

BRITAIN'S SHEEPDOG CHAMPIONSHIP

By SYDNEY MOORHOUSE

A Derbyshire man ends Scotland's supremacy; mist and darkness hamper competitors

BLACKPOOL acts as host to a multitude of organisations during the course of a year, and already this season it has been "invaded" by trade unionists, Rotarians, politicians, and others for the purpose of their annual conferences, besides the holiday makers. Last week, by way of complete contrast, it entertained farmers and shepherds from all parts of Great Britain who were attending the sixth post-war championships of the International Sheep Dog Society.

It may require rather a vivid sense of imagination to associate a holiday resort of the gayer type with the hills and moors on which the sheepdog performs its day-to-day duties, but Blackpool has a happy knack of providing amenities to meet the situation, and on the old airfield near Stanley Park a course had been laid out well in accordance with international sheepdog championship requirements.

Indeed, when the sheepdog enthusiasts turned their backs on the famous Tower and the town and looked towards the wooded undulations of the Fylde they saw an almost entirely rural background to a setting of shepherds, sheepdogs, and sheep. There was even a windmill, complete with sails, on the horizon to emphasise the fact that here, within a stone's throw of a crowded promenade, there are still many links with pastoral Lancashire.

There were times, however, when it seemed to me that Blackpool was carrying its efforts to accommodate a little too far. Each morning I found the course blanketed with ground mist, with the sun striving valiantly to pierce a way through the greyness.

Such conditions may have been Blackpool's idea of a mountain mist, but they caused a deal of dismay among those competitors forced to make their runs soon after nine o'clock. Two hours later the sun was shining down, but that was poor compensation to those handlers who had struggled hard earlier on. On the first day there was a postponement of the start, but the programme at an international trial is too long to allow much of a delay, and as it was we had the last runners in the qualifying rounds on the second day running in semi-gloom, with an already illuminated Tower showing that Blackpool's nightly autumn carnival of light had commenced.

The shepherds were the chief sufferers on the opening day, but the Lancashire handler Harry Huddleston of Caton, twice called on to open proceedings, might count himself as being somewhat unfortunate, and his final position of third was very creditable indeed. The order of running is determined as the result of the national championships of the three countries concerned. The lower-pointed competitors are off first and the three national champions run last—a dubious distinction when final runs are being made in the dusk.

International championships are so arranged that

at the same time. Next day the 36 dogs selected as the result of the national championships compete for the International Farmers' Cup, and the 12 highest pointed of these go before the judges in the supreme championship on the final day.

The course for the latter is usually regarded as the finest test of sheepdog sagacity and the nearest approach to natural conditions that can possibly be devised. The dog is required to gather two lots of 10 sheep by making two runs (first to the left and then to the right) to places about 800yds. away from the handler, bring them through a gate, unite them, and then drive the combined flock of 20 in triangular fashion through two further gates. Afterwards five marked sheep have to be "shed" from the remainder and driven into a pen. These operations have to be accomplished in a time limit of half an hour.

Perhaps the most important feature of this year's event was the fact that the English handlers, who have been somewhat overshadowed in the major championships since the war, really came into their own at Blackpool, while the Welshmen were also in great form. The Scots, on the other hand, who almost swept the board at Ruthin last year, suffered a comparative eclipse, taking only one trophy, that for the driving championship, across the Border.

It was an Englishman, Ashton Priestley, of Bamford, Derbyshire, who won the supreme championship trophy which has evaded his countrymen's grasp since W. J. Wallace, then of Otterburn and now of Arundel, brought off that great win at Southport in 1938, the last international before war brought about a suspension for eight years. Wallace was in the English side at Blackpool, but did not survive the qualifying round.

No one could say that the result was a complete surprise. Priestley, running the same dog, Pat, won the farmers' championship at Ruthin last year, and came within an ace of gaining the major award, being beaten by the last runner of all, the redoubtable J. M. Wilson, of Innerleithen, who went on to gain his eighth success in these events. Throughout the season Priestley has been in great form and has won many important trials, and while in some respects his winning run this year fell somewhat short of his



THE JUDGES INTENT ON AN EVENT

there is a gradual increase of interest which corresponds with an increase in importance of the events decided. On the first day we have the championship for hired shepherds, introduced some 30 years ago as the result of complaints that the shepherds were placed at a disadvantage in these contests through being forced to compete against farmers with more opportunities for both training their dogs and attending local trials. Then comes the brace championship, in which the handler works two dogs



J. M. WILSON, EIGHT TIMES CHAMPION, EXPLAINS A POINT TO THE REV. D. R. DAVIES, ST. LEONARDS-ON-SEA. Right: THE NEW CHAMPIONS—ASHTON PRIESTLEY AND PAT

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A CRITICAL MOMENT AT THE PEN FOR THE YOUNGEST COMPETITOR, MAURICE COLLIN

Ruthin performance it must be stressed that there were few outstanding individual runs at Blackpool.

Pat, who is seven years old, is possessed of two of the most important qualifications of the champion sheepdog—pace and intelligence. His power, although steadily improving year by year, is not yet 100 per cent., and perhaps it was because of this that Priestley pressed him on the sheep somewhat too closely at times to give peace of mind to his many supporters. Yet, after missing the first obstacle of the "fetch," he kept the sheep well under control and showed wonderful address in front of the gates during the driving tests. Shedding proved rather more troublesome than one had anticipated, and it was well that this stage was reached with time well in hand and quite an appreciable advantage in points over his nearest rivals. However, the task was accomplished without major disaster, and the work at the pen was as neat as could be desired. He gained 175½ points out of a maximum of 210, a total much lower than that of international winners for several years.

Some time before, W. J. Evans, of Magor, Monmouthshire, appeared to have established a comfortable lead with his bitch Nell, but it was obvious that the gap between his accumulated points and the maximum left plenty of room for later competitors to get in front. Nell, who had only just succeeded in qualifying on the previous day, really came into her own on the final day, and after missing the first obstacle worked efficiently and well throughout the remainder of the course. Nell is four years of age, and should improve a deal in the next year or two. Like Pat she lacks power at the moment, but there is every indication that this will come with added experience. She had 171 points.

Third came Harry Huddleston, with his nine-year-old Maddie, a bitch that has done well for England in the last four years. In the conditions when Huddleston made his run I had the greatest difficulty in distinguishing the obstacle used in the initial stages, and there was every excuse for the somewhat slow start. At close range, however, Huddleston was complete master of every situation, and had the round been made at a more favourable time of the day he must have challenged even more strongly. He gained 161 points.

The holder, James M. Wilson, qualified with his Moss, a dog that had been second at Worcester in 1948 and again at Ayr in 1949, and was greatly fancied for supreme honours this time. However, both in the qualifying test and in the final round Moss revealed a tendency to cut in during his outrun—he had done the same thing at Ruthin last year—and both here and in the driving tests the run fell far short of the high standard which Wilson himself has been setting for some time. Only in the shedding ring did the former champion come into his own, and at this work he has no equal.

Only one of the three national champions qualified for the last day—J. H. Holliday, of Pateley Bridge, with his Roy. Dusk was already gathering as he made his run, and the two runners to follow—Griffiths Pugh, of Sealand, with Don, and J. M. Wilson, with Tib—must have experienced great difficulty in seeing the obstacles.

The winner of the International Farmers' Cup was Ted Jones, of Bala, who won at the Royal Welsh Show earlier in the season, with his Gwyn, who got 147 points out of 165, with W. J. Evans's Coon and Ashton Priestley's Pat sharing second place with 146.

On the first day, the hired shepherds' championship was held over the same course as that used in the supreme championship, and here the mists caused the first three competitors to retire without their dogs having even found the sheep. The winner was H. J. Worthington, of Abergavenny, who has had four Welsh shepherds' championship successes since he began trials running eight years ago, and was second in the international last year. His dog Moss, which has gained him his last three Welsh victories, had 178½ points out of 210. Second was the Scottish

shepherds' champion, W. Work, of Hawick, with Ken, who gained 177½, and Tim Longton, jun., of Dunsop Bridge, Clitheroe, who won the English shepherds' contest, with Nell, was third with 165½. Worthington's was the first Welsh victory in this event since 1931.

The brace championship, in which two dogs work a flock of 10 sheep, was won by a 20-year-old Yorkshireman, Maurice Collin, of Richmond, with Cap and Kep. Collin was making a first appearance in international events, and was awarded the special trophy for the youngest competitor in the championships. Second was David Murray, of Peebles, with Vic and Number, and third, W. J. Evans, with Coon and Nell. Collin had 161 points out of 180, Murray 153½, and Evans 145½. The running in the brace championship was the best seen for many years.

The last contest was the driving championship, in which one dog drives 50 sheep in triangular fashion, and this was competed for by the driving champions of each country—Ashton Priestley's Pat, G. Pugh's Don, and David Murray's Vic. Here Murray registered Scotland's only victory.

