



## NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF TECHNICAL AGRICULTURE

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### Stock dog contest to honor longtime coaches

CURTIS, Neb. - College students, alumni and the stock dog community will pay tribute this week to dedicated mentors and friends of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture.

The Kelly Popp Memorial Stock Dog Trial is Saturday and Sunday at the indoor arena of the NCTA Livestock Teaching Center in Curtis, Nebraska.

Popp, age 60, died of natural causes at his home south of Curtis on November 19. He helped establish the NCTA Stock Dog Team as well as the regional group, the Outback Stock Dog Association, as did his friend, Eddie Merritt of Wellfleet who died Thursday.

“This is a special trial for all of us to honor Kelly and all that he contributed to our students and the alumni of NCTA,” said Leighlynn Obermiller, veterinary technology instructor and stock dog coach-faculty sponsor.



*The NCTA Stock Dog Team will pay tribute to two of their mentors. Kelly Popp, left, and Eddie Merritt, right, recently passed away. The coaches volunteered for more than 10 years to mentor NCTA dog handlers, as shown at the 2020 National Western Stock Show in Denver. (Photo by XP Photography for NCTA)*

“Kelly did so much for many of us, personally, and in our lives to affect who we are and the path we’ve chosen for our careers,” Obermiller said. “It will be good for many of us to get together.”

The contest will be hosted by the NCTA Aggies and the Outback Stock Dog Association. It is sanctioned for points in the National Cattledog Association.

Members of the two local groups often hold contests or “trials” for handlers of stock dogs such as border collies and Australian Shepherds. The two breeds are known for their agility and instinct in herding cattle and sheep.

#### **Aggie mentors**

Judy Bowmaster Cole, veterinary technology instructor and founder of the NCTA team (a first of its kind at the college level), says Popp was the impetus to start the team for students.

“Although 2015 was our official charter, Kelly had been working with interested students long before that time,” she recalls. “Kelly always took the time to help others, especially youth. He was never negative about students and dogs. He was *always* an advocate for their benefit.”

In addition to volunteering at campus, Popp raised stock dogs, often matching a first-time student owner to a pup from one of his litters.

Kelly and his wife, Jo, who is employed at NCTA in Aggie Dining Services, opened their farm and home to dozens of students over the years. Conversations went beyond dog handling, often sprinkled with humor, counsel on life, or mentoring about career aspirations.

Several times a week, students would carpool or caravan to the Popp farm to work their dogs in the arena with sheep, goats, dairy calves or beef cattle. They were there on rainy days in some sloppy conditions, or on warm summer nights enjoying camaraderie of friends.

A row of overturned mineral tubs served as the seating area for both spectators and dogs. One at a time, a student and dog would enter the practice pen. Handlers trained dogs with various techniques from voice commands, hand gestures, body movement, sorting flag, or other teaching aids to efficiently and safely sort or move livestock.

### **Stock dog community**

They learned with the help of clinicians, dog breeders, NCTA classes in obedience training, and often with Popp or coaches volunteering long hours.

"I think the first clinic we had was in 2001, and then the Outback crew including Kelly, started helping us over time until we were able to become an official NCTA club, and then traveling, competition team," said Bowmaster-Cole in sharing club history.

The Dec. 11-12 dog trial will have three categories: Open, Nursery and Intermediate. A separate collegiate division will not be held this time, to enable students to assist in hosting the trial. Two alumni of the stock dog team will serve as official judges.

Registration and entry fees can be paid at the trial. Spectators are invited to attend for free admission.

A celebration of life service will be Friday at 3 p.m. at the Berean Bible Church in Curtis. In case of capacity limits, the service will be livestreamed to the auditorium of the NCTA Education Center.

Obermiller said proceeds from Saturday's event will go toward a scholarship honoring G. Kelly Popp. An [obituary](#) has additional information.

(Editor's Note: This report was updated December 10, as the NCTA Stock Dog Team and cattle dog communities learned of the sudden passing of Eddie Merritt of Wellfleet on Thursday, December 9, apparently of natural causes. The weekend trial will proceed, as Eddie had planned, worked diligently to coordinate, and "as he would have wanted," friends said.)

*Part of the University of Nebraska system, the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture is a two-year institution with a statewide mission of preparing students for successful careers in agriculture, veterinary technology and related industries. NCTA is known for its affordable tuition, high job-placement rate for its graduates, and for the success of student teams in competitive activities including crops judging, ranch horse events, livestock judging, shotgun sports, stock dog trials, and intercollegiate rodeo. The college is consistently ranked as one of the best two-year schools in the nation.*

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Online article: <https://go.unl.edu/ju9i>