Overview of this sheepdog trial:

Legend has it that Sheepdog trials were started in the 1800's in the British isles to test the sheepherding dogs' ability to gather sheep, move them through gates etc and pen them up for management tasks, all in a calm orderly manner. These fun trials will be a relaxed version of classic trials in that the humans will be allowed to leave the handler's post at any time to help their dog succeed negotiating the course. (In official trials the handler usually may not leave the post until penning)

There are 4 classes of competition depending on the level of difficulty: novice /novice meaning that both dog and human are novices; pronovice means that one of the pair is experienced; ranch class which is a transitional phase from pronovice to open, and open class which is the most difficult course. See link for course diagrams. The ranch course is very similar to open. In this trial it will have a slightly shorter outrun and handlers can chose whether to try the pen or the chute. In this fun trial there are color-coded posts (pool noodles) for the place for handlers to send their dog from as well as "set out" posts where the setout person and dog hold the sheep for each competitor.

Judging is based on the line the sheep take, optimal being straight lines from each obstacle to the next. Extreme speed or hassling the sheep is penalized. Very slow movement or many detours may result in the team running out of time. Each class has a time limit after which they must retire. Unjustified biting of the sheep, hassling the sheep and unsportsmanlike conduct will cause a team to be disqualified.

FAQs:

Q: How does the person communicate with their dog?
A: The initial part of the course where the dog leaves the handler and runs in a big arc to get behind the sheep theoretically needs no commands. It is based on the herding dogs' instinct to gather the sheep. After that, a combination of voice commands and whistles are used, the most important being to stop, slow down, walk up and move either clockwise or counterclockwise with respect to the sheep.
The command ""lie down" really means for the dog to stop affecting the sheep, so when things are going well you will not necessarily see the dog lie down, she may stand. You will also see many instances where the opinionated or pushy dog refuses to stop. In these cases the handler may get loud and frustrated.
Whistles vary a lot from handler to handler, but commonly the stop whistle is a high-pitched authoritative whistle and the walk up is often 2 short peeps.

Q: Are the sheep trained?
A: These sheep are trained in that dogs work them regularly and usually there is learned mutual respect between the sheep, dogs and person. Sometimes the sheep have their own ideas, usually running back to their friends in the shady cool holding area, and the dogs have to get tough to get the upper hand. The sheep are also extremely good at reading new dogs and deciding if they merit respect, or not!

Q: What kind of sheep are these?
A: These are wool sheep meaning they have to be sheared unlike breeds that shed their hair. These sheep are approximately 3/4 North Country Cheviot, with a smattering of Hampshire, Romney, Tunis, Clun Forest, Border Leicester and Montadale. The black comes from a black Border Leicester/Montadale/NCC cross ram.

The trial runs will have 2 ewes (adult female sheep) and 1 March 2020 born lamb. The sheep will run not more than 3 times during this trial, resting and plotting how to beat the dogs in the shady "setout pen" with their friends in between runs.

Q: How long does it take to train a sheepdog?
A: Their whole life! Usually training starts at between 4 months and a year of age, and the dogs come into full working prowess around age 4 years.
In this trial, many of the dogs are being trained by their handlers, and a few were purchased as partly or fully trained dogs.

Q: Are all sheepdogs Border Collies?
A: Other breeds of dogs herd sheep too. In New England, at sheep dog trials in large fields you will occasionally see Kelpies, Australian Shepherds and once in a while a Bearded Collie. The Border Collies overwhelmingly predominate because of their innate ability to gather sheep from longer distances (up to ½ mile or more) and exert authority over the sheep driving on longer courses. The other breeds such as Australian Shepherds are more commonly seen in trials held in smaller areas such as arenas.

Q: How is the trial judged?
A: The course is broken down in segments called the outrun, lift (where the dog makes contact with the sheep and causes them to move, or "lift" from where they are being held bye the setout team), fetch; generally from the lift to a point half way around the handlers post, drive and pen, and in the case of open class, a shed (where the sheep are split and held apart) or another obstacle if shedding is deemed either too difficult or too stressful for the sheep (see the course diagram).
Each segment has an assigned number of possible points: 20 for the outrun, 10 for the lift, 20 for the fetch, 20 for the drive in the novice classes and 30 in the case of ranch and open, 10 for the pen and 10 for the chute (or shed.)
Points are deducted for any deviations from a straight line between the obstacles as well as any sheep missing an obstacle, the dog circling the sheep or otherwise hassling them. If the dog bites a sheep other than in self defense or dire need the team is disqualified.

Chut
e

Pen

Handler's
post

Line of sheep travel
Blue =open
Green=pronovice
Red=novice/nivice

Setout post