

## Chapter 11 Click! The Adventure Begins

You are in the “clicker training agility know”. You now face choices. How high should you jump your dog in training? How many trials a year to attend? What is best for your dog? What does your dog want? So much of agility is about achievement and us. I recently spoke to a top competitor in a different dog sport. Everything this person said was centered on himself; his dog was only mentioned in terms of how she would help him attain more fame. I challenge agility competitors world-wide to be different, to keep the focus on the dog and to make all decisions based on what is best for the dog not on what will help secure money or ego enhancement. Agility is a game we play with our dogs.

Dogs don't care about blue ribbons and they don't care about a run being qualifying or non-qualifying. Dogs truly just want to have fun, and some, like my Turbo, truly just want to be a couch potato. Consider what your dog wants. If your dog is not addicted to agility, consider another dog, or limiting competing to your dog's favorite environments. Dogs don't often have a vote in what we choose for them, but we can give them one. We can watch their body language, their expressions and we can listen to what they say. When you listen, you hear that they have something to say about everything.

Click and Play Agility Chapter 11 Click! The Adventure Begins



Photos by Suzanne and Tony Rider and Spot Shots



What do these dogs have in common?  
They are all smiling. That is what agility is  
all about, making your dog smile.

## **The Best Teachers**

Many dogs enjoy agility but for various reasons they still present a wide array of training challenges. These dogs are our best agility instructors. Our training and trialing frustrations are actually gifts. The challenges we face allow us the opportunity to learn, and only by learning can we become the best we can be.

My first agility dog, Moose, taught me more than all the seminars I have attended. Moose taught me that force does not work with most terriers. Moose taught me that if I were forceful, he too would resort to the use of force. Moose taught me that it is truly possible, even for a terrier, to love his “work”. Moose shaped me to find another way, to find clicker training. I listened to all he had to say, even when it was painful for me to hear.

One day after only a few years of competing Moose told me something was wrong. He told me it was time to stop trialing and to just be a pet. He told me by showing me that he was unable to differentiate one cue from another. He showed me by staring aimlessly at nothing. Odd obsessive behavior had always been normal for Moose, but this was different. I knew something was wrong. Years later I finally learned, he had canine cognitive dysfunction, doggie Alzheimer disease. The years that came were hard; it was a long good bye. I will eternally miss my Moosie-man, my best teacher. His lessons made me a better trainer and person.

With every dog, I have learned valuable lessons. When I added my first Border Collie, Nicki, I learned that breed differences really do exist. I learned that I had to work anywhere from ten to one hundred times harder to get my Jack Russells to do the same behaviors as my Border Collie. The Border Collie wanted to do agility; two of my Jacks wanted to do what they felt like, which usually had nothing to do with agility. Ah, the joy of learning the lesson of loving what is. Love them the way they are. Avoid

fighting with genetic and biochemical make up, this is always a losing battle.

### **Responsibility is Power**

Nicki taught me about taking responsibility. She did not lecture me; she gently guided me to see the truth. When I first got Nicki, I lacked a handling system. She was my first Border Collie and fast. I had no access to consistent instruction, so I was free falling. Patiently Nicki taught me. All the times I was absolutely certain she had made a “mistake” she smiled and continued to play with me. Thanks to her patience, I became aware of the truth. It was always me. Whether it was a handling error, or a training error (I was both the handler and the trainer). If Nicki failed to respond to a cue, it was the result of my training. If Nicki did not respond to a handling cue as I had intended, it was the result of my inconsistent handling. With this realization came empowerment and freedom. If what Nicki did was truly the result of my training and handling, then it could all be modified.

I made a lot of mistakes training Nicki and I still do, but our journey has been fun! Many of the mistakes I made, like letting her watch other agility dogs run (which to this day haunts us when she sneaks a peak at the dog running in the other ring) are the result of my training. Of course, Nicki is genetically and biochemically wired to eye, stalk and obsess, but what she does when I run her is *still* the result of my training. Taking responsibility opens the door to learning.

Literally every dog I have ever met or seen, has taught me something. Sometimes I learn something about that dog's behavior motor pattern, sometimes it is something about the owner. It is amazing the stories a dog can tell if you learn to listen.

As you journey through the agility world, allow your dog to be your teacher. Allow your dog to tell you what will work,

and what won't. What brings her joy? Stress? How would she like to spend her life? It is your choice to consider what your dog thinks and feels. If you choose to listen, your reinforcement will be learning, respect and true love.

