

## ONE MAN'S WAY WITH DOGS

**John James, for fifty years one of sheepdog trialling's foremost trainers and handlers, talks with Austin Bennett.**

Until I sat down for this talk with John James, I really thought he was an Englishman; he isn't. His parents and all his forebears were Welsh and when he moved from Herefordshire twelve years ago to settle at Lower Trewern in Llandegley he was, in a manner of speaking, returning home. Perhaps my supposition can be forgiven because when I very first went to talk with John, twenty-two years ago, he was at the farm in Herefordshire where he was born in 1924 (a date that's hard to reconcile with the amazingly alert, active man to which it relates). Not only that, his standing in the sheepdog world has firm foundations my side of the border. International Sheep Dog Society handlers run their trials in their countries of residence, not origin, and John represented England at the International as far back as 1956, just six years after he first started competing. Altogether, he's been an English team member ten times, once as Captain after he took the Championship in 1975 with his dog, Mirk, 68102. He was English National Driving Champion with Mirk the following year and, in 1986, Reserve English Champion with Ben, 123761. For thirty years, he was an English Director of the International Sheep Dog Society, too, so, as far as sheepdog trials are concerned, things English have draped themselves rather successfully about this Welsh born handler.

I first met John in 1983. I'd moved to the country intent on having a go with sheepdogs and my companion was Brocken Meg, a bitch so hard I'd never want another quite like her. (I remember Bobby Dalziel describing one of his dogs to me as the sort that would chew iron and spit rust, a description that springs to mind when I recall dear old Meg). I had nobody to talk to about my dilemma until I was told that John James was in the neighbourhood. In fact, he was in the next county but it was one of those 'needs must' situations and I was welcomed to Shirlheath Farm, near Leominster, after a 'phone called introduction. So John was the first established handler I met after I moved and it was easy to feel a complete stooge under the circumstances. There was I, the complete beginner with hard-nosed Meg, and there was he, the accomplished professional with his latest rising star, Ben, 123761. 'Well, he's a thousand pound dog', John pointed out. Meg looked more in the fiver class but John gave her his full attention. His assessment was what I'd suspected; she was one hard lady, but a hell of a worker. He liked her but he could see she'd be a tough one on a trials course, and especially in hands as green as mine. I never did manage to get her round a course in acceptable fashion but I'd met John James, was impressed by everything he had to say and enjoyed my visits to Shirlheath Farm.

John's parents bought Shirlheath farm in the 1920s. His grandparents had been Welsh speaking hill farmers in the Cwmdauddwr hills who'd moved later on to farm closer to Rhaeadr. When his parents married, they pursued what was a prime ambition for many mid-Wales farmers at the time; to move to the 'good land' over the border in Herefordshire. So John was born in the ancient, half-timbered house at Shirlheath Farm, Kingsland, and he grew up learning to farm on the 120 acres that it comprised, a good sized enterprise for the time. In the pre-war years it was predominantly a stock

farm but the exigencies which the ensuing conflict brought to bear saw much of the country's land under the plough for the war effort. John left school at sixteen in 1940 to contribute, ploughing with horses for the first couple of years and then with the farm's first tractor. It was hard work but no hardship for John since he'd always had a deep interest in farming life and he applied himself assiduously to everything from horses to hedging.

As a small boy, John was sent for his summer holidays to his grandparents in Rhaeadr. The long distance 'Black & White Bus' would ferry the eager lad up the A44 to the region he came to love and it was there, at shearing time, that he first became fascinated by the border collie. Ever since he could remember there had been a dog on the farm, but up there on the Welsh hills he was lost in admiration at the abilities of the pure bred workers and at the skills of the shepherds who handled them. 'I was quite excited by what I saw', he explains. 'Compared with the ordinary farm dog, the border collie was entirely different. They were so keen and so completely concentrated on what they were doing. I couldn't believe how those dogs could be sent to work so far away from their handlers, way back and out of sight sometimes.'

The impact those hill dogs made on John stayed with him. Later on, a neighbour in Kingsland who dabbled a little at breeding collies, had a pup available by an ordinary farm dog out of a border collie bitch. John bought the little dog pup and it was a good move. 'He became a really marvellous farm dog', John remembers, 'and I think of him now when I see bullocks turned out, because they can be difficult to hold and, in no time, they're gone. Well, my father had bullocks and, in those days, we used to have to drive cattle to market at Leominster every month, about five miles away. This dog was marvellous. He knew every single turning all the way there and he'd get by those bullocks every time they thought of getting away and turn them back on to the road.'

John's interest in working collies was further aroused when he saw Dai Daniels demonstrating at the Three Counties Show when it visited Leominster. Not only was this master handler using flanking commands to guide his dogs expertly through their work but he handled two dogs at the same time with different commands for each. This was a revelation to John whose abilities were limited to basic handling and for whom the complexities of driving and flanking were yet to be attempted.

It was also not long after the war that John acquired his second dog, this time an unregistered pedigree pup out of the same bitch as that master of the bullocks. Soon afterwards, the longstanding Leominster Ploughing Match was resumed and it was decided that a sheepdog trial would be run in conjunction with it. John was asked to help organise the event, which included local and open classes, and he took the old farm dog along as well as Shep, his nine-month-old pup, to have a go himself. John admits to knowing absolutely nothing about flanking commands nor the niceties of controlled dog handling, but the trial was all South Wales style (no driving but work at a Maltese cross before penning) and he certainly knew how to gather sheep and control them at gates. His youngster worked well and the other competitors were mightily impressed. It was his first trial and it fuelled his enthusiasm for more, especially as he'd stood and watched the skills of the era's top men like W.J. Evans, Bill Miles, H.J. Worthington and Dai Daniels.

John continued to holiday in the Cwmdauddwr hills and, on one of his visits, he took his young dog with him. Hugh Roberts, a keen trials man from the Elan Valley was extremely impressed by him and asked John if he could buy him. John was already seeing to it that young dogs were always coming on at home and, since there were a couple shaping up well at the time, he did a deal that seemed nothing short of ground-breaking. Shep went for twenty-five pounds, a sum that staggered the local hill farmers who reckoned a cow and calf could have been bought for the same money and been a sounder investment. Those back in Kingsland were equally incredulous and, when John said he'd sold Shep for twenty-five pounds, his family and neighbours simply wouldn't believe him.

The purchase of John's next dog constituted a big leap forward in his trials endeavours. Roy was the same way bred as high selling Shep but he was to benefit from John's ever-improving training skills. Almost all the trials John attended were South Wales style, national style not forging ahead in popularity until well into the '50s. He watched the few national style events intently and took to the form readily, going home and working on his dogs to teach them to flank and drive in a polished manner. It paid off and, with young Roy, he won his first open trial and had the great satisfaction of getting the youngster registered on merit. This was quite an accomplishment considering that John only went to about four trials a year and, when there, was up against the top handlers of the region. There was no qualifying requirement for the national trials at the time and so John, together with Evan Dyke and Jack Roderick, two other keen handlers at the time, set off for the 1952 English National at Loughborough. John didn't do too well but it was a step on the way to bigger things, although he didn't actually compete at national level again for another four years.

It was at this time that John began to breed his own pups. It started when he bought a registered bitch called Fan by J.M.Wilson's Moss, 5176, and a registered dog by D. Murray's Vic, 4368. Both these collies went blind with PRA, but since the level of awareness about the problem wasn't as it is today, the reasons were never fully investigated. They did produce John's Moss, however, a good dog who accompanied John to the dizzy heights of team membership in 1956 and 1958. (Moss, incidentally, remained with John until he died and never experienced any eye trouble at all). The real Shirlheath line, however, started when John bought a very stylish bitch called Tot, 17564, from Jack Roderick of Hay-on-Wye. That's over forty years ago and John's current dogs trace back to his own breeding through these decades. Tot was a grand-daughter of W.J. Evans's International Supreme Champion, Roy, 7696, and John line-bred her closely to Alan Jones's Supreme Champion, Roy, 15393, who was himself a son of W.J. Evans's Roy. The mating produced Fly, 34035, one of the collies closely associated with John's trials and breeding successes. She was an excellent all-round worker, but not the easiest.

'She was a very good bitch but a very hard bitch for trialling.' John recalls. 'A totally different bitch from her mother, really, because Tot was very easy, a bit sticky, even. Fly was the very opposite. Nothing would stand in front of her. Not stylish, either. And she never went down; you just could not make her go down. I never saw her down once in her life. Oh, she *was* a hard bitch, but a terrific worker, you know. I did well in trials with her, though, and we were in the team for the International at Towyn when Llyr Evans won it with Coon. It was a good run I had with her, too.'

John went for further close line breeding when he took Fly to Barbara Carpenter's Brocken Robbie, 24636, who, as a son of H.J. Worthington's Hemp, 13132, was another grandson of W.J. Evans's Roy. It was a successful litter producing Dick Nicholls's well known Moss, 41957, an important stud dog himself whose many trials successes included the Welsh National title in 1972. A full brother, Jim, 41958, was a highly successful trials dog for Gordon Lewis, bringing him Welsh Driving and Reserve National Championships. After these litters, John turned to sons of Wiston Cap as sires. First to Clarence Storey's Roy, 45152, with whom Fly bred another winner, Nell, 65799, who took the Welsh Championship for Mel Page in 1973 and went on to be an excellent breeding bitch herself. Next, to Gwyn Jones's Supreme Champion, Bill, 52654, which mating supplied John with another excellent brood bitch in Nell, 91340.

I mentioned earlier that, when I first met John, he was working a young dog called Ben (whose existence I would myself be grateful for in due course). Ben was the result of a mating between John's Nell and John Thomas's renowned Don, 108869. He was an eye-catching dog, a smart, tricolour who worked on his feet with style to achieve considerable success for his master. 'The mating of Nell with Don produced my Ben and another good dog, Don, who went to Sydney Price to start with', John relates. 'Don was perhaps slightly classier and more intense on his work than Ben but not quite as free; a little bit more of a line dog, I suppose, but a good dog.' (Don was a dog I liked a lot myself and I mated my original Brochen Meg, 130594, to him. She'd become a working bitch of the power house variety and it was a great shame that she had breeding problems after that first litter. It included a dog called Asterton Roy, 148992, who went to America to become double Texas Sheepdog Champion and Dog of the Year and also Asterton Tweed, 148994 who worked three thousand acres of hill for Cyril Roberts of Llanyddyn and was Welsh National Shepherds' Champion. The rest of the litter worked their socks off, too). 'Ben won a lot', John continued, 'and was second and third in the English National in successive years. He had quite a few bitches to him and there were a number of good ones came from him.' Amongst them was my own Jess, 139686, who was a delight to watch and who still remains the most successful trials bitch I've owned.

John married his wife, Jean (also from Welsh farming stock), in 1953. Twelve years ago they decided to sell Shirlheath Farm and move back into Wales. John's heart was there and he'd long coveted the idea of returning to the hills he loves to run a small sheep farm. Mixed farming no longer held him and he felt enough time had been spent on the seats of tractors and combines. Although he was always training dogs he wasn't shepherding to the extent he wanted to and, already past official retirement age, he wanted to fulfil his aim. Finding a property he wanted wasn't easy and he suffered the customary frustrations of those searching for their ideal homes. It was quite by accident that they came across Lower Trewern. After a day of disappointments they decided to take a look at a property that hadn't met their requirements on paper. Despite the fact that, with only thirty-five acres, it was considerably smaller than they wanted, they fell for it immediately. It isn't surprising. Tucked away off the main road through Llandegley it sits peacefully amongst garden trees and old farm buildings. A robustly flowing stream divides the front garden from the barns surrounding a fenced, grassy yard. It's reached by a little gated bridge and in it, as I drove up, four young collies were romping happily in chilly November

sunlight. They're the current representatives of John's long and successful breeding line and they'd already had the benefit of his masterly training. John has trained and competed with a great many dogs over the years and when they first come out as apprentice triallers they're always conspicuously accomplished for their age. There never seems to be any rubbish or rough edges about them at all. They look the result of careful and consistent schooling and it was going to be interesting to hear how he did it.

AB: You've always tended to breed rather than buy, haven't you?

JJ: Yes, always.

AB: And the reason for that?

JJ: Well, I have bought a few young dogs in my time, but never a fully trained one just to go trialling. I suppose if you were short of a young dog at some stage, you'd have to buy one, but I've never really had that problem. I've always been keen on the breeding side of things and I enjoy the training. I've always trained and sold young dogs and, as a matter of fact, I've often sold a young dog at the nationals.

AB: Do you mean dogs you've run at the nationals?

JJ: Yes, that's right. I suppose I've sold half a dozen that way. A couple went to Hubert Bailey in America, one to Clarence Storey and one to George Eyre.

AB: And your youngsters have always commanded high prices at dog sales, too, haven't they?

JJ: They've tended to do well, I suppose. I know we held the record for some time. People say to me, "How do you keep on doing it?" but, if you're breeding pups and training them, you're going to have young dogs coming on all the time, aren't you? Mind you, it doesn't always work. I've sometimes thought I've had a good one coming on and it hasn't been as good as the one I'm selling! But that's the way of things. And, of course, if you're able to sell one now and then, it makes the whole job worthwhile.

AB: And, as you said, you enjoy the training.

JJ: Oh yes, I love the training. I always have. I get a lot of delight out of it and I wouldn't if I bought them.

AB: What's the particular attraction?

JJ: Well, what other animal can you take out to do a job for you, say, half a mile away? You think about it. There isn't one, is there? Horses are marvellous, I know, but you've got to be on their backs, or guiding them. But, with a dog, you can just stand there and send him off to do a job and he'll do it for you. I think it's marvellous. So it's very satisfying to be able to train them to do such marvellous things.

AB: You obviously admire them a great deal.

JJ: I do. And it amazes me to see what very young dogs can do, because they have that wonderful in-built instinct; and I like to be involved in bringing it out and perfecting it. They're all different, of course. Some are too strong, some are too weak, or too wide or too close. But you can always make something out of them, even if it's just for farm work.

AB: That's the essence of a good trainer, of course, being able to make the most of whatever the raw material is.

JJ: I suppose so. You have to be able to adapt to whatever you've got.

AB: But if you could choose the material, what would it be?

JJ: Well, I like one that's almost got too much in it so that, when you've finished training it, you've got the right amount of pace and power in it; not one that might have that taken out of it in the training. And I don't like a wide dog. I don't like a pup squatting down and then flying off when it sees sheep. I prefer one that drops its head and walks up on them. If they're flying off here and flying off there, it's very hard to get them on to their sheep properly. In fact, I'd say it's almost impossible to get a very wide dog in, whereas you can get a close one out.

AB: And if you have a litter of pups, what do you do with them? Keep one, two; how many?

JJ: Two. I nearly always keep two and I might even keep three sometimes.

AB: And when would you think of doing anything with them?

JJ: When they start taking notice I take them out on a long piece of string. That's just to get them to come when they're called and to get them under control. Then I'll just take the old dog to get a bunch of sheep together and I'll let go of the string and see if they're interested or not.

AB: Would you have done any basic training beforehand, without sheep?

JJ: No, I've never done that, even though I'm sure a little bit of obedience could do some good. But I think it helps to take them to sheep when they're young, you know, even if they're on a string. And sometimes I'll just let them run with the string if they're very young, and catch hold of it and call them to me so they get used to coming. No, I like taking them early on because they're all so different and it's interesting to see. Some want to run straight at them, some squat down and eye them.

AB: What do you think is a good age to start taking them regularly?

JJ: About four or five months, although some will start showing before that, even. But at four or five months they start being a bit more sensible. If you have a very keen pup and you don't take him out before he's eight or ten months, he can be bonkers. Then, if they're six or seven months old and running to head sheep, you can think of starting

to train them. If I think they're ready, I take them to a little paddock I've got close by with a few quiet sheep in it and just see what they do.

AB: Do you always start them on a few?

JJ: Oh yes. Half a dozen quiet ones are ideal, I think, because they're easy to control. I mean, if you've got a wild young dog and fifty wild sheep in a big field, you wouldn't get very far, would you?

AB: So at six to eight months old you'd be starting to put commands on them?

JJ: Definitely. I can have pups trained at eight months old; I mean trained under hand so they know their commands properly. I've competed in nursery trials with ones that are nine or ten months old quite a few times. But, of course, it depends entirely on the pup. Some pups you can take into a field and they're boss of the job straight away, they're so on top of things it's simply a question of putting commands on them. Others are different and you just have to wait for them to grow up and settle.

AB: And not put too much pressure on them.

JJ: Oh no, you can't put too much pressure on them. Again, it depends on the dog, but some of them won't take any pressure at all and, if they aren't natural, you'll just spoil them by trying to force it. You've just got to let them develop at their own pace, working them a bit and working them a bit and letting them gain in confidence.

AB: What are the first things you'd be doing when you start training?

JJ: I think it's important to get their flanks right to start with.

AB: What do you mean by 'right'?

JJ: Keeping the right distance. Some of them can be far too tight so you just have to get between them and the sheep and keep them out and make them keep their distance. Once they're keeping their distance, I like to get them coming in between me and the sheep.

AB: Is getting them to come between you and the sheep something you'd do early on then?

JJ: Well fairly early, yes. Because, until you can get them to do that, you can't really get them flanking properly on driving. And sometimes it can be quite difficult, especially if you've got a tight dog that you've had to force out, because they don't have the confidence to come in so close when they've been taught to keep out. I've seen that problem quite often, especially with dogs I school for other people. I sometimes do that and have the dog here for a month or so to get it under command properly. And you sometimes get these dogs that are flying off here and flying off there and they won't come in close onto their sheep. It's because their owners have been forcing them out all the time and breaking their confidence for closer work. I like to see a dog flanking nicely, yes, but I also like to see them coming onto their sheep naturally as well.

AB: How do you get the dog to come between you and the sheep?

JJ: I just work the dog around me closely, flank him out round the sheep and, to start with, call him to me as I give the flanking command. Some will do it naturally and with all the confidence in the world. If they're not so sure, I'll stand up against a hedge or fence so that he can't get behind me and just call him round in the same way. It's a harder thing to do with dogs that are very sensitive, I think.

AB: Do you come across a lot of youngsters that are very sensitive?

JJ: Well, they are around, yes. I have a young bitch now who's a marvellous worker but she really is sensitive in the extreme, and I wouldn't have expected it the way she's bred. Most of her line are really hard, but she's not. She wouldn't stand any real pressure when I was training her at all but she loved flock work. So I just used to let her run on the flock and give her commands while she was doing that.

AB: So flock work could be a useful thing for the more sensitive types?

JJ: Yes, I think it is. It certainly helped her. She's a very good bitch now and she's got plenty of everything about her, but she's still sensitive, mind. She still doesn't like being forced to do anything.

AB: Do you work on specific things during training or are you one to do all sorts of things as you go along?

JJ: I tend to do a little bit of everything. You do go through stages where certain things have to be worked on but I don't keep on at particular things. I aim to get basic control on them to start with, flanking properly and stopping.

AB: How about getting them to stop?

JJ: It's not difficult with some because they'll stop naturally when they're balancing sheep to you and you can just add the command, but some can be very difficult indeed. With really hard dogs it can take a lot of time and work to accomplish.

AB: Do you think there are some that you simply can't get to do it?

JJ: Yes, I think there are. And I don't think that sort make very good trials dogs because they don't have any respect for the sheep and they're putting too much pressure on them all the time. It's nice to have a dog with plenty of power, of course, but you want that lovely pace and feel for sheep to go with it.

AB: So what would you do with one of these really tough ones.

JJ: I'd probably train it thoroughly and sell it as a farm dog. I'm not saying they can't make trials dogs altogether. Provided you're a strong enough handler and have the work for the dog, you might be able to manage, because they're natural workers and you'll get by with them. But they're obviously not as easy as the ones that are listening and that have a nice feel for the sheep.



AB: So what are the first things you're looking for early on?

JJ: Well, first of all I'm looking for a dog that's got plenty of work in it, then you can do something with it. Then, if it's got a bit of class, they're going to stand a chance of making good trials dogs. Because you've got to have plenty of work in a trials dog, haven't you? At home you can manage with more or less anything. Even if it's a weak dog, you can hustle them up, cut the corners and get them running up on sheep a bit. In fact, that's what you want for flock work; you just want to get the job done. But, when you get to a trial, if you haven't got plenty of power, and power you can manage, you're not going to be able to deal with the sheep properly.

AB: What don't you want?

JJ: I don't want too much eye. I want one that just drops his head and has a good grip of his sheep. And I like a dog with a good tail; by that I mean I don't like a curly tail. Some dogs sort of carry them at half cock and I don't like that at all. Mind you, there are plenty of good dogs that have bad tails, but I don't think it looks very nice in a trials dog. And, of course, we're all after dogs that have the right temperament because, if you can't get on with a dog, you're never going to get the best out of it.

AB: After you've got the basics sorted out, would you start a bit of driving?

JJ: Yes. I like a dog that will walk up on its sheep; the type that, when you flank him, he'll turn and come back on towards them. So I tend to just ask the dog up no matter where he is and let him keep going, and I'll just get in alongside him and walk along with him a little way. Only a short distance to start with because they can lose confidence if they're not sure what they're doing. And you have to be sure they really understand their flanking commands before you start driving otherwise they can just get into a muddle. After all, you've taught them their flanks by going around you and now you're altering your position for driving and it can confuse them to start with.

AB: How about outruns?

JJ: That depends a lot on the dog. Some will always run out naturally and others you have to train to do it properly. But I never bother about outruns until I've got them really well trained under hand. Then I just do it a little bit at a time, gradually increasing the distance. The main thing is not to let them go too far early on. You see people's dogs going wrong on their outruns on small fields. Well, it shouldn't happen if they've trained them properly close to.

AB: Do you walk between the dog and the sheep to start with?

JJ: No, not always. If it's one that wants to come in, you've got to do that to force him out. But that's no good if the sheep are a couple of hundred yards away. You've got to do that by stopping him and redirecting him, which means you've got to have him under pretty good control. That's easier to do with the sort of dog that puts itself right when it sees sheep and corrects itself naturally. With the tighter ones you've really got to get closer to the sheep yourself to keep them out. But you don't want to force a dog on its outrun. They mostly develop it naturally but at their own pace and you can spoil

them if you just keep at them all the time. You've got to be patient about it. What I do think is a good thing is to take them into lots of different fields. We're lucky here for that because they soon learn to cope with difficult outruns if they're not doing the same one all the time.

AB: Any tips on shedding?

JJ: Well, again, it's something you've got to be careful about, because the young dog won't know what it's all about, will he? I'll often take an older dog to help to start with. I'll get a bunch of sheep together and get the old dog to split them because he'll hold them apart. Then I'll call the young dog to me and we'll all walk them off together. Sometimes, if you just have the young dog, he won't be able to hold the sheep apart if they're fighting to get back together, which is no good at all because he won't know what he's there for. Again, it's no use doing too much shedding unless you've got your dog on proper commands; stopping, starting and flanking properly.

AB: How long are your training sessions?

JJ: A quarter of an hour. It may be twice a day but, now that I've got more time, it could even be three times.

AB: Jumping right ahead now, how do you prepare your dogs for all these double-fetch trials that we have now?

JJ: Well, to be honest, I don't bother too much with it because I've never had any trouble getting them to go back. If you part a few sheep out from a bunch and drive them off and play about with them a bit, your dog knows those other sheep are there. If you just turn him round and ask him to go back, he's gone like a shot, isn't he? What's difficult, of course, is to guide them on a big course to get them to the right place.

AB: What's the secret to that?

JJ: It's just a question of control, of having got your dog to take commands properly early on when it's close to you. After the first fetch on a trials course it's a good idea to flank your dog well over to the side it has to go back on so that it knows which way to bend. They get used to that quite quickly.

AB: How about the dog that comes in, though, and just will not bend out, that keeps coming in despite the correct flanking whistle?

JJ: You have to stop the dog and make him go out. But, as I said, unless you've trained that control in him properly as a youngster, it's going to be difficult.

AB: You come out with a lot of young dogs, John, and it's very obvious to me and lots of others, that they're always of a high standard. They're always on the job, under control and they never really let you down. What's the secret behind good training?

JJ: No secret really. Plenty of patience and the right dog, I think, and you need to be consistent. Some dogs you can't train so well. Yes, they'll come when they're eighteen months or two years old, but....

AB: But you don't want to wait that long?

JJ: Oh no. No, I wouldn't want to bother with a dog that didn't look like he was coming by twelve months.

AB: So you really want a young, natural worker?

JJ: Yes, I do really. It depends how they're bred, I suppose. Some come to work early and some don't. But, even though I like them to work early on myself, I've had exceptions, and one of them was Mirk, that I won the English National with. I remember I'd kept a couple of pups by Elwyn Griffiths's Craig out of Fly and a friend of mine wanted one. I didn't want to part with it, to be honest, but he'd got this young dog, Mirk, by Richardson's Mirk, 52844, and we eventually did a deal. I let him have a pup in part exchange for this twelve month old dog, even though I didn't like the look of him, to be honest, because he looked like just a rough working type. I took him out to sheep and all he wanted to do was run through the middle of them all the time. He really was a terrible thing to start with but, funnily enough, after a while he started to drop his head and he came all one way after that. It was odd because he hadn't even shown a bit of eye to start with, and they generally do.

AB: And your dogs are always farm workers?

JJ: Oh yes. They're all farm dogs. In fact, at Shirlheath I reckon they did as much cattle work as sheep work.

AB: Do you have to polish a dog up before a trial if it's been working hard on the farm beforehand?

JJ: No, I don't think so. Well, you might have to if you had a particularly hard type of dog, but I've never really had to. I remember one Easter at Shirlheath when we'd been bringing all the ewes and lambs in for tailing, and you know what that's like when they come in for the first time. It was one hell of a job and Fly was a tough one who wouldn't let anything get past her. We were going to a trial down at Wilf Reed's the next day and I remember thinking to myself, "This isn't going to be doing the old girl much good." Well, we went there next day and we won it.

AB: What do you think is the best dog you've ever had?

JJ: I think Ben was as good as any, really. He was a very nice type of dog. He was a good listener with lots of natural qualities about him and he had plenty of power, too. I think all those dogs I ran in the nationals were pretty good dogs but I suppose I've never been as professional about it as I should have been. I mean, for years we only ever went to four or five trials in the summer. Nowadays some of them are ever so professional, aren't they? They'll go to trials every weekend and travel all over the place to get to them. I don't think I've ever wanted to be like that. I don't think I've ever even been to a trial in North Wales all my life.

AB: What about other people's dogs? Any you've liked particularly?

JJ: Well there have been so many. I think John Evans's Roy and Alan Jones's Roy stand out for me. I'm not saying they were better than all the others but, for me, they were the sort of dogs I admired and wanted myself.

AB: And do you think the dogs have changed over the years you've been working them?

JJ: Not really. I don't think the good dogs years ago were any better than the good ones you see today, and vice versa. What's different is that you see so many more dogs. I mean there are hundreds at open trials today whereas, when I was first going to trials, there would only be ten or a dozen in the open class. The competition is terrific today.

AB: Better?

JJ: Yes, it is, because there are so many more at it; more good handlers and more good dogs. It doesn't mean to say that the individual dogs or handlers are any better, just that there are so many more of them at it. I remember in the internationals back in the fifties and sixties, it wasn't at all uncommon for dogs to cross the course; in fact, it could be won with a crossed outrun. Well, you'd be very unlikely to see that today, wouldn't you?

John James has certainly seen a great deal of change in the sport of sheepdog trialling during the fifty years he's been involved in training and working dogs. He started when, as he says, there were only a dozen or so competing in the open classes and now he fights it out against over a hundred. He's taken the challenge in his stride because he's still one of the handlers to be reckoned with and that, in huge measure, is because he's such a skilled and knowledgeable trainer of young dogs. Somehow, he seems the sort of guy you'd be happy to buy a dog from and that, in today's highly competitive market, where the search for talent sometimes seems to have reached desperation level, is as good a thing as you could say.

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