

Raising **POLISH TATRA** *Livestock Guardians* **On Small to Mid-Size Farms**

By Lisa Arnold
Little Flower Lambs
October, 2018



This is Duzo Serca Kraina Zimy, 9 months old in this photo, watching over some of our sheep..

My dream to obtain a Polish Tatra Sheepdog for our sheep farm came to fruition about a decade ago. I am still in awe of the Tatra's unique bond with humans, unparalleled devotion to family and ability to double as both a family guardian and a livestock guardian dog (LGD). In this article, I share some stories, lessons and tips I have learned during this time of raising Polish Tatra Sheepdog livestock guardians on our farm in Iowa.

My dog experience includes 50+ years of living with dogs, more than a decade raising guide dog puppies for the blind and a bit less than a decade raising Polish Tatra Sheepdogs. (I do not feel qualified to speak about raising livestock guardian dogs on large outfits, open plains, etc., since I have no experience with such large-scale farm or ranch operations and I would like to defer to the expertise of those who have.)

The working abilities of the Tatra are breathtaking. Tatras are primarily nighttime

guardians, though they guard surprisingly well during intermittent daytime naps. Once, I saw a fox come up to one of the pastures where a small group of sheep were grazing. They were being guarded by my LGD, Izzy. It was a beautiful day and Izzy was asleep near the sheep in the warm sun. Just before I noticed the arrival of the fox, Izzy stood up. He ran directly to the fox, faced it, and barked strongly. The fox ran right back where it had come from. Izzy then ran and barked once at each corner of the pasture. Finally, he ran a circle around the sheep, who were all huddled together, fully (and it seemed, gratefully) listening to him. Izzy then returned to where the fox had first appeared and remained there for a long time. Eventually, he laid down in that spot and kept vigil. The fox never returned. It was a beautiful sight.

Many Tatras in the United States today come from show breeders in Poland, France and the Netherlands, including several of my own dogs. It is good to see the interest in the Tatra expanding because of the show ring.

However, there is also a downside to this trend, which is a tendency to select away from traits that help a Tatra to thrive as a guardian to livestock. Thankfully, though, the breed standard for the Polish Tatra Sheepdog is remarkably sensible. It preserves a number of traits that will help a Tatra to be safe in colder weather, such as preferring hair between the toes, preferring lips to be “desirably taut and well fitting” (which can reduce drooling and hence, freezing at the mouth in frigid weather). The standard also encourages ears to be “well furnished with hair”, which can help protect the Tatra from flies in summer. A good bite, part and parcel of most dog breed standards, is critical for obtaining sufficient food and nutrition to handle life as a livestock guardian dog. Although the Tatra was originally developed for the purpose of livestock guardianship and many breeders want very much to preserve this central purpose, we can also recognize some important value that careful attention to conformation and structure from the show ring might have for the long-term benefit of the breed.

Some may wonder why anyone wanting

a LGD would want to acquire them from show lines at all. There are two practical reasons that have moved me in that direction. The first is that FCI eligible dogs will have their hip dysplasia ratings on their pedigrees for many generations back. This is enormously helpful to breeders who are trying to reduce the incidence of hip dysplasia in the breed. Secondly, it is much easier to get good information about puppies from show people, as they are accustomed to communicating with others about their dogs on a regular basis. Trying to find good working dogs from remote farms in foreign countries is a task that can overwhelm any American who does not speak Polish, French or Dutch — particularly the American writing this article. There are other reasons, such as knowledge of specific health issues, better conformation, etc., among show breeders, and more familiarity with how to prepare a dog for shipment overseas, and so on, that have made it more sensible to search in that direction.

We have five Polish Tatrads on our farm,

and had a sixth (Izzy) who sadly had to be put down due to advanced hip dysplasia. In terms of livestock guardian ability, two of my six dogs have

been outstanding in this area, three have been good with training, and one has been not really suited to sheep by nature, though he still thrives on the farm and has the temperament of a therapy dog. He exemplifies some of the remarkable variety we are seeing within the breed in modern times. Nonetheless, he is the dog who makes everyone who visits our farm want to adopt a Polish Tatra.

Not every Tatra puppy is cut out for livestock

guardian duties, but for those puppies who are, they should be given prime consideration for placement in homes on working farms in order to grow into healthy and happy dogs and to preserve the working tradition of the Tatra. They are innately wired for such duties and experiences. Sometimes when this innate wiring is short circuited through placement in more confined homes, such dogs will exhibit poor behaviors in the ensuing years that are difficult to correct. They are mentally wired for a strong challenge and they are highly independent thinkers. The responsibility of guarding livestock can best be carried out easily and naturally by those pups which exhibit a particular calm energy around the livestock, bringing about a natural comfort to the stock, and reducing a number of puppy antics that work against the livestock bond or erode trust with the stock.

I am very interested in the puppy selection

process, partly because of my guide dog raising experiences and partly because of my need to have good working dogs on our farm. We can eliminate certain puppies from placement in guardian homes by eliminating the excessively nervous puppy or the pup with out-of-control energy. LGD puppies need to exhibit calm-but-confident leadership traits. It is difficult to say for certain at a young age that puppy A or puppy B will be outstanding with stock or not. However, one thing I have noticed among the puppies I have raised is that those puppies possessing the calmest energy around the stock, those interested in grooming or licking the stock, taking an interest in the sheep in a calm and intimate way, are the ones who have needed the least amount of training from me to be excellent sheepdogs. Seeing the litter out in the wide open spaces and watching for a particular puppy’s contentment and desire to stay out for longer periods of playtime than some of the littermates can also suggest a puppy that may be

Continued on page 14.

better suited to work as a LGD. Seeing the litter out in the wide open spaces and watching for a particular puppy's contentment and desire to stay out for longer periods of playtime than some of the littermates can also suggest a puppy that may be better suited to work as a LGD. I have also found that those pups who want to come out with me on the farm, even in challenging weather, are often the ones who later thrive in the guardian environment. One of my dogs used to head out of the barn on purpose, frequently lying down in the freezing rain, sleet or snow during her youthful days. Her protective coat would act like a winter parka. She would later wake up, shake herself off, and trot back to the barn where the sheep may have already turned in, as if she didn't notice any weather problems at all. The Tatra has an amazing coat and once dry, icicles, mud or dirt can be brushed off and the coat will look brand new.

Pups with fewer guardian traits can sometimes do well with extra help and guidance along the way. Some of these Tatra pups, often between five months and 3 years may enter such an energetic period that they will need time away from the flock followed by supervised time with the handler and flock. If a pup has innate talent, often such supervision can be reduced considerably and the pup can remain on a more continuous road to living full-time with the stock.

There are some practical ways to foster this relationship as well, particularly in those pups who fall somewhere in the middle regarding their natural abilities with stock. Introducing pups to recently weaned lambs and allowing ample time to grow up with them is very helpful in forging a bond. Allowing pups to move up to a higher level of stock as their maturity dictates is also important. An owner shouldn't put a young pup in with a mature ewe having brand new lambs, for example, who may push the pup roughly against the wall if coming too close to her newborn lambs and potentially harm his early confidence. It is best to keep pups with kinder stock unless the pup starts to show signs of taking advantage of the polite company he is in. He is then ready to "move up" to more demanding sheep, which is particularly important if the pup is exhibiting overly rambunctious behavior towards the younger stock.

Introduction to rams should always come last, and should begin with yearling rams and end with mature rams. This is best only after the dog has shown a readiness for more challenges or a continued misplaced desire to chase mature ewes or pull their wool. My one Tatra who is not good with the ewes is quite excellent with the rams. He seems to need greater discipline and more challenges than the ewes can provide him. Yet a different, old LGD of ours has never been in with the rams, as he is perfectly behaved with all of the ewes and gentle with all the lambs, keeping him gainfully employed and content.

Allowing the growing Tatra pup an opportunity to share fence lines with the sheep is also very helpful in cases where the owner does not have young stock available for the Tatra pup to move in with. Introducing pups to larger but trustworthy stock only under supervision helps to get the relationship off to a good start. For additional bonding, owners may also like to make dog beds from the sheep's wool for the puppy to sleep on in winter, provided the beds are of a rugged material on the outside. Also, allowing pups plenty of time to play with another dog before putting them together with the stock is very helpful to expend some of their energy.

Certain behaviors are off limits entirely. If you see a pup in a litter of LGD's that likes to scratch at or lie down inside water containers, you will not want to choose that puppy. This is a difficult habit to break when he is with a large flock of sheep, for example, as he will then contaminate the water on a regular basis, making the water unclean for the flock. If you see a puppy that is overly exuberant around livestock or overly dominant with other dogs, you may want to pass on that puppy, as that kind of energy is not conducive to the many relationships with poultry, sheep, goats, cattle or horses and other dogs that he may encounter on the farm. In general, having strong, calm leadership traits is best, but having energy that is "crazy" all the time, is bad.

It is helpful if you can prepare your farm before you acquire your Tatra puppy. Even if your main fencing is not electrified, it is helpful to have at least a small electrified fenced-in area for the

puppy so that he learns not to challenge fencing in general. After your new pup has first acclimated to your home and farm, placing him in this smaller yard for even a few days every now and again can help him learn to respect all fencing for the rest of his life. This can greatly reduce the chances of a pup escaping from regular fencing when he or she is older, allowing him to work successfully as a livestock guardian. It can also help to prevent him from getting run over, being shot, poisoned, accidentally bred, stolen, etc. On our farm, for example, a tree fell onto our fencing twice over the years, creating a hole, and our dogs simply chose to remain with the sheep, not even trying to slip through the new openings. However, one of our dogs wasn't raised with a working electric fence as a pup, and this dog will happily escape whenever there is an opportunity. Fortunately, when she does, she comes right to our front door or she lets herself back in to certain pastures to be with a different group of sheep.

Another preparation that can be helpful on some farms is to install coyote rollers on the tops of any solid fencing. These rollers work very well to keep predators from coming over as well as to keep the LGD's in. I have found over the years that most dogs want to jump solid fencing if they are jumpers. If a fence is see-through, they will more often try to dig their way out (assuming they are the escape artist type), so anticipating these problems and making the necessary arrangements in advance can greatly enhance the joy of owning a LGD. We have found it helpful to have several fenced-in areas with shelters that can allow rotation of livestock for grazing, housing and movement of the dogs to new areas, varying their responsibilities over time, such as being with lambs, then yearlings, then mature ewes or possibly even rams, as the pup's maturity increases and the need for greater discipline emerges. Admission to these new areas teaches the pups to adapt to different circumstances while keeping them keen, happy and challenged. Such areas will also be helpful during lambing, when some ewes prefer to keep a little distance from the dogs during the first few weeks immediately following birth. Sometimes the dogs feel more comfortable being able to watch from a nearby paddock or barn, allowing the ewe's strong protective hormones to settle down a bit before moving back

in with them as usual. The needs and changing relationships of the working Tatra to the livestock will become apparent over time and certain changes to the farm setup may be helpful, such as making new gates, repairing fences, relocating or building additional shelters where the animals like to spend their time and/or where the sun or weather is less direct, and so on. On our farm, this willingness of my husband to make such adaptations has been a big reason that I have been able to work with our Tatrás as livestock guardians on our farm. He built our farm by hand, maintains it, and it is because of his dedication over a long period of time that I have had the privilege of raising these incredible dogs.

Giving the Tatra a daily brushing over her

lifetime can be invaluable. I understand that on an open range, this may not be good advice, as a matted coat can sometimes protect the dog from the claws of a coyote or a wolf. However, on a farm with good fencing, the advantages greatly outweigh the risks and the Tatra will benefit immensely from daily brushing by increasing its bond with humans. This special, individualized attention will also allow the owner to discern any health issues or problems the dog may have, such as mats in the coat, ticks or injuries. It is also important to take LGD pup out on the leash every day, even if it is only for a few minutes. Such discipline and training can go a long way in helping owners to maintain control of their Tatra, which is really critical during social events, veterinary care, etc.. My own expectations center around training my dogs enough to be easily managed on a daily basis, and to provide them with clear leadership, even if I may sacrifice some of the very tight bonding with the stock, were I instead to leave them entirely on their own with the stock from puppyhood, as some large farmers and ranchers choose to do. In farms with good fencing, such tightness with the stock is not as critical. If the dog comes to me, for example, when I enter the pasture, that pleases me, allows me to interact with her, and further solidifies our bond together. When I leave, the dog returns to her sheep and stays with them.

We must try in advance to see if our setup and lifestyle will be right for a livestock dog. For example, if we have just one pasture to run all of our livestock and dog(s), we will likely become frustrated down the road, as we will have far less

Continued on page 36

Continued from page 15.

flexibility and fewer ways to help solve problems between the animals. This can lead to the temptation to fix problems quickly in ways that are not necessarily the best for the Tatra's well being.

Sometimes, I will hear about people who want a Tatra to guard their huge unfenced property from strangers but who also want to allow all of their farm workers and friends onto the property whenever they stop by. This simply is not realistic. It is best if the new owner can formulate realistic goals, such as expecting their dog to protect certain areas within clearly fenced boundaries or expecting their dog to respect certain individuals whom they have previously taken the time to introduce properly, on several occasions, under relaxed conditions, before allowing them to meet one another without the owner being present.

I believe the key to really enjoying the Tatra as a livestock guardian on the small to mid-size farm is being able to formulate clear expectations (ahead of your puppy's arrival), to become informed about the breed, communicate clearly with the breeder and be willing to make any necessary changes to your farm. This way, you will be able to relax more, enjoy your training more and enjoy your Polish Tatra LGD in a way that will be fruitful and fun for many years to come. This is why I wanted a Tatra over other guardian breeds. I wanted that closeness in addition to guardian excellence. My Polish Tatra sheepdogs have given more joy, care, devotion, work and love to me over the years than I have given to them, though I love them with all my heart. They have been worth every effort... and I think my sheep would agree.

LITTLE FLOWER LAMBS

Home of Olde English Babydoll Southdown Sheep
and Working Polish Tatra Sheepdogs
(Polski Owczarek Podhalanski)

www.littleflowerlambs.com



Bezyk (8 months old), Zuszek, and Dužo (10 months old)

www.littleflowerlambs.com