

Jumping Through HOOPS

Agility Training Forges a Strong Bond With Your Dog

BY MARGARET LITTMAN

Five years ago, Chicagoan Amy Ripepi was a self-described “relatively normal dog owner.” But when she and her husband rescued their second Shiba Inu, Kiko, they found themselves with an anxious 4-month-old puppy.

In hopes of boosting Kiko’s confidence, Ripepi signed her up for professional obedience and training classes in order to expose the dog to a variety of experiences.

During their training, the duo was introduced to an agility course.

Ripepi was skeptical. She didn’t consider herself particularly athletic, and she thought

her dog would be distracted — or a distraction to other dogs (in fact, they ended up quitting the first class early for exactly that reason).

But the instructor urged her to show up early the next week for a little private one-on-one conditioning before the other dogs arrived.

And then it all began to click for owner and dog. “She outlearned other dogs,” Ripepi remembers. “She even learned (the course) in reverse. I was hooked.”

Agility work calls for dogs to demonstrate their natural ability to move by maneuvering through a timed obstacle course. Racing against the clock, dogs jump, weave, run and balance as they follow cues from their handlers to negotiate tunnels, seesaws, tire swings, poles and more. Success relies on speed, flawless execution of the course and near-perfect communication between dog and handler.

Agility is one of the largest recreational dog sports and one of the fastest-growing in the country, says Kenneth Tatsch, president and founder of the 28-year-old Texas-based U.S. Dog Agility Association (USDAA).

The sport is growing in all regions of the country, with competitions in every state, Tatsch says. In 2013, the association licensed about 600 events, with as many as 25 events on some weekends.

“It started out just as fun; I said I never

would compete,” says Camille Fowler of Nashville, who became interested in agility training for her energetic Pembroke Welsh corgi, Lucy. “I never thought I would compete. But then I did it and it is one of the coolest things. When you start training together, you really become a unit.”

At the height of Lucy’s competitive streak, the two were participating in trials as often as two weekends per month.

Fowler has begun participating with a second corgi, Pippin, as Lucy has become older and unable to compete. Pippin doesn’t have the energy level of Lucy and doesn’t move as fast, Fowler says, but he loves to follow her commands and has won awards.

While dog agility trials have been in existence since the late 1970s, they’ve become more popular and accessible in recent years. The sport was introduced to a much wider audience in February when the nationally recognized Westminster Kennel Club held its first Masters Agility Championship in New York City.

The televised competition was open to mixed-breed as well as purebred dogs, with Kelso, a lightning-fast 7-year-old border collie from Maine, taking the Masters Agility Championship title. Westminster had »



A Cavalier King Charles spaniel, far left, and a West Highland white terrier tackle the obstacles at Westminster Kennel Club’s Masters Agility Championship in New York City earlier this year.

THE FIRST HURDLES

You don’t need to be an athlete or even have an athletic dog to start agility training. But there are a few things you can do to prep both of you for success.

- **Pay attention to your dog.** That’s what Kenneth Tatsch, president and founder of the Texas-based U.S. Dog Agility Association (USDAA), says. Work on building your relationship through basic obedience, so the dog will follow your commands and look to work with you on the agility course.
- **Get your dog in shape.** That doesn’t mean you necessarily need an athletic breed — even lap dogs can be enthusiastic agility competitors. But you do want to make sure your pup isn’t overweight, doesn’t have any pre-existing conditions and is prepared to try a new sport. Daily walks, games of hide-and-seek and other regular activity can all help get him in fine form. Consult your veterinarian if you have questions or concerns.
- **Boost immunity.** As is the case with any activity where your pet is around other dogs — dog parks, boarding, obedience classes — make sure he has had the necessary titers or vaccines.
- **Get yourself in shape.** While your dog does most of the work, you’re on the course, too, and agility can boost your own heart rate as you run along with your pup. Make sure you’re in shape and consult your doctor if needed.
- **Research.** Know what will be expected. Agility competitions are divided into different programs and classes based on training and skill levels, and rules and regulations will vary.

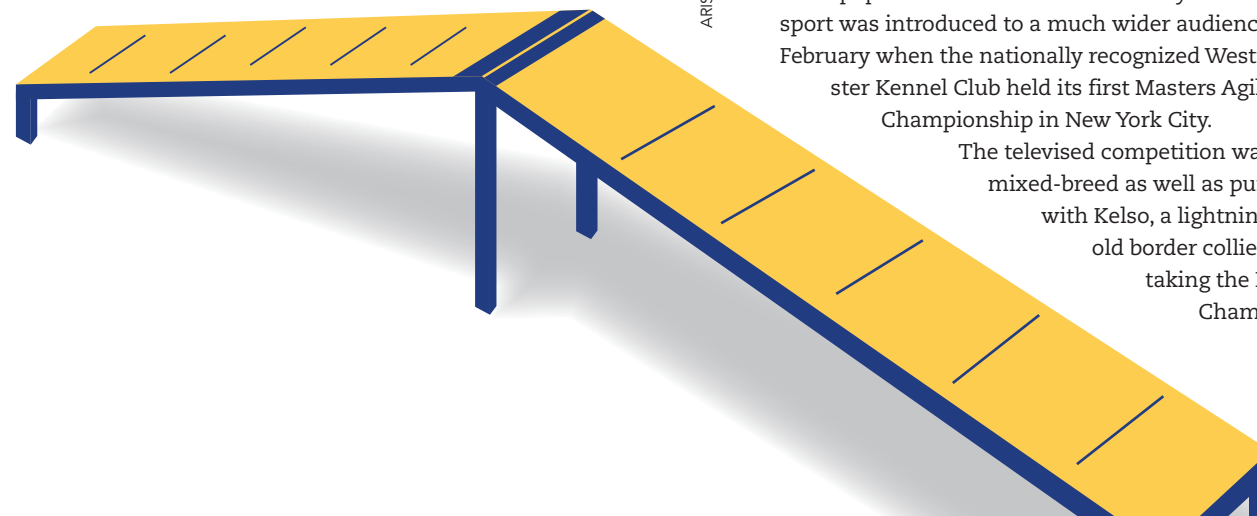


ILLUSTRATION BY LISA M. ZILKA

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A SECOND CHANCE

A 6-year-old husky mix who was given up to an animal shelter not once, but twice, catapulted to national prominence this year when he took home a top title in the Westminster Kennel Club's first-ever Masters Agility Championship.

Roo!, owned and handled by Stacey Campbell of San Francisco, earned the "Best All-American" mixed-breed trophy during the February trials in New York City.

For a club traditionally focused on purebred dog shows, admitting mixed-breed dogs into its agility competition was big news.

Campbell, who runs Go Fetch Dog Training (gofetchdogtraining.com), says she adopted Roo! from the San Francisco SPCA in 2007 as a "high-energy, fearful and reactive dog" who had been returned to an animal shelter twice.

"She was very pushy, rude, jumpy, mouthy, an adolescent with lots of energy, no manners," Campbell says.

Campbell knew she'd found the right dog to train for obedience competition, even though she'd been looking for a purebred. "Agility seemed like the perfect sport for her."

Roo!'s win is an obvious boost for dogs who don't have a long pedigree attached to their names.

Indeed, Campbell hopes more people will take a second look inside shelters.

"There are plenty, plenty of talented dogs in shelters," she says. "What they often get returned for — too much energy — actually makes them perfect candidates for agility and other sports."

— LORI SANTOS

For large or small, purebred or mixed-breed dogs, agility competitions like the one sponsored by the Westminster Kennel Club in February give dogs a chance to shine as they soar over hurdles, weave through poles and dive through hoops.

room in the event for 250 dog/handler teams, although more than 600 applied, says David Frei, director of communications for Westminster. Teams representing 23 states and 63 breeds (from Pomeranian to rottweiler) entered.

For audiences, part of the appeal is the obvious eagerness of the dogs and the fast-paced, race-against-the-clock competition.

"Westminster turned people on to it, people who might not have seen it otherwise," says Chicago-area agility trainer Stacey Hawk, owner of Hawk City K9.

Hawk's clients run the gamut — married, single, young, old, teachers,

dancers and doctors — all of whom enjoy agility training not only for the bonding and the exercise but because "they are there to learn something. Seldom as adults do we get to try new things.

"I love it because it is a mental outlet for the dogs," says Hawk, who competes with German shepherd dogs. "There is strategy for them; it is a puzzle, and it is so much fun to watch. It is poetry in motion."

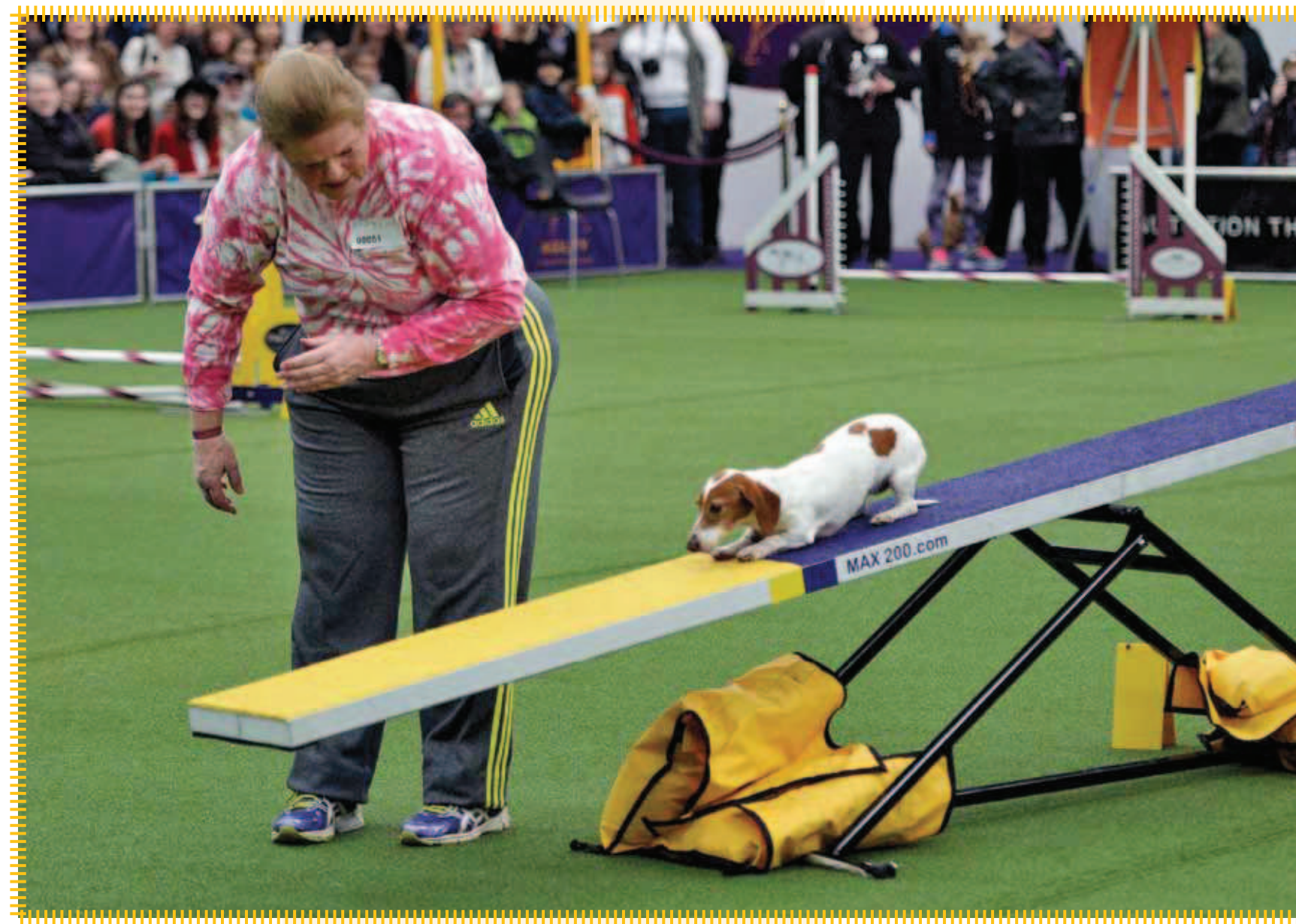
Ripepi liked the impulse control her dog developed, but she appreciated even more the bonding that occurred between the two of them. "There is this rush, this high. I have an other-worldly sensation when I am on »

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ABOVE, TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; FAR RIGHT, SAMANTHA DILLARD



Dogs competing at the Westminster agility trials in New York City drew national attention to the skill that's required to successfully navigate the course.



LEFT AND ABOVE, TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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— STACEY HAWK,
agility trainer

the course with my dogs,” she says. “Every dog owner loves their dog. But agility brings that relationship to a whole new level.

That is why I do it.”

Tatsch says that type of experience is apparent to anyone who watches an agility competition: “Dogs and handlers will be smiling ringside afterward,” he notes.

Ripepi and Kiko now compete at the masters level (i.e. the American Kennel Club’s most advanced level for agility). While the travel expenses may add up for those who excel at the sport and want to compete, Ripepi jokes that it is still less expensive than being an avid golfer or tennis player.

And, while she considers herself a competitive person, the outcome of the trial is irrelevant to one-half of the team. “The whooping and cheering are some of the things I like best,” Ripepi says. “You might lose and you might hate to lose, but your dog still might think it is the best time he has ever had.” ●

GETTING STARTED

- **Know the rules.** The USDAA provides information and competition rules. usdaa.com
- **Get the scoop.** The American Kennel Club provides information on trials and competing, including an events calendar. akc.org
- **Attend a class.** Any agility class should welcome you to observe before you sign up. If they don’t, the pros say, find a different class.
- **Try this at home.** Once you’ve learned some of the basics, set up some inexpensive jumps and other obstacles at home and practice ‘til perfect.
- **Be patient with your pup.** And remember to have fun!



Once you begin agility training with your dog, you may discover that you have a natural-born athlete on your hands.