

## Anatolians in practice

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Southey



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I had just returned from working and travelling overseas when our family joined an agricultural training and coaching organisation called RCS. The organisation has its roots in holistic farm management, but has developed further over the years and it is filling a much needed gap where farmers can obtain relevant coaching and training in an environment of like-minded people. The strength of the organisation lies in this meeting together of like-minded people where one is able to network and bounce ideas off others freely, but also to be able to hear how other farmers are solving common problems in innovative ways.

I had missed out on the first of these meetings and hadn't been exposed to much of this out of the box way of thinking. Dad returned from one of these meetings and told me that he had heard from one of the farmers there that they were putting a certain breed of dog, the Anatolian, out with the sheep to protect them from vermin. He also suggested that it was something we should consider doing too. When I heard this my first thoughts were very negative. I was thinking of all the things that could go wrong as it was the first time that I had heard of anything like it and there were very few farmers who had Anatolians at the time. But we decided to go ahead and order a pup despite our reservations and with not much idea of what we were getting ourselves into.

As soon as the pup was ready we made the long trip to go and fetch her and the moment we let her out amongst the sheep in her 'hok' I knew that we had made the right decision. It was incredible to see her interact with the young hoggets that were caged up with her. The sheep were terrified by the smell of this young pup and all gathered into a corner but she wasn't fazed at all. She ambled over and simply rolled over onto her back in front of them in submission and then just lay there perfectly still. To witness this gentle instinct really encouraged me and it wasn't long before the sheep had completely accepted her presence amongst them. From then on

it has been quite a learning curve for all of us and I never cease to be amazed by the incredible instinct of these dogs. One day I found her waiting next to a farm road near the camp where her flock of sheep were running. At first I was irritated that she wasn't with her sheep, but when I climbed out of the bakkie she led me straight to a little lamb that had died during the night. That was the first time I learned that when the dog did something out of the ordinary I was about to learn something new. Dad had always said to me that one never trains a dog, you let the dog train you.

We have now trained (or been trained by) three dogs and have learnt something new every time. Each dog has its own personality and needs to be treated accordingly. Some like to stay with one flock of sheep while others will actually roam between all the flocks each day. But it has been wonderful to see that the dogs will always be amongst the ewes when they start lambing.

Unfortunately, every dog has not been equally successful and we have also experienced tragedies, but there is always a valuable lesson to be learnt. It is also something that needs a lot of time and attention, and the more effort put in the better your results will be.

When it comes to vermin control we need to make use of everything at our disposal, but what has really interested me is the



An adult Anatolian guarding a flock

basic principle behind using Anatolians. A lot of local farmers' associations have kept very good statistics of stock losses through vermin as well as numbers of vermin killed per month. What struck me is that losses remain high even though vermin kills are also high and don't seem to diminish per month. As I understand it, when one shoots a jackal or lynx you create a vacuum in that territory that then needs to be filled. But by using the dogs you are pushing the vermin out of the territory and, in theory, should limit the numbers of vermin being bred in an area. If we can get this to work it makes much more sense than having to try and eradicate vermin completely.

We live in a rapidly changing economic, political and ecological environment and it is wonderful to see how different people are managing this change. What we need most now is to be able to share this information amongst each other and to tackle these challenges together. ■

<sup>1</sup> Son of Merino SA councillor Julian Southey - Manor Holme & Southfield Merino studs, Middelburg EC



Bonded puppy