

Starting a Belgian on cattle.

For many people, herding cattle is scary, whereas working sheep or ducks is “fun”. Cattle do deserve respect – they can kick and even without horns, a head butt by a steer can hurt. Being trampled by a sheep can hurt, being trampled by a steer can do far more. So why do it? After all, Belgians aren’t “cow dogs” are they?

Historically, Belgians were primarily sheep dogs. However, it’s clear from early texts that many dogs were also used on cattle. As with most countries, Belgian herders and farmers didn’t precisely draw lines as to breed before the advent of a studbook. While the Bouvier des Flanders, Bouvier des Ardennes and Bouvier des Roulers were the primary cattle dogs, It’s also true that some of the same dogs in the Belgian Sheepdog ancestry are also found in those of the Bouviers. As in France, where a Beauceron or Briard may work cattle or sheep, Belgians who could work cattle were used on cattle. Working cattle is well within the original function of our dogs.

In AKC, where 3 to 5 head is the standard for A course or B course, cattle can even the playing field for a Belgian. While the dogs were normally worked on largish flocks of sheep, it was the rare farmer in Belgium who had more than a handful of cattle. Cattle are not particularly responsive to “eye”, but they are responsive to movement. They frequently require the dog to work close and to be assertive, including being willing to bite if necessary. These are characteristics found in many Belgians and consequently, Belgians can do quite well on cattle.



DC Uvar Eresha Kuymal HXAscD, HXBscD, HXC, working cattle on a B course. (photo by Cathy Modica)

To introduce a dog on cattle, it is best to start with a dog that has already learned the basics of herding on sheep. Even with cooperative cattle, it is easier to keep a dog and the handler safe when the dog will flank, stop, walk up and stop on command. I usually start my dogs on cattle after they are working in an “intermediate” level on sheep and have the basics for driving. It’s also important to find the right kind of cattle. There are no feral cattle or range cattle in Belgium and it is best not to try to start your dog on such stock. What you want to find are young (about 600 -700 pound) animals that have been worked by someone who wants to have calm, quiet control of their stock. Because the Australian Shepherd Club of America requires cattle titles for their Working Trial Championships (WTCH) and because the Australian Cattle Dog club promotes cattle work in the ACD, it is easiest to find dog broke cattle by finding people involved in one of these two groups. You are looking for cattle that have already learned to respect a dog and who will move reasonably quietly off a dog who is confident without requiring the dog to bite.

When introducing a dog to cattle, I start in an arena about 100 by 200 to allow movement of the cattle. I usually go in with the dog on lead. I carry my crook with me. I use a standard “American” crook but any good stock stick will also do well. I start as if the dog does not know herding – walking up with the dog on lead into the group of cattle. The idea is to act as if you are a second dog – to back up your dog’s authority and to let them see, on this first exposure, that the cattle are “stock”, that calm walking up is desired, and to let the dog “feel out” the difference between cattle and sheep. Cattle have a slightly different visual range than sheep – Ohio State University has a nifty little bulletin on-line that discusses this: <http://ohioline.osu.edu/b906/pdf/b906.pdf>. Because cattle can’t see directly behind, you want your dog to be off to one side or even to wear when moving cattle. For those who have been despairing of “wearing”, here’s where that behavior is beneficial. Temple Grandin’s diagrams on working cattle are also useful -- http://equineextension.colostate.edu/files/articles/working_ranch/WorkingCattle.pdf or at <http://www.grandin.com/behaviour/principles/moving.sorting.html>.

Once you have gotten the dog to move the cattle around the arena and believe the dog is going to listen to you, take off the lead. You cannot let a dog drag a lead or line while working cattle. It’s too dangerous if the dog should get the line caught and also if you are dashing after the line, you are likely to spook the cattle. If your dog is too hyped, then get some folk in the arena to help you and make doubly sure that the cattle you are working are cooperative cattle. Start with walking with the dog, pushing the cattle as if you were doing a parallel drive. Cattle do not fetch particularly well compared to sheep and it is best to simply walk onto them as if one were doing a PT course but driving the stock instead of fetching them. By being with the dog, you can both back the dog up if the cattle do not cooperate and can ensure that the dog does not do anything foolish. Once you have a dog working at this level, it’s time to introduce the outrun and lift.



DC Bertilak Fides Kuymal HXAsd, HXC, on an introduction to cattle.

In asking your dog to do an outrun or gather on cattle, have the cattle well off the fence to start. Do not stop your dog as it completes the outrun and starts the lift – motion is power and your dog's motion will likely start the cattle. Once you have accomplished this, it is largely a matter of practice with cattle. Stay with the cooperative cattle until your dog has demonstrated it's confidence and can work the cattle without you in the picture. Teaching your dog to grip cattle or about working difficult cattle are things that should wait until your dog is solidly working on the cooperative ones.