

In search of border collies... in human guise

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There are dogs and then there are Border Collies. A true working dog, the Border Collie has its own international breed association because owners feel the AKC is too much of a beauty contest. Field trials to the international level ensure a working dog bred for what's between its ears not whether they're black or white, pricked or lopped.

What is it that makes a champion Border Collie? When you see them work, its as if they are simultaneously reading the minds of both master and sheep, so honed are their herding strategies. Because these dogs are keen to "get it right", they develop amazing communication with their masters. But behind it all, I suspect, is also a feeling of responsibility for the sheep.

B.C. agriculture needs some Border Collies. Soon. To round us up, point us in the right direction, and make sure we reach a safer place. Particularly well trained ones with enough of an "eye" to get our attention and the fleet-footedness and smarts to keep us between themselves and our destination. It won't be easy. We have become a very unruly and fractionated bunch given to wildly bolting away in different directions at whim. Without any sense of belonging to a herd. But then, good dogs deserve a good challenge.

Diligently doing my homework in preparation for this column, I have actually been in search of Border Collies all this month. I will share with you the ones I met so far, all of whom qualify as top dogs!

the provincial public servant (of course an Agrologist — maybe we should have an identify-the-Collies contest and you can vote for those-most-likely-to-have said it) who, in expressing concern with what they saw as the Ministry's shift in focus away from farming and towards the "markets and agri-business issues" of the post-farm gate sector:

"they seem to think they can ignore farm policy issues and food will just continue to magically appear like schmooes in L'il Abner.,

the brain-trust within the Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust who, on September 14th, brought together 70 municipal, regional, provincial and federal politicians, planners, public servants and media (on an articulated bus along curving Brunswick Point dykes with a wonder-woman of a driver...) to show them how a municipal council with respect for agriculture can help communities accomplish something truly wonderful,

the farm leader who, speaking over a microphone as we bussed along the southern portion of Brunswick Point dyke, referred to farmer's need to:

keep the land in good heart,

the Delta Farmers' Institute for proactively pointing all three levels of government in one direction (a formidable task) to address what needed to be addressed — farmers actually wrote the terms of reference for the Delta Agricultural Study),

Its beautiful to watch the Delta collies work the field. Standing in low cloud in a dairy yard listening to a refreshingly young (early 30's?) and highly competent farmer explain his operation, I am across from a senior agricultural leader standing next to a senior environmental leader. Casually and willingly. And both randomly chatting back and forth to one another, easily sharing views, camaraderie and respect in this misty Delta afternoon. Obviously a team that works well together. Anything becomes possible.

"Okay, so this field trip to the Border Collie trials in Delta was fun, but we don't have dogs like this in our neighbourhood."

"Don't bet on it."

In the 1970's I stood in Ottawa and watched as angry Quebec dairy farmers encircled Parliament Hill with farm machinery and placards. Eyes widening with the appearance of each new tractor, the attention of federal politicians was finally riveted on what the farmers were saying.

Circling the tractors in the 1990's means linking together commodity groups, communities and agricultural professionals to stand together on key issues. With enough collective "eye" to get the attention of politicians and the public; with enough of an understanding of the task-at-hand to drive it home. With both a keenness to "get it right" and, behind it all, a feeling of responsibility for the sheep.

Where are the Border Collies? You tell me (fax me at 947-2321). We'll run an informal poll. *"And I nominate..."*

Wendy Holm, P.Ag., is a blah blah blah and the faithful owner of a proud Border Collie named Cap.

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