



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

## Canine Master on Pet Life Radio - Episode #21 Sheep Dogs in Ireland

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**Chris Onthank:** Hi, this is Chris Onthank, Canine Master on Pet Life Radio. Today we're going to talk to John Davoren. And John is a farmer in The Burren on the West Coast of Ireland, and he is an amazing trainer working with his dogs, his Border Collies, and watching how he manages these dogs and how they work with him is truly, truly an amazing sight to be seen.

Hi, it's Chris Onthank, Canine Master. Today I'm going to take you on the show. We are on the West coast of Ireland and we're in, what County are we in John?

**John Davoren:** We're in County Clare.

**Chris Onthank:** County Clare, I'm here with John Davoren. He is a farmer and he uses his Border Collies to herd and to navigate and to work his sheep. Welcome, glad to have you on the show, John, how are you?

**John Davoren:** Thank you very much. I'm glad to have you over and I hope you enjoy your trip while you're in Ireland.

**Chris Onthank:** Gosh, I've had the best time and the Irish people are so friendly. I wanted to ask you, John, I watched you working these dogs. How many dogs do you have altogether?

**John Davoren:** We have 10 dogs, well actually eight dogs and two pups and they're all Border Collies

**Chris Onthank:** And they're all Border Collies, and are they all working or do you have some working-

**John Davoren:** Well, they're all working. Three of us work on the farm so I take out the young dogs to do the demonstrations here every day for the tourism and the other two guys are out on the farm and they have the other seven dogs gone with them.

**Chris Onthank:** Oh that's great. You know today we watched four of your dogs working I think or yeah, it was four. And one of them was a little older and then you had a younger one. Right?

**John Davoren:** I had, yes.

**Chris Onthank:** And you know it's really interesting to watch you work these dogs. we are using both voice command and whistle. Can you me a little bit about what are the benefits of using a whistle and what are the benefits of using voice?

**John Davoren:** Well, the Collie dog is the most clever dog, that's supposed to be the most clever dog in the world, so they can know your signals. The reason that we use both, we trained the dogs originally with the voice that's to get them to walk or sit down and go left or go right, that's done originally with the voice. But there are two reasons then we have to change them to the whistle. There are three of us working on the farm and it's very difficult to get the dogs to work for more than one person by voice. But you see if you blow the whistle properly, the dog won't know who's blowing it, so she'd walk away for anybody when she goes to the proper whistle.

The other thing is in our territory here it's mountainy and as you can see it's very stony or rocky. So when you shout at your dog in the mountain, your voice is going to echo and then it'll echo three times over. So when you move from one dog to the next with the voice echoing three times, no dog will know what you're talking about. That's the reason for both the voice and the whistle.

**Chris Onthank:** But does a whistle work better for long distances?

**John Davoren:** Way better. Way better. The dog would hear you to a mile out with a whistle. He won't hear you only a couple of hundred yards with your voice.

**Chris Onthank:** So using the whistle is probably the best way when you're in big expanses of property and things like this.

**John Davoren:** Of course it is. And the dog has seven times the hearing of a man. And as well as that, he'll work better with a whistle because it delivers the message to his hearing much clearer and better. Accent will come in with your voice. The wind will break up your voice but the whistle is very clear.

**Chris Onthank:** Right. And the reason why you use Border Collies, tell me why, why Border Collies and not, I don't know, a different type of herding dogs.

**John Davoren:** The Border Collie is the most clever dog. He's handy and he's light. All dogs, you've seen them working today, they're all very small, much smaller than the normal WC, the normal collie. But here in The Burren, The Burren County Clare you're in, it's very rocky and very stony. So if our dogs get more than about 18 kilos in weight, they are going to get sore feet. Their paws will get sore running up over the stone. So that's the reason, really, for keeping the dog light, number one, female does only. And the collie dog is light bred anyway. He's light boned, he's light frame, he's a bit frail.

**Chris Onthank:** And using the female is the preferable thing for all people that do herding or just in this area?

**John Davoren:** It's just in this area. Most people would prefer maybe male dog because he moves slower than that and he's easier to train. For us, we need a female dog because we have to cover a big distance. They're very quick on their feet for the big distance and they'll stay lighter, longer than the male. So we'll get an extra maybe two years out of them in the mountain compared to a male dog because he's getting heavy and his feet are getting sore. And then to go the big distance, he's too slow. If you send a male dog, like you said, out there out a big distance, he'd stop to look at the scenery on the way out, whereas the female dog will just shoot on.

**Chris Onthank:** So the females tend to be more focused.

**John Davoren:** They are more focused, yeah.

**Chris Onthank:** They're not thinking about their sexuality as well, right?

**John Davoren:** No, what I suppose it's like the all, if you stay long enough sitting in the chair, somebody might bring you the dinner.

**Chris Onthank:** that's great.

**John Davoren:** It's a bit that way with the male dog, he's intensive. He can sit about.

**Chris Onthank:** So tell me a little bit about what's the difference between the ones that are nipping and the ones that you use that don't nip. So with sheep, you're not wanting them to nip, correct?

**John Davoren:** No. Yes. In our case now with the dogs will do both because we do dairy cows, suckling cows, beef cattle and sheep all in the one farm, all here on the farm. We do. So we train our dogs to do the sheep and

the cattle. Now for the sheep, she just has to creep like a predator and have the proper focus in the eyes. That's enough to move the sheep because the sheep have a fear of the predator. But for the cows or the cattle, you'll need your dog to nip because the cows won't move. They'll get used to the dog, they stand up in front of them and nip now and then. But we cannot allow our dog to nip only when we tell him because when we are out in the mountains, you have the breaks in the stone, between the stone, Do you know the split between the stone? When the animal puts his foot down there, if he doesn't pull it straight up, he's going to break it.

**John Davoren:** Yeah, because he'd snap it as he walks forward so the dog must nip when he's told. So we have a whistle just like his left and his right whistle that tells him to nip, there's a (whistle) and that'll tell the dog to nip once when he hears that and he'll wait until he hears it again to nip it again.

**Chris Onthank:** This is fabulous.

John and I are talking about herding dogs and his Border Collies. John, we were just talking about how you train them to do a little nip here and there with a certain whistle. Training these dogs seems like a major commitment. Can you tell me a little bit, we know Border Collies are smart. But do they just pick it up or how does it all work and when do you start training them?

**John Davoren:** Well I supposed the first thing you do is your breed them properly. That's the first thing, if you have a good breed of dog, a clever breed of dog. It's like everything, if the dog is clever, it's easy. It's easy train them, it's like people, you know? Some people are bright, some people maybe not quite so bright. It's the very same with the dog. If you did breed it out properly. Now what we do is we breed them as good as we can and then at about three to four months of age, we'll take them out to have a look at the sheep. Now if the dog takes an interest in the sheep, we'll take him home at that stage and we'll make him sit down and walk on our heel. That's the very first stop before we'll go train the dog or do anything. He's got to sit down and walk at your Heel.

**Chris Onthank:** So, Basic obedience in the very beginning.

**John Davoren:** Basic obedience because when you go up the hill, you see if you have, we have eight dogs here. If you go off out the hill, with your eight dogs, you cannot have them running around the place the must walk at your heel and when you call any particular dog, say you go, you saw me outside the sheep. I send one dog off to the right and one dog out the field to the left. So they all came around the sheep and meet at the

back and carry them up. If you have your eight dogs, when you call one dog to go, he must go. The other seven must stay. So that's the reason that you train your pup the first thing, walk on your heel and stay there until he's told to move. Then you're taking out the sheep it after that, and the first thing you're teaching, sit down and look at the sheep, he's already sitting down, make sure he sits when he sees the sheep.

Then you'll begin to teach the left and the right. Now, the way we do that is we go one at a time. We teach, right first. We'll teach them by voice, we do the voice first before then we will introduce the whistle. We'll teach him the voice. Now what we do with that, is you stand on the spot there yourself, sit the dog the opposite side at the sheep. Now you'll have your sheep between your dog and yourself. Now, when you want your dog to go right, it's the dog's right, not your right.

**Chris Onthank:** Ah, That makes perfect sense right?

**John Davoren:** Yes. It's always because when the dog turns around, he'll go the opposite way and that is right. But it's the dog's right. So, what you do that to encourage them is, you walk off to the left and the dog will tend to walk to his right before you.

Now if that fails with a pup, what we'll do is we'll bring him home again and put a little barrel between ourselves and the dog and he now go over it with the lead and walk the dog to his right.

**Chris Onthank:** And guide him.

**John Davoren:** And guide him and you'd walk the other when you'd say away to me, away to me that's what you say. All shepherds will say the same thing, away to me to go to the right. So you would walk him like that. After a turn or two he'll get the idea that when he sees you moving, he'll move. You bring it back out to the sheep again, do the same. But, you do it every day for maybe a week or that. But the way you know the dog knows his right is when you stand on the spot and the dog moves without you moving, then he has his right.

**Chris Onthank:** Wow, that's really interesting.

**John Davoren:** You do the very same for the left.

**Chris Onthank:** Same thing for the left.

**John Davoren:** For about a week again.

**Chris Onthank:** So when you introduced the new cue, which is the whistle. So we've got the old cue, which is the voice and now we're going to change it to the whistle. Do you put the old cue in front of the new or you put the new cue in front of the old cue?

**John Davoren:** What you do you just say the voice one. You sit the dog like I said before, say away to me to the dog and the minute he moves, bang on the whistle, whatever sound you're going to give him. Doesn't matter to the dog what sound you give him, but you must give him the same sound every time. So you just say away to me once for is right-

**Chris Onthank:** And as he's moving, you hit the whistle.

**John Davoren:** You just hit the whistle and hit it all the time.

**Chris Onthank:** And now he's starting to understand that the whistle.

**John Davoren:** He will. About week, he should nearly pick up the whistle just. Now he'll pick up the whistle in about week his left and his right if you do it maybe two to three times a day. You only do a few minutes at any time because he tune out if you do it too long. But, once he has that done, that's fine, he's walking away at this whistle. The problem then is to get him to walk with another dog. That's where your trouble starts. It's not how to teach one dog his left or his right or his own whistle, but now you're going to introduce them to the next dog. And he'll hear the sounds of the other dog's whistle.

**Chris Onthank:** But you're having different cues for each dog.

**John Davoren:** I am.

That's really important because you couldn't give one cue for three dogs, they'd all do the same thing and then you'd have the chaos. Right. That's right. So that's interesting. One of the things I would ask you, what's the motivation for these Border Collies? A lot of people in dog training, we're all talking about treats and good boy or we trained through fear and intimidation. Tell me what's the motivation for these dogs?

There are two things that make the dog work. The first thing is breeding. Breeding is everything. The dog, if he's properly bred, he wants to work. You could not make a dog work if he decided and sitting down on his tail on the floor, then he didn't want to work, well he wouldn't work. All you do is you direct the dog. The minute he comes out of the van or the Jeep and command his (whistle), he's away and ready to go to work. You must just be direct or guide him. That's all you have to do. You haven't to do anything else once he's properly bred, the whole thing is to breed him. That's where you.

- Chris Onthank:** So it's the breeding.
- John Davoren:** It's the breeding, yeah.
- Chris Onthank:** In today's world we see a lot of people breeding Border Collies and they're breeding them for the show ring and conformation. And these dogs, unfortunately, some of these natural instincts that we need in herding are actually not bred correctly. So this is dying in those breeds. So it's the farmers like you that breed the dogs that breed the correct dog with the correct temperament that creates dogs that can have the sort of appetite for this kind of sport.
- John Davoren:** Of course it is. And it's not alone. Even the correct dog, it's the correct dog for the correct territory. Because our dog is, they're so small, they're much smaller than any, I presume you've seen plenty collie dogs and they'd be once and a half the size of our dogs, maybe twice, but those dogs wouldn't last a second day here.
- Chris Onthank:** Because of the terrain.
- John Davoren:** Yeah, the feet would and be sore. The paws, you know the way the little paw at the back, they cut the paws coming down the hills. All hills go up and steps are about 80 to 70, 80 feet. Steps you'd have about 80 of them up the mountain, say up the hills. So on the way up, it's very severe on their nails and their toes. But on the way down the back of the paw will get cut when it's so steep, if the dog was too heavy, he is pushing down against it and he'd cut the back of the paw. So that's the reason for the small dogs here.
- Chris Onthank:** So dogs on The Burren, are maybe different than dogs somewhere else in Ireland.
- John Davoren:** They surely are because they're smaller, and they're happier, they have to be.
- Chris Onthank:** I see. Do we have dogs that are bigger for cattle and smaller for sheep or does that even matter?
- John Davoren:** No. Small is small here. He's got to be small and tough.
- Chris Onthank:** And he has to be able to move quickly.
- John Davoren:** He has. And he's got to be able to nip the heel, he's got to be able to nip the nose and he's got to be able to look after himself. So when he nips the heel, like he told you, he'll nip the heel and he lay down on the spot and he'll always nip the foot the animal has the weight on because we nips the one that's lifting, he's going to get kicked. But if

he nips the one the weight is on the animal will have to take one more step before he can kick him.

**John Davoren:** The dog will be down low, that kick will go over its head. For the nose, he's got to come in from the side, especially if it's a bull. Come in very quickly, jump, nip the nose and away the other side. Otherwise the bull will kill him so he's got to be (snap) quick and gone.

**Chris Onthank:** Have you ever lost a dog?

**John Davoren:** No. If you train them properly, he won't. We train them on the sheep, we'll move them on to the calves then the small ones stock, you know? And we won't let them onto the cattle till his timing is good. We'd watch his timing that he's able to get away from the kicks. He's quick in and out at the front.

**Chris Onthank:** How long does that take, John?

**John Davoren:** It'll vary with the different dogs, but to train your dog to do that, you generally have them there maybe year and a half or two years. But you see there's a lot of training, that's grand and one dog.

**John Davoren:** But if you want to train, say, three dogs to go a mile out the hill, out that valley you won't actually see the dog, you'd only see the flock. But you know by the bend of the flock where the dog is. Do you remember I showed you with the dog went head to head. That's what you trained the dogs for. They go head the head, so they listen to the whistle. But to actually do that with three or four dogs could take about three years because you want have the variations in between. And just to make them listen and then they're out of your sight so they've got to listen to the whistle 100% and as you know, it's very hard to get 100% of anything.

**Chris Onthank:** It is.

**John Davoren:** Now if you train eight dogs, you'd be lucky that five of them maybe they'll do their job. Look, it's late at night in the pub. They'd all be great and then go too [inaudible]. Not as good in the morning.

**Chris Onthank:** So let me ask John, I know my audience is going to want me to ask this question. Where do your dogs sleep at night? On the bed?

**John Davoren:** No, they have a kennel. Each dog has his own kennel and they have their own food and water. They have a little place where they can sit up and sleep. They're only fed at night. They're only fed once a day because when they come out on the morning, you want to have the food digested and ready to run.



**Chris Onthank:** Right, What we call gastric torsion or bloat.

**John Davoren:** Yes. That doesn't come in, so then you feed them at night. They'll digest the food and they'll have their own food and water and a way to go on the mountain. And for the females, you need a kennel for every dog because they tend to fight. Females, if two males fight, they kind of decide who the boss is. Females, get-

**Chris Onthank:** And once they start fighting, it's really tough, right?

**John Davoren:** It is tough and they don't know when they're beaten up.

**Chris Onthank:** No, they just keep on going. We see that with all female dogs. It tends to be. Yeah, we see that.

**John Davoren:** Yeah, That's why we have a kennel for every dog.

**Chris Onthank:** John, thank you so much.

**Chris Onthank:** You did an amazing demonstration today for me and for a whole group of us. Tell me a little bit about what you guys are doing here in the name of your. It's Caherconnell, right?

**John Davoren:** It's Caherconnell Stone Fort, that's what it is. initially I was a farmer and I had four sons. Now there's only one of them interested in the farming, so we had to do something else as well to have a place for everybody. Now what we do is, we had a stone Fort down on the farm. It was a thousand years old, but there was no history with it, but we decided anyway, about 15 years ago now that we'd open it to the tourism. But with the no history, we had to have an archeological dig to try and get the history of the Fort out of the ground. And we couldn't really afford to do something like that because it's very expensive.

**Chris Onthank:** To do an archeological dig.

**John Davoren:** To do an archeological dig. It would cost you, to do the Fort would cost you, maybe. It would be certainly hundreds of thousands anyway. Because a little square would cost you 25,000 quid so the fort is quite big. But we came up with the idea that we'd set up an archeological field school and we have students use that down there today. They're doing the excavation. Mostly U.S and Canadian students come to us. We're accredited by the university in Galway. So they'll get credits while they're here and take them back to their own university while they're doing the excavation and they'd get field experience as well to do the excavation.

**Chris Onthank:** That's a great way to pay for.

**John Davoren:** That's a great way to pay for it. And it has the history for Ireland, that's free history. Because they're digging up a thousand years of history. They have various finds, god they have arrowheads from ironstone, they have all the middle gods. They have amber gotten, that silver, bronze and gold. All got, they've amber got. They've even a pick for tuning Irish harp, picked up on the fourth day or so. We had music long before the pubs had it. So as well as that, then we do the farming. Our family are here for 300 years. We make dairy cows, we do beef cattle, we suckle Charolais cows and that kind of keeps us going.

**Chris Onthank:** And then you do the dog demonstrations.

**John Davoren:** And we do the dog demonstration as well.

**Chris Onthank:** Well, I really, really enjoy the dog demonstration today and you even had my youngest son out there barking commands at the dogs, trying to get them to obey to his voice.

**John Davoren:** He did really well didn't he?

**Chris Onthank:** It didn't work very well did it?

**John Davoren:** No, he did very well-

**Chris Onthank:** Well, he did well, but the-

**John Davoren:** You might have thought he didn't do well. He did really well. We were here with a.... I Met this, were I know many years, maybe since 2012 whenever. Very few people have ever managed to put the dog to the left after the right. Only, I think one person has done it more than two years ago very few put it to the left. Your son put him to the left today. Now he went slowly, but he went. That young fella did really well today.

**Chris Onthank:** Well, maybe I have a young trainer in my midst. Follow after his dad. Well, listen John, thank you so much for your time today and I had a great lunch at your cafe and I appreciate that and really enjoyed meeting you and meeting your dogs. Thanks a lot. That's Chris Onthank, Canine Master and come on down to Caherconnell Fort in The Burren on the west coast of Ireland. And I will tell you something, it is truly magnificent here, it's beautiful and I really appreciate your time today, John.

**John Davoren:** Thank you very much Chris. Nice to have you.

**Chris Onthank:** All right, take care.