dogs is best seen in stockmen like Corrie Leatham of Fernbank. Although he wouldn't say it himself, Corrie and his line of Kelpies have had a considerable impact in improving the standard of working dogs available to farmers in Gippsland.

But he is not a professional breeder — he is a sheep farmer and the country on which he runs his stock, dictates that he must rely heavily on his dogs for mustering in areas that are inaccessible to vehicles or horse and rider.

Corrie and his wife Nancy live on the 90 hectare property Kanangra, but also lease approximately 1620 hectares of APM country most of which is under pine plantations, in various locations.

Born at Bairnsdale, Corrie has spent most of his life working stock, although five years were spent in the police force during which time he was stationed at Mansfield where he met Nancy.

He left the force, married and embarked on a new career managing some 8000 head of Corriedale Sheep and 300 Hereford breeders for Allan and Marj McMillan on their 2000 hectare property Hillview, in the Mansfield district.

During 30 happy years spent there, Corrie and Nancy reared three sons and a daughter — Ken is now on a farm at Mansfield, Bob also farms but in Tasmania, Dick is a sheet metal worker in the aircraft industry and Joy who is also living at Mansfield, maintains her own sheep as well.

It was while he was working at Hillview, that Corrie ventured into breeding his own working dogs as there was a great need for a particularly hardy type of dog that could cope with the hot dry summers and who must be strong and sound in the feet because of the grass seeds encountered in a day's work.

From the outset in 1955, he used Frank Scanlon's breed, which, along with that influential man's stockhorses, were and still are, keenly sought by stockmen throughout the country.

Corrie's need was for a utility type of dog that would work both sheep and cattle in the paddocks as well as the yards, a dog that could think and act for itself without direction if his master was not there.

What has developed over the years is now seen in the remarkable working companions that trot happily by Corrie's side, ever ready to tackle the job at hand.

With their family off their hands Corrie and Nancy set out to purchase a farm of their own and in 1980, found themselves back in Gippsland on the delightful, well treed, undulating property at Fernbank.

Kanangra, in conjunction with the leased APM country runs 2000 fine wool Merinos of Merryville bloodlines. The need for clever working dogs and a sound knowledge of the way in which sheep think and move are essential to the success of Corrie's operation, one which other sheep farmers have been reluctant to take on because of the problem of mustering in densely treed areas and also because of the menace of dingoes.

Salt licks are placed in clearings in the pines and the dogs are sent in at strategic points to flush the sheep out, a demanding and time consuming task. It is indeed a challenge but one which Corrie handles

lightly, accompanied on most occasions by no more than his faithful four footed work mates, the team all sharing a mutual confidence in each other.

It is hardly a wonder that any pups bred with the Leatham prefix, are quickly snapped up by other sheep and cattle men.

Corrie was one of the group of men who in 1981, formed the East Gippsland Farm Dog Group and commenced utility dog trials.

The need for such trials was felt as it was considered by many farmers that the standard trial where a dog worked three sheep only, had become too far removed from the realities of a working situation.

Such was the success of the first trial, held at Bairnsdale, that other trials progressively sprung up throughout Gippsland and these meetings are attended by many enthusiastic owners keen to display their dogs' skills.

Little emphasis is placed on prize money, the aim being to conduct a sociable meeting where farmers can compare the virtues of various dogs and maybe select a future work-mate from a better than average line up of farm dogs.

The result has been a definite improvement in the type of dog available and a consequent demand in Corrie's case, for he and his dogs to stage exhibitions, which he is happy to do, especially for school functions.

Among his team at present is Scanlon's Smokey who has a good combination of "eye and bark"; is fast and a winner in both field and yard trials; Leatham's Chocolate by Scanlon's Red, a good utility dog with excellent cast, and two bitches

Nea's Zip, also by Red, a great worker and breeder along with Leatham's Judy by Smokey, another top all rounder.

There are also a couple of youngsters, eager to get out and prove their worth.

Corrie introduces his pups to sheep at about three months of age, being careful not to over work them so that they remain keen and should be showing their style by six to eight months of age.

It is natural instinct that they want to head the sheep — learning the subtleties of control is the secret behind the makings of a good dog, he explained.

Last year was probably Corrie's most successful in trials with numerous wins and placings at Bairnsdale, Korumburra, Yarram, Sale, Essay, Omeo, Clydebank and Stathfieldsaye culminating in winning of the aggregate trophy with Chocolate.

Whether it be at a trial or working at home, the Leatham team deservedly earn the admiration of all who see them in action.

There is anticipation in each dog's expression as they set out to muster, working fast and wide in the paddock so that the stock barely know of their presence until their own direction has been blocked and suddenly they are yarded.

The combined talents of stealthiness as they crouch with an eye to hold stock, a strategic bark and sufficient force when necessary, along with an explosive burst of pace to block a sheep in a couple of strides, obviously make work more of a pleasure for Corrie who says of his devoted Kelpies — "they are a stockman's greatest asset."

