

Road to the 2010 National Championship



As in past years, I decided very early that I should go to the National Finals. Even though it was going to be held back East, I thought that Riggs could have a good shot at the title. And at the same time, thought because of his age of just turning eight, I should commit to making the trip.

Throughout the year, Riggs had been running well. He was winning, placing and being in contention in most of the trials we were attending. In June, I thought he was having some type of stamina problem, decided it was his prostrate, and treated him for that.

Riggs has been a special dog from the beginning of his sheepdog career. He won his first Nursery trial at the age of 10 months. He was the 2005 Reserve USBCHA Nursery Champion. He has also been in the Double Lift at the National Finals the last four years. At the same time, he has had a small base of loyal friends who watch and root for him at each event.

As the summer went on, I knew that to win, Riggs would have to be in great shape. The runs during the finals can be up to 30 minutes, and heat can always be a factor. About 10 years ago, I was running regularly, but gave it up because of some injuries to my shins. This spring, I started running again. Working your dog is one way to get them in shape, but the best way to get them in top physical condition, is to have them increase the length of their physical activity. A medium paced trot is a great way to get them in shape without stressing their body.

So Riggs became my running partner on a few days a week. I run on pavement when I run outside, so I was careful not to over do it. The biggest runs we did were about 5 miles. Riggs enjoyed the extra time with me, and looked forward to the runs.

I had two big trials in August and September to help prepare for the finals. Lacamas Valley had a huge entry and some great competition. Riggs ran well the first go and won that trial. The second trial, he ran okay, easily good enough to get into the double lift finals. In the double lift, Riggs ran poorly. I was concerned, but thought it might have been a “off” day for him

The second trial was Soldier Hollow. As most everyone knows, the competition at Soldier Hollow is tough. My first go with Riggs had him struggle a bit with a difficult ewe, but he worked very hard and ended up second for the day. Once again, Riggs didn't seem to be “on” for the finals.

Both of these Finals really concerned me. Riggs has made mistakes in Double Lift finals, but these two finals made me wonder what was going on with him. These weren't errors

as much as him not looking like himself. I have always said to other people, “when you see a change in behavior in mature dogs, look at the health and physical stature of the dog.”

On the way home from Soldier Hollow I called my Vet and made an appointment for the next possible moment. The next day, we went in and she did a thorough work up. She found some minor places of pain, but we thought we should wait for the blood work to come back.

It took a few days to get the complete workup, and nothing was out of order. He seemed to be a healthy dog from all the blood work. I still was not sold on that, so I asked if we could do a tick panel as well.

Tick born diseases are not common in our Valley. We rarely have ticks, and it isn't something that most Vets in our area diagnose. But since Riggs and I travel out of our area, I thought it might be worth looking into. I was looking for the reason Riggs wasn't running like himself.

It took a couple days, but there was a titer for Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Finally, a possible answer. Immediately I ran to the pharmacy to get the prescription of necessary antibiotics to start him on his path to recovery. I was in a big hurry, as this was Thursday and I was leaving on Saturday for the finals.

Less than 24 hours of being on the antibiotics, I worked Riggs. Immediately from the first few feet of his outrun, I could tell the difference the antibiotics made. He went out with determination and confidence that I hadn't seen for quite sometime. When they gradually change physically, it is really hard to see. But those people who have dealt with tick born diseases usually notice a great improvement with just a couple of treatments.

I worked Riggs only once since Soldier Hollow on my way to the finals. With him looking so poorly at the Finals at Soldier Hollow, I didn't think extra work would really benefit him. So I worked him on Friday, and we left on Saturday. Our first run was to be on Tuesday. I was anxious about that run, as it is usually the most difficult day to qualify to get to the Semi Finals.

We got to the finals on Sunday, and watched the Nursery for the next two days. We saw some great young dogs, and saw some really talented, experienced Nursery dogs have trouble. Tuesday came around, and the running began for the Open. You could tell the sheep were going to be difficult, as they wanted to run to the exhaust and for shade. A few people put up good runs, but for the most part, the running was hard.

Riggs drew up 28th, which put him in the middle of the afternoon. Not the best time, as it would be the hottest part of the day. I sent him out on his outrun, and he had a very good



gather, making the fetch panels with a straight line. On the first leg of the drive, he had a ewe start to give him trouble. She wanted back to the exhaust. She stopped. She stomped. She put her head down and tried to ignore Riggs. He pressed on her and would get her moving. Within a few feet she would stop again, spin around and try to face him down.

Here is where Riggs will try to do anything I ask. He pushed. He pressed. He jumped at her twice, to get every bit of her to move. I was through the first set of drive gates and wondered if I would be able to continue. She did not want to go. Finally, about half way through the cross drive, she decided to follow the other sheep.

Since there was a marked shed, pen and single, I knew I needed to come into the shedding ring with as much time as possible. I looked at my clock, and I had 2.32 left when he brought them into the ring. Earlier, I had it all planned on where and how I was going to shed. Since there was little time, I threw all that out, and ran to make my first shed.



The ewes ran into the ring and I ran out to stop them. The ewe that was causing all the trouble earlier, I could tell was not feeling well. She ran in the middle of the group, and put her head down. I took a quick cut, and failed to see a ewe run behind me. No shed. I lost valuable time and points. I had to do it again. This next time I was successful, as the sick ewe was an anchor of my shed group and she did not want to travel much.

I looked at my clock, and I had a minute to pen and single. I egged Riggs on to bring them to the pen, using no commands, just his name. He pushed them and they ran right into the pen, something that hadn't been happening all day. I sent him behind the pen, and quickly got them out to the ring for the single. Since it was a marked single, I had one ewe that wanted to leave, and she was the proper one. I quickly asked Riggs in and our run was complete. We had only seconds to spare.

The score was a 160. I hoped it would be good enough to get into the semi-finals. They take the top 40 dogs to the Semi-Finals, and Riggs's score would have been 7th on that day. There are 4 days of qualifying, so about 10 dogs days qualify, but that can change on the conditions and the sheep.

We waited and watch some really great runs. Each day, I wondered if our score would hold up. The sheep were running well, but not typical of what we normally see. We had extremely hot weather, and usually the sheep run best in the morning. At these finals, the sheep worked best in the heat of the day (on Friday it was 97!)

If we made the Semi's, Riggs would have 3 days of good rest. It would also give the antibiotic more time to work. I could see him looking stronger each day, so I was happy that we had the break. Friday afternoon, I started to feel a bit more confident that we

would make the Semi-Finals. I ran my other dog on Friday afternoon, and felt good about her debut at the finals. Riggs ended up 27th for the first go round.

The running order for the Semi-Finals came out right out after the last run on Friday. Riggs and I would run about noon again.

During the Semi's, Riggs had a really great solid run. We finished with plenty of time, and had some really good work around the course. I felt confident when we came off the course that we would make the Finals the next day. Riggs would end up in 5th place for the Semi-Finals.



The draw for the finals was right after the Semi-Final runs on Saturday. At the time, I really had no preference on when to run, as the sheep were quite different all week. There were good runs in the morning, and good runs in the afternoon. The forecast was for a cool day on Sunday, so I would be happy to run at any time.

We drew up 16th for the finals. With 17 runs that day, I would wait most of the day for my run. I was able to watch and see some great handling during the day. Tommy Wilson put down a great run early in the morning, and that would hold for most of the day. While I was watching, I was most interested in the turn back, and the shed, as that is what usually determines who wins the finals.

Finally it was my turn. I went to the post with a plan in my mind. Once Riggs left my feet, most of it would be up to him. His first outrun was good, but that was the easiest part of the course. Riggs took his time on the first lift, and had firm control on the difficult first fetch. He had such control of the sheep, I had to make sure I didn't over flank him and lose our good line.

We made the fetch panels, and I put Riggs on a firm down. This was the most difficult part of the course for everyone. Once you release the first lot of sheep, they ran to the strong draw of the exhaust. Most dogs did not want to let go. Riggs's look back started well, but he suddenly took up the middle of the field. I quickly put him down, and asked him to look again. This time I could see Riggs planning the proper path, and I let him go.

His second fetch still amazes me. He took control from the lift, made the dog leg fetch without many commands. I questioned myself during this fetch if I should be commanding him, but he was doing well without my whistles. It wasn't until he was near the fetch panels, that I helped him keep them online and through the gates. Riggs and I kept the sheep online until he was even with the other group, and then I sent him back for those. The rest of the fetch was good.

Driving has always been one of Riggs's strongest assets. Here he showed how he could take control, and keep the sheep on a straight line. During the cross drive, he kept them online and moving properly. There was a small ditch that sometimes the sheep ran offline after they went through. Riggs looked at me as he approached the ditch, as to say that he wanted me to give him control going through the ditch. I did though a walk up whistle and they stayed perfectly online. The rest of the drive went well, and we entered the shedding ring with time.



When the sheep came into the ring, I laid Riggs down. I wanted him to catch his breath, while I put a plan together. After a short break, I saw a big group that included all the collared ewes. There wasn't a gap between them, but I asked Riggs to come in and make that gap. He did so quickly, and I had a nice start to my shed.

I flanked Riggs out to allow a few more ewes to flow out of my kept group. At one point, Riggs had to bump between a collared ewe and an uncollared ewe to help me keep the collared ewe in my group. Uncollared ewes were flowing off nicely. I finally got down to two uncollared ewes, and saw an opportunity to cut them off. I had my group of 5 collared ewes, and plenty of time to pen. We had completed our International Shed in less than 3 minutes.

After I shed, I formed a plan. Sitting and waiting for a bit, I wanted to make my collared sheep feel comfortable. I wanted them to think that they were a group, and to forget about the other larger flock. I watched my last two uncollared ewes run about 50 yards away, and then hesitate. They were thinking of coming back to our group. Now was not the time to leave anything to chance. I left Riggs to hold the collared ewes, and ran down the field to chase the final two ewes away.

We went to the pen with about 7 minutes to go. I knew I had a good run, and wanted to be diligent to get the pen complete with any major problems. After having an excellent run in the 2009 finals, and losing a ewe while penning, I knew that I needed to be patient. Riggs put them in the mouth, and after a little hesitation, they all went in.



As I closed the gate, I can't quite express my feelings. I was so happy for Riggs, as he was able to show what a great dog he is. Just as I remember in 1994, when I won with Hannah, I was so proud that my peers got to see the work that we were capable of. The feeling wasn't about the possibility of winning; the feeling was about the success of the trial and course. We had shown that we were a top team.



When I came off, I noticed how well Riggs felt. He looked hardly winded, and he himself, could feel the excitement. He ran to the water tank for a well deserved, quick dip. Walking out the gate, I had lots of congratulations and accolades. My friends were waiting, happy to share the joy of the run. Our announcer, Ray Crabtree, announced the score. We were in the lead! I tried to let it sink in.

There was one more run that day. Scott Glen and a very capable and competitive young dog, Don, were about to take the field. As I didn't want to watch a run, and wish bad luck on anyone, I left to go back away from the competition. I wanted Scott and Don to do well; I hoped our run would be better.

Technology today has changed most everything at the Sheepdog Finals. I grabbed my phone while waiting for the next run to be over. Immediately I saw the texts starting to pour in. With the Finals being broadcast for the first time this year, the rest of the country got to see our run. I was getting all kinds of congratulations from friends everywhere. The most important text was from Dianne Deal, as she is the reason I have Riggs. It was great to celebrate our success with her.

I tried not to listen on the loudspeaker about the last run. People were coming and congratulating me, and it was easy not to pay attention to what was happening on the field. Finally, I heard the announcer say that it was over, and that Riggs and I were the National Champions.

At this point, I still don't think it has really sunk in. This has been a dream for quite sometime. I knew I had a great dog. I only hoped that we could show that at the

National Finals. Finally, we had accomplished our goal. I was so fortunate to have such great friends to help me navigate afterwards. There were interviews, an award ceremony, and pictures. Although I was present, it seemed like I was in a dream.

Riggs was present of course for all the celebration. He knew this time was special, and enjoyed all the celebration that day. Being a very personable dog, he took each congratulation sincerely, and seemed to enjoy it almost as much as I did.

The one thing that I am certain about is that our success did not come without great help. I always tell people, "That it takes a village," to send the dogs, and myself out on the road. I have some great friends, students and family that have supported me throughout the years. They make it possible for me to be gone from home. Riggs and I share this great success with all of them.

That evening a group of friends went to an Irish Pub in town (how fitting!) to celebrate. Strangers in the pub came to congratulate us, as they had been out to the trial to watch. It still was happening so fast, that I didn't have time to really let it settle in. It was a very late night for myself, Ruben and Riggs.

Early the next morning, we had an early flight to catch home. It would be the end of a magical week, but one that I will treasure for years to come.

