

# Bye-Bye Birdie

*In Increasing Numbers, Golf Courses Are Going Canine to Handle the Unattractive Problem of Geese*

By DOUG SANDERS  
*Golf Journal*

For Tony and 10 of her companions, this is an exciting day. All the hard work over the last few months can now be tested where they *really* want to be — on the golf course. The class has traveled to Glenmore Country Club in Charlottesville, Va., to finally put its training into action. Although they don't know what's at stake, a good showing here will result in a job at a golf course.

Tony leads members of the group as they hop onto waiting golf carts and head to the course. But Tony is no college intern seeking a profession in golf, or new player dreaming of life as a touring pro. Tony is a 2-year-old border collie.

Once placed at a course, the dog's mission is simple: to rid its fairways of the unwanted assault of the Canada goose. For Tony and the other collies, their months of training at Seclusival Farm and Kennel has prepared them to become the ultimate in specialized maintenance equipment. They will protect a course and players from the goose's toxic droppings, molting feathers, honking and hissing.

The increased development of land in metropolitan areas has made corporate campuses and golf courses appear more inviting to the Canada goose. From the air the migratory bird sees a course as an attractive rest area, complete with ample food, water and few apparent predators. Geese will not nest in areas where they cannot walk into or out of a pond, and are wary of taller vegetation since it may conceal predators. That makes courses, where grass is often mown to water's edge, even more attractive.

Superintendents and course managers have tried everything imaginable to stop the invasion, usually with little or no success: spreading nets across ponds, stringing wire or fencing along the shore, flying mylar balloons as a sort of scarecrow, spraying grape juice to make grass taste acidic, shooting blanks from a gun, flying windsocks, even laying out decoys of dead geese. Although they work initially, the Canada goose, which was near extinction in the 1960s, is a stubborn bird that is not easily fooled. All of the methods eventually fail.

There have been reports of some courses resorting to shooting or employing euthanasia as a desperate solution, tactics that are controversial and, in some instances, illegal. Those acts rightfully drew the animosity of animal-rights organizations. But the mix of the hard-working border collie and an on-course handler provides a novel alternative. The utilization of the dogs, welcomed by many animal rights activists, has grown from a new wrinkle less than a decade ago into a thriving industry that has seen the placement of hundreds of dogs.

**The border collie's natural strengths** suit it for the task course superintendents have in mind. The breed is characterized by intelligence, boundless energy and an instinct to herd its quarry. Originally used by shepherds across the rolling hills of Scotland and northern England — where golf itself sprang forth — breeders in the 19th century broadened the collie's skills to encompass livestock. At that point its territory expanded to include every continent.

Most dog breeds lose interest in chasing birds because they never catch the prey and the game is lost. The border collie never loses interest. The mere act of pursuit is what pleases the breed most. The relationship between the animal and handler is crucial, working as a team with the collie able to perceive and act upon the most subtle of commands. Deployed properly, the dog's determination to continually annoy the geese encourages the birds to move to another location.

For years the owner of the Seclusival Kennel, Barbara Ligon, had been training border collies in the traditional sense, preparing them to work a farm with cows and sheep. She and her husband, Stu, established a national reputation in border collie trials, where the working dog competes against others in the task of herding sheep into pens against the clock. But one day she received a call from Richard Marcks, the superintendent of Fairview Country Club in Greenwich, Conn., inquiring about her dogs.

"He had tried other breeds of dogs with little success and heard that border collies were very smart," she recalls. "The

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## Border Collies—

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big question was whether the dog, which thrives on continuous work, might become bored with the task of just chasing birds, rather than sheep and cows like it is meant to. But he had great success with his dog and soon other course superintendents were seeking me out.”

As the success of the border collie has grown, so has interest throughout the golf community. Courses situated along the migratory flight patterns have turned to Seclusival Farms, which bills itself as the nation’s only kennel training border collies exclusively for golf course use. As a result, courses from coast to coast have made a border collie an

integral part of their maintenance program. The \$2,800 investment brings a hard-working member of the grounds crew as well as a beloved mascot for the membership.

“Our dog, Nell, has been here for two years and is a treat to have around,” says Dean Graves, head superintendent at Bethesda (Md.) Golf Club. “She is so determined in doing her job that we consider her our most valuable employee. Even more than the great job she has done here, Nell is loved by both the maintenance crew and the club members alike. She brings so much to our club.”

Upward of 70 dogs are trained at one time at Seclusival, one of many commercial training facilities nationwide catering to border collies. The kennel is on a 400-acre spread near the sleepy Virginia town of Shipman, just a dot on the map about 20 miles south of Charlottesville. The facility is equipped with 200 sheep and 40 cows, which are used to blend the traditional herding and specialized work that will adapt the dogs to a golf environment. There’s also a

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small flock of geese available for training exercises both on land and in a nearby pond.

Ligon developed a specific training regimen to prepare the dogs for a golf environment. First, they are taught how to gather the sheep together and guide them toward their trainer, a technique known as balancing. The dogs also learn to respond to voice commands that work the dog clockwise, counterclockwise and forward as they herd. The dogs are taught not to attack the animals, but to gather them and control their movement.

“Each dog is an individual,” Ligon explains. “Some dogs will work great with the sheep but are not natural swimmers, while other dogs will be just the opposite. We have had dogs that take weeks before they develop the courage to even go into the water. It takes perseverance, patience and a lot of encouragement to get the dogs up to the level we require.”

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## Border Collies--

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Along with learning to work the animals, the dogs also need to learn added skills they'll require on a course. These include absolute obedience — no barking, no chasing after humans or balls, no running toward traffic if a course is located beside a road. Each dog also learns a full understanding of all voice commands and the ability to ride on golf equipment.

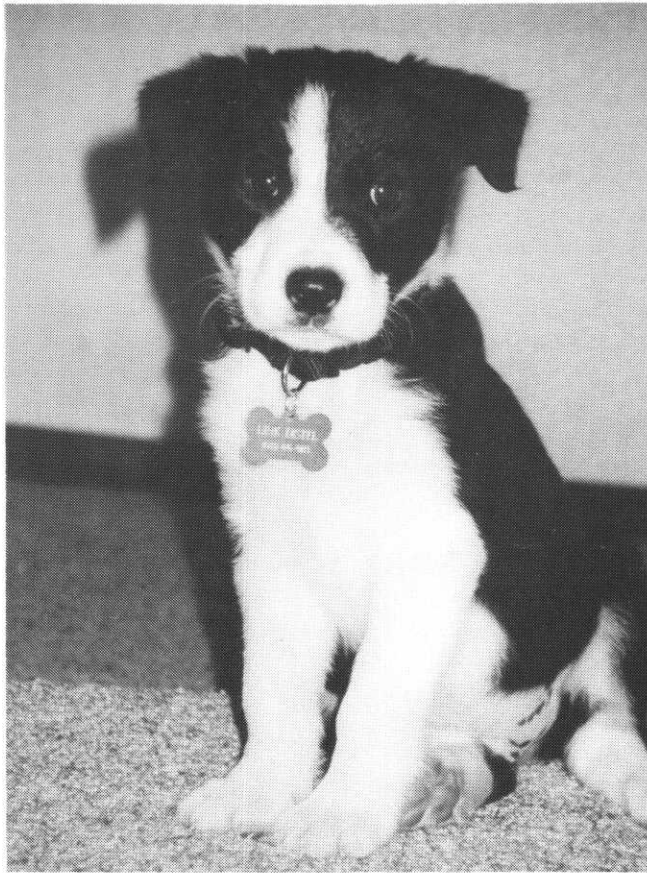
"Just as some dogs are better in water than others, some of the dogs have to develop a trust of the golf cart," says trainer Debbie Marshall. "We have to prepare the dog for as much of his new environment as possible. No dog goes off to a golf course until he has developed all of these basic skills."

The emphasis on obedience training is critical so that the dog's next handler can show the canine his new boundaries. The dogs can be taught to stay out of bunkers and neighboring yards, or trained to hassle only geese and ignore other birds, such as herons or ducks, that a course may welcome.

"The key to the training is consistency," says Marshall. "I work each dog the same and use the same vocal intonations and sounds for each dog. Training with the sheep, we put more pressure on the dog to learn the voice commands and learn to herd the animals properly. I try to make the pond and swimming a more exciting and fun exercise. This way, when the dog goes on to a golf course, he will find his new task there to be a fun experience rather than an upsetting experience."

When a dog has completed its training and is ready to be placed, Seclusival ships the dog, along with complete instructions and a videotape that describes how to work and care for the dog. Each course that receives a collie must understand its responsibilities — the dog must be given the proper attention, including both physical and emotional care. A happy dog is an obedient one; an abused animal will become increasingly depressed and act up on the course or not complete its duties.

The importance of strong training was made clear to Fritz Howell, the superintendent at Northridge Golf Club in Sacramento, Calif. Since his course is near the Sacramento River delta, the natural flyway brought hundreds of geese to settle in the course's seven ponds. He first obtained



### LINK

*Bob Distel has a new border collie friend to help control Canada geese at Wayzata Country Club.*

a border collie from a kennel in the area, but that experiment failed because of a lack of strong obedience training.

"Our first dog became possessive of his environment and would nip and bark at members of the club," Howell explained. "The dog had to be muzzled and eventually returned. We then contacted Barbara at Seclusival about another dog. She made a point of providing us with a dog with more maturity. Gertrude turned out to be a fantastic dog, very personal, never needing a leash and our goose problem is gone."

While many dogs are shipped throughout the country, sometimes it's more convenient to present the dog in person. Such was the case at Glenmore, a private club which quickly attracted migrating geese to its three large lakes when it opened five years ago. After constant complaints from members

about the birds' foul addition, Candi Kessler Comer, a former Curtis Cup competitor and now the director of golf at Glenmore, had to find a solution.

"I talked to other golf pros and kept hearing about the success with dogs," she says. "I contacted the head pro at Brae Burn Golf Club in Massachusetts about their dog and was totally surprised to learn that their dog came from just 30 miles from my club."

Glenmore's latest staff addition is Fly, a 2-year-old male. "Getting Fly was like purchasing a new piece of equipment," Comer says. "You have to learn how to use it properly. On top of that is the extra responsibility of having not only a working dog, but also a loving pet that needs care and attention. Fly has become a true part of our family here at Glenmore." Comer has granted permission to the Ligons to use Glenmore's ponds so the dogs can become accustomed to larger bodies of water.

To this day, Graves, the Bethesda superintendent, marvels at the intelligence of his border collie.

"I kept her on a leash for a few days and then kept her in my office while working," he explained, "but every time I got up she would want to go with me. I worked on teaching her the 'stay' command so she would stay at my desk. A few days later I took her out on the golf course in a cart. When I commanded her to stay, she jumped from the cart and ran back to my office. I wish I knew more people who listened to me so well."