

On Course With...

The Editors of CR

BY NANCY GYES

Iwould like to thank Bud, Monica and Linda for the effort they put into providing us with such high quality agility training exercises and other related material through the Clean Run. The agility community is growing with no end in sight and we are lucky to have a forum to express our views and gain further education in our sport. Part of the reason for that quality is that these three individuals are not just editors and writers. First and foremost, as you will read herein, they are agility trainers and competitors!



Bud and Winston



Linda and Nifty



Linda's dogs Awesome, Doodle, Spiffy, and Nifty



Monica and Boomer, Splash, and Lazer

Bud Houston



NG: OK. Starting at the beginning in 1990 with (now) ADCH Winston, your Sheltie, can you tell us how your agility career actually was launched?

BH: I used to show my dog Winston in obedience. About the time he got his CD, he and I both agreed that obedience was about as much fun as sticking pins in your eyes. We heard about an agility class up in Scottsdale, Arizona. This was in the winter of 1989. I didn't even know what agility was. I figured it was some kind of dog circus school. So I signed up.

After a basic equipment familiarization class, we stumbled through six months of advanced classes, which consisted of two or three runs over a new course each week. Agility was amusing. And Winston thought it was fun.

The club had a show in the spring. And that's what hooked me. The first time Winston ever showed, he got a leg and a USDAA Agility Dog title. It only took one leg in those days. The judge was Sallye Tatsch. On the same day Billie Rosen got a title on her dog Kara, and Ray Weick earned an AD with Meagan Deerchaser, both Miniature Schnauzers. We had the first three dogs in Arizona with agility titles.

I'll tell you the basic difference between obedience and agility. In obedience, when you get a leg or a title, you feel satisfaction. When you get a leg in agility you feel... adrenalin, the wind in your hair, a thrill like electricity racing through you, joy.

I haven't been back to obedience since. Have I missed anything?

NG: How and when did you come up with the idea for the first *Clean Run*?

BH: Back in my early days in the sport I was the training director for a club in Arizona, for which I put together a well-choreographed lesson each week. I began sharing this plan with other agility trainers. As I got more and more requests from other people for the weekly plan, I packaged it up into an eight to ten page training letter, and started charging for it. The inaugural issue was *Clean Run* #7 in 1995. I had fifteen paying subscribers.

NG: What separates Bud Houston from the rest of the agility world? Are you just more vocal, or do you see agility differently from the average agility enthusiast?

BH: Nothing separates me. I'm no different than anybody who ever faced the start of an agility course with a dog at his side. I'm certainly well-known these days, mostly because of my affiliation with the *Clean Run*. But that doesn't make me special.

NG: What roles do you, Monica, and Linda play in the day to day business of *CR*?

BH: Monica is our production and distribution guru. Linda is our technical editor. I'm virtually reduced to a staff writer these days. Being surrounded by very capable and talented people is a blessing.

NG: *CR* changed its format at the beginning of this year to include what some people would call fluff (like this interview!), as opposed to the original focus of training articles and exercises. How is it going? Have you won some readers? Lost some readers?

BH: There's no question that going monthly was the right thing to do. In our weekly format we buried people in training material. No one had time to do all of the exercises we published. So when we went monthly we sought a balance of highly focused training material mixed with special interest reading that would keep our readers occupied and entertained. I'm sure the world misses my weekly soapboxes. But there had to be a trade-off somewhere.

We've more than doubled our subscription base since going monthly.

NG: You're teaching agility classes now, publishing *Clean Run*, working a 9 to 5 job, training your dogs, and competing. How do you find time for all of this? And what takes top billing?

BH: I don't find time to do everything I need to do. There are periods when I'm gone virtually every weekend, showing, judging, or doing a seminar somewhere. And my dog training sometimes suffers. So I make the most of the little bits of time I have each week for my dogs.

NG: You have been away from "active" agility competition since you left Phoenix, Arizona. Bogie has a few months of AKC competition under his belt, and your newest pup Birdie has just started. What is it like for you to finally be back in "competition mode"?

BH: I love it, of course. I appreciate that I know more about training dogs in agility today than I did when I started with my first dogs. I'm very relaxed in competition and manage to have fun with it.

NG: What has Bogie taught you about training?

BH: Mostly that I'm running green dogs. Some things that were automatic with Winston are unknown to my young dogs. To give you an example, I'll get a refusal with Bogie on a pipe tunnel if I'm lazy about making a good signal or command. Winston needed only the slightest suggestion to tear through the performance.

NG: How does your training with him differ from how you started and worked with Winston?

BH: We just didn't know how to train dogs in agility in those days. Today I actually have a training philosophy and pretty much know how to get where I want to go with a dog.

NG: Given that most handlers are deficient in planning out the focus of their practice sessions away from agility class, can you

SNAPSHOT

offer some insights into how you suggest your students structure their at-home agility training?

BH: My advice is to *have a plan*. Know what your objectives are, then go home and work on them.

NG: You live with quite a few Border Collies, but have chosen Shelties again as your competition dog. Any chance you'll ever own and show a BC?

BH: The BCs I know are intelligent and affectionate; all in all they're remarkable animals. But I do like Shelties. I like their manner, sensitivity, and intelligence. If I ever want to be a famous star of the agility game I need to go out and get a BC. But I would view that as a cop-out.

NG: There are quite a few vocal Shelties competing in the U.S. Have you come up with any new ideas for hushing up the noisy workers while training your own two newcomers?

BH: Oh, I don't know. They say that Shelties will bark at growing grass. It is virtually part of the breed standard. If barking bothers you, you probably shouldn't get a Sheltie. Neither of my pups are big barkers when we're working. I do allow them to bark when they greet me when I come home. But outside of that, if they get carried away with their barking, I'll just tell them "You hush!" It works wonders.

NG: As editor of an agility training magazine, you must hear about all the new training and handling techniques. What's the most interesting new idea you've heard and incorporated in your own training program?

BH: Ha, ha. Sorry, that's proprietary info. Well, I was at a great Nancy Gyes seminar not too long ago. I figure if I add what you know to what I know, I'll be able to use that to take a placement over you in competition some day soon. I'm still mindful that you *Toasted* me and Winston in the Phoenix Grand Prix Regional in '94. I'll see you in '98.

☐



Bogie and Birdie

Handler: Bud Houston

Home: Ostrander, Ohio

Occupation: Technical Writer

Current Dogs:

Trinity JUSDANDY Bogart, AX, a.k.a. Bogie, 18-month-old Shetland Sheepdog.

Trinity One Stroke Under Par, NA, a.k.a. Birdie, 15-month-old Shetland Sheepdog.

Former Dogs:

Winston, ADCH, 8-year-old Shetland Sheepdog.

Pepper, MAD, 6-year-old Shetland Sheepdog.

Your next dog: From all indications, another Shetland Sheepdog.

First agility show: 1990 USDAA trial held by Dogwood/Phoenix Field and Obedience Club.

First clean run: Same trial.

Biggest agility moment: Winning my first USDAA Grand Prix Regional Qualifier in 1992 in Scottsdale, Arizona. In those days the Regional Qualifier required two rounds.

What I like most about agility: I most like that moment in competition when everything comes together. Your dog is having fun. The two of you are in sync, each knowing what the other is thinking. You go onto the field and you run the course like you own it, as though you'd been practicing that sequence for a month. The perfect clean run is totally intoxicating.

Biggest influence: Early on my greatest influence was my dog Winston, ADCH. He was far more knowledgeable of agility than I, and he taught me an incredible amount about the sport. At this moment in my life, my biggest influence would have to be Linda Mecklenburg.

Favorite show or venue: Artful Dodgers' USDAA trials. These are folks that know how to put together a well run event. Being organized, they make it look so effortless.

Favorite class: Any standard course run. That's what dog agility is all about.

Nancy Gyes operates Foothill Dog Training and Power Paws Agility with Jim Basic in San Jose, California. Nancy and her BC Scud were chosen to represent the AKC and the U.S. at both the 1996 and 1997 Agility World Championships. She has trained Scud (BC), Winston (BC cross) and Toast (mini mixed breed) to their USDAA Agility Dog Championships and has put MAD titles on four dogs—Scud, Winston, Toast and Hopscotch (another mini mixed breed). Nancy has recently started competing with her young BC, Riot, and has added another English-import BC, Wicked, born in February 1997.

Linda Mecklenburg

NG: How did you get so involved in agility?

LM: I was an avid equine enthusiast and an active hunter/jumper competitor. When I was accepted to veterinary school, I had to have a “dispersal sale” of all of my horses and move from the heart of horse country, Maryland and Virginia, to central Ohio. I intended to return to equestrian sports after graduation, but in the meantime I discovered dog agility. I found that dog agility fulfilled my competitive desires and was a lot cheaper.

NG: Doodle, your first dog in agility, was, and still is, a wonder to watch. Sometimes more entertaining than effective, Doodle's antics are known far and wide. What was the original focus of your training with her?

LM: When I began training Doodle, dog agility instruction was not widely available. My knowledge of the sport was limited. I had never seen an actual competition. I got Ruth Hobday's first book, *Agility is Fun*, and trained my dog based on her techniques. My impression was that it was desirable for the handler to remain stationary and send the dog around the course. Thus, what we think of as distance control training today was the sole focus of my everyday training for Doodle.

NG: How did your training tactics change when you started Nifty's agility instruction?

LM: Having a dog that will work at a distance and essentially independent of the handler is great for Gamblers and impressive for the spectators, but not ideal for the rest of the classes. Doodle taught me that if I wanted to be successful in all phases of the sport, I needed to learn to work more closely with my next dog. So, with Nifty I worked on us developing a working relationship as a team.

NG: Your dogs are great Gamblers dogs. I've heard an estimate that Nifty has over thirty (forty?) career Masters Gamblers legs, and has had a few “streaks” of many legs in a row. How and when do you start asking for distance control? Is it based on how you play with your dogs, or solely on agility?

LM: I train for distance right from the start, while at the same time trying to get the dog to work intimately with me. I try to perfect the dog's understanding of each obstacle before I ever sequence and I never do “run-bys”. I work most of the obstacles in a training session, but each is worked individually.

If I am training the jump, I will work with the dog from all possible handler positions, from all angles, and from all distances. At first the dog is always recalled back to me after the jump and rewarded. Gradually I begin sending the dog over one jump, recalling, then redirecting back out over a different jump before the dog reaches me. That is the dog's first exposure to two obstacles in a row.

Before I ever start sequencing, I'll have a dog that can be sent fifteen to twenty feet out to a jump, recalled and then redirected out to a tunnel, recalled and redirected out to a jump, and recalled and redirected out to a table. At the same time, I have a dog that is attentive and listening for each directive, not anticipating. Gradually I phase out the recalls between the obstacles. The dog learns that is pleasant to *Come!* after an obstacle (even with another obstacle presenting itself), but is willing to be sent on to the next obstacle if directed to do so.

NG: Bud whispered in my ear when I was visiting you in Ohio that I had to ask you sometime about your strategy for Snooker competition. I have been saving this question for months now. So, are you going to explain this secret technique?

LM: Well, I like to think that my success in Snooker is due to a combination of the training and strategy. My dogs are trained to not perform an obstacle unless directed to do so. So Snooker is no big deal. I strive

for my dog's attitude to be: “Where do you want me to go next, Mom?” I'd guess what Bud was referring to is how I decide which path to take in Snooker. Obviously it is usually advantageous to take the shortest route. The way I figure out the shortest route is to visualize the alternate routes as if they were curves on a graph. Rather than trying to decide which line is shorter, I mentally calculate the area under the curve. The route with the least area is the shortest. I knew the Calculus I took in college had to be good for something.

NG: Can you tell us the process you went through in coming up with the effective contact technique you perfected with Nifty?

LM: Common sense. Doodle's biggest thrill was going on to the next obstacle; the last thing she wanted was to stay on the contact. So I decided to make the contact zone the most rewarding place for the dog, *not* going on. I simply reward the dog for stopping at the end of the contact, and expect it to wait for me to say *Okay!* before it can go on. Simple as that. I strive for a dog that drives to the end of the contact and then waits. I prefer having all four feet on the board rather than two feet on and two feet off as some people teach. After Doodle I am paranoid about the dog getting the slightest bit off the board without my permission. For practical reasons, I like all four feet on because it easily transfers to all contact obstacles for all types of dogs. Many trainers prefer to teach two on and two off, the rationale being that the dog is less likely to stop too soon on the plank. I find that most dogs don't have this problem if properly reinforced.

Regardless, the exact position isn't as important as the wait for release and the repetition. With enough repetition, the dog will learn to consistently wait (and may be proofed just as if proofing a sit-stay). Once the dog has proven that he is reliable at home and in competition, he may be gradually released after shorter and shorter spans of time until the pause is no longer perceptible. If retraining a dog, the key is to stop competing during the retraining period. The first time the dog does not wait for release in competition and you cannot correct him, you have just taught him that he doesn't need to wait for release in the ring, only in training.

NG: Biting right at Nifty's heels, Spiffy has come exploding up through the classes. I know on at least several occasions she has beaten Nifty's times in the Masters Standard rounds. Did you ever expect that to happen?

LM: Spiffy has a very silly personality and acts like life is one big party. She barks on the course, acts like a big kid, and is unpredictable. She's extremely fun to run. In contrast, Nifty, her half sister, is very serious and is all business. No, with Spiffy being such a clown I have never given her much respect and certainly have been surprised when she has turned in faster times than Nifty.

NG: Spiffy won the very competitive 24” height class at the USAAA Nationals this year. Can you predict now where her career is headed? Will she eventually be the World competition dog that Nifty is?

LM: Even after that accomplishment, Spiffy still hasn't convinced me that she will ever be the dog that Nifty is. Nifty is a once in a lifetime type of dog that is talented in all phases of the sport.

NG: Did you change the way you taught Nifty and Spiffy weave poles from how you started with Doodle? Will you revamp the strategy with your new puppy, Awesome?

LM: I started Doodle with a combination of channel wires and slanted poles. I pushed for speed in the poles; after all, weaving was an important skill according to my training bible, *Agility is Fun* by Ruth Hobday. As a result, Doodle is a spectacular weaver but she is undependable. With Nifty, I decided to sacrifice a bit of speed and shoot for accuracy.

Handler: Linda Mecklenburg

Home: Ostrander, Ohio

Occupation: Veterinarian, Technical Editor.

Dogs:

Awesome, 7-month-old BC who aspires to live up to his name.

Spiffy, ADCH, MX, 2-year-old BC. Spiffy earned her ADCH in seven shows at Masters level. 1997 USDAA National Champion 24" class. *Front and Finish* 1996 AKC Agility Top Ten: 8th All Breeds, 3rd BCs.

Nifty, ADCH, MX, AADC, 4 1/2-year-old BC. USDAA 1996 Agility Top Ten: All lists. *Front and Finish* 1996 AKC Agility Top Ten: 1st All Breeds, 1st BCs. USDAA Grand Prix Regional Winner 1994-1997. USDAA National Finalist: 1995 (5th), 1996 (3rd), 1997 (3rd). USDAA National Nonstandard class placements include: Jumpers 1st 1994, 1995 and 2nd 1996, 1997; Gamblers 1st 1996, 1997 and 2nd 1994; Snooker 1st 1997. USDAA National DAM Team Champion 1994 (Hayley/Gaiser, Stoni/Garrett) and 1997 (Gyes/Scud, Hatfield/Lilly). Nifty has represented the U.S. in international competition at the Pedigree World Cup in 1995 (Belgium) and 1996 (Austria), and the 1997 World Championships (Denmark).

Doodle, ADCH, VAD, MX, CDX, ADC, 7 1/2 year old BC. Doodle probably holds the record for most USDAA Grand Prix Regionals attempted in one season without qualifying (eleven). She went to the USDAA Nationals anyway that year (1992) and earned 1st Place in two Nonstandard classes: Gamblers and Pairs Pursuit.

Your next dog: Another BC no doubt.

First agility show: 1991 USDAA trial at BB Agility Center in Danville, Virginia.

First clean run: 1991 Canine Combustion/Swansea USDAA trial in Ontario, Canada for Doodle's Agility Dog title.

Biggest agility moment: Placing first and third with Spiffy and Nifty in the 24" class at the 1997 USDAA Nationals was a career highlight. But my most precious agility moment was when Doodle recently finished her ADCH. She finally recovered from an injury I thought would force her retirement. She loves agility, and it was discouraging to think that she might never have the chance to complete the title of which she is so deserving. Most people don't remember Doodle, but she was an incredible dog in her prime. Everything I've accomplished in agility I owe to her. In my heart she's truly a champion no matter what the letters after her name are.

What I like most about agility: The "rush" you feel after a run when you and your dog put it all together. That's what I run for—not for the Q, not for the win, but for the exhilarating rush.

Biggest influence: Lassie.

Favorite show or venue: I have two that are on opposite ends of the spectrum as far as style of event. I loved running in the USDAA Nationals when it was at the Houston AstroArena for the sheer excitement of performing in front of a huge crowd. I am also fond of competing at the USDAA Regional Qualifier in San Juan, Puerto Rico for just the opposite reason—I enjoy the relaxed atmosphere where you and the dogs can lounge on the beach in the a.m. and run agility in the p.m. with just a few friends in attendance.

Favorite class: Any class without a table.

The difference between a good weaver and a great weaver is less than a second. Nifty learned to weave with a modified in/out method with portable weave poles at the truck stops on the drive to her first trial in Florida. She qualified both days. I did come home and train her for real with wires on. With Spiffy I just put wires on poles, put Spiffy on a leash and told her to *Weave!* I showed her that jumping the wires wasn't what got her the reward and it wasn't long before she was weaving. She seems to be a natural. She can hit the most difficult of entries. It took Nifty over a year of hard work to become really competent at the poles. With Awesome I will do the same as with Spiffy—leash on, wires on and go!

NG: What was the first thing related to agility that you taught Awesome?

LM: The first thing he did was sit on the end of my dogwalk and eat goodies. The first real agility skill he learned was an automatic drop on the table, paws over the edge.

NG: This will be the first male dog you have owned and trained for agility. Can you tell yet if gender will affect how you need to train him?

LM: His gender will not affect how I train him, but it may affect his response to training. When I got my first BC most experts advised getting a male, but I went against their advice by getting Doodle. Since then I have had two more females and have obviously been very happy with them. However, I can tell that this pup is very much into me and is quite the Momma's boy already. We have a very solid bond. I think many would claim that is due to his gender. I don't know, but I won't hesitate to get another male if I feel that, as in Awesome's case, the male pup is the best choice.

NG: You routinely show four very different dogs, and sometimes more at weekend trials. How do you manage to keep it all together with the assortment of techniques and commands, and do you have any tips for handlers of multiple dogs?

LM: I try to work every dog the same—at one point in a course I may plan a different handling maneuver for a slow dog vs. a fast one—but I run them the same. If I am running someone else's dog, I use *Come!* and appropriate body positioning to maneuver it around the course. I don't care what the dog's vocabulary is, I guarantee you can successfully run a course by just pointing the dog in the right direction with a *Come!* command. This simplifies changing from dog to dog, because you don't have to change your style with each dog. I expect each dog to work for me, my way. I may have to adapt to the inevitable differences between the dogs' responses on the course, but that is easier than planning several different runs during the walk-through.

NG: Could you pick out one major handling error we competitors make which prevents us from being more successful with our dogs?

LM: Many handlers err by expecting the dog to do all of the work. Dog agility is a team sport. It is the handler's job to get out there and participate; the success of the run depends on the handler. It is the handler's job to tell the dog where to go, what to do and how to do it. Competitors need to realize this and not be so quick to blame the dog. Get out there, work with your dog to put in the best performance that the two of you are capable of, and I guarantee even if you don't bring home blue ribbons, you *will* be successful.

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Monica Percival

NG: Is there any one individual responsible for immersing you so heavily in the sport of agility?

MP: Julie Daniels. I had just bought an English Springer pup with the intention of doing obedience. The breeder recommended Julie. I called and got Julie's machine with a message saying she was starting agility classes, but not obedience. I'd never heard of agility so I did obedience elsewhere. That fall my instructor took a break and I had nothing to do. I remembered the agility classes and called to find out more. I ended up being one of Julie's first agility students. Her enthusiasm for the sport was contagious, and I caught the agility bug. Later, Julie introduced me to the New England Agility Team and asked me to assist her with teaching agility at Camp Gone to the Dogs. She also got me interested in designing agility obstacles that were really tailored for instructing.

NG: What about the sport has made it so attractive to you?

MP: I love team sports and I love dogs. Agility offers me a team sport that I can play with my dogs! I love that the challenge changes on every course I run. Also, having to think quickly on your feet so that you can adapt and respond to your dog's every move on course is very exciting. When you do it right (or even mostly right!), it's exhilarating!

NG: Your Border Collie Lazer is one of the fastest dogs in the U.S. Standing on the outside looking in, many would desire to have a dog with that much drive, speed, and enthusiasm. What problems come along with that intensity?

MP: Problems... this is only a 72-page issue! Accuracy, control, and flattening over jumps are major problems. Lazer is like a race car driver who thrives on the sheer thrill of speed. He just wants to GO! For example, if I don't intervene, he will weave so hard and fast that he can bounce off a pole and miss the next one. One danger of having a dog that's so "self-driven" and intense is that it's easy for agility to become self-rewarding to the dog. If you don't teach basic control and establish a good working relationship *before* you introduce the dog to agility, you can get yourself in big trouble as I did. Lazer learned that agility was fun before he learned about working *with* me. The result was a dog that thought he didn't need me on course. He could please himself quite nicely by taking obstacles on his own at 90 mph. We "argued" a lot on course; both of us wanted to play the game a different way. After missing every contact at Fairhill in 1994 and spending the weekend trying to "steer" him from half a ring behind, I knew something had to change.

First I worked on our relationship. Using a suggestion from someone who trains service dogs, I put Lazer on a short lead and tied him to my waist. For two weeks we went everywhere together. Afterwards, I kept treats in drawers all over the house and rewarded him whenever he came to see what I was doing. Following me and interacting with me was strongly encouraged. Toys were only brought out for play when it was *my* idea. Access to all good things was only through Mom!

Next I had to convince him to let me pilot our team on course. I got to take some herding lessons with Lazer's breeder, who unknowingly gave me the solution. Lazer loved sheep as much as agility, and was just as wild! My regular instructor had me running after Lazer, flailing my arms, and shouting *Lie Down!* to try to control him—but I always felt like Lazer was the one in control. Lazer's breeder taught me that instead of fighting and chasing the dog, step through the flock and break the dog's contact with the sheep. As long as you keep yourself between dog and sheep, you control the dog's access to what he wants—the sheep. When the dog does what you want, you step back and give him the sheep—the reward! It made perfect sense to apply this concept to access to the agility obstacles. If Lazer chose to do something his way instead of the way I had trained him, we left the course; no fighting or yelling. Our off-courses quickly diminished as did other accuracy problems.

NG: What kind of training do you do to keep Lazer "reined in" and under control?

In training, we work tight sequences with me being close to him. I ask him to "check in" before performing an obstacle. If he doesn't check in, and takes an obstacle on his own, the game stops. If, for example, he's taking a jump in a straight line series but he hears no command for the next jump, I expect him to turn off the jump and find me. While this has improved accuracy, it does increase the risk of a refusal if my timing is off. He can be heading at the right obstacle and if I don't verbally confirm that it's the correct obstacle, he will turn off at the last second.

In the ring, I don't let him just rip at full speed for 20 obstacles. I treat the course as three or four separate groups of obstacles and throw in recalls between groups. If there's a long transition between obstacles, I call him back to me and have him run next to me as in Snooker.

NG: Have you joined the growing crowd of handlers using clickers for agility?

MP: I don't use them a lot, but I have found them very useful for several things in agility—particularly for changing an old behavior. I use the clicker as a way of "marking" the new behavior I want. For example, on the A-frame contact Lazer was waiting at the next-to-last slat and I wanted him stopping at the *last* slat. I'd been using the clicker for trick training and decided to try it with the A-frame. When he stopped too high, I said nothing. I waited for him to creep down little by little, and when he hit the last slat, I clicked. After several repetitions; his attitude was "Oh, that's what you wanted!" I have also been very successful in using the clicker and a Plexiglas target to teach distance work (no food on the target). I'm hoping I'll have time to write an article this winter!

NG: Has your technique for teaching the contacts changed in the past couple years?

MP: I changed my training method about three years ago. I taught my Springers to run up and down contacts, giving a treat as they hit the down yellow. I taught an *Easy!* away from obstacles, and if the dog was going too fast I used this command on the downside. This was effective with the Springers as long as I was there to manage performance. It worked with Lazer for awhile. Then contacts became a battle—me growling in his face all the way down and *maybe* he hit it. After a Sharon Nelson seminar, I decided to train him to stop in the down contact and wait for a release command. I used a ball for this. First I placed the ball a few feet away from the bottom contact. If Lazer stopped in the zone, I released him to the ball. If he didn't stop, I put him back on the contact, praised him there, then released him—no ball—and tried again. Later I would throw the ball *as* he descended. The faster he got to the bottom of the zone and waited, the faster I would release him to the ball.

In the ring, going to the next obstacle was the reward for successful contact performance. If he didn't wait for a release, I picked him up, thanked the judge, and left the ring. People thought I was crazy for leaving since he often hit the contact before he left the obstacle. But the job I trained him to do was *not* to hit the contact, but to run to the end of the ramp and wait for release. If I let him leave one contact without a release—even if he hit it—he would leave the next contact from a little higher up, and so on until he was soon blowing contacts again. I feel strongly that to solve a contact problem, you have to be consistent 200% of the time. If you let the dog do a sloppy contact in the ring, you'll get sloppier and sloppier contacts until you finally train the dog that you're willing to accept a different performance in the ring than in training. Dogs don't just become "ring-wise"; we train them to be ring-wise! The only contact Lazer has missed in three years is when I was trying to win a Gamblers class, your BC Scud was the dog to beat, and I released Lazer when I thought he had a foot in the zone.

NG: If you were starting a new puppy tomorrow, what would you concentrate on first?

Relationship, control, and work ethic. My Springers taught me that you have to build a “work ethic” in most dogs. With a new pup, I play lots of games *away* from the agility field to teach the pup how to “work for a living” and enjoy it! For pups who have a built-in work drive, these games are focused on control and teaching the dog to work *with me*. A pup won’t meet a real agility obstacle until he has many basic skills—Wait, Come, Easy, Sit, Down, Go, Look Back, Left, Right, and Heel—and can work off-lead. Once I teach obstacle performance it’s awhile before the dog does sequencing. When I do start sequencing, I work on lots of turns as well as sendaways. I want the dog to learn from day one that turning is as fun as going straight. Too many green dogs only learn how to go in straight lines. This is fine in novice classes, but when the courses get more complex I see many dogs shut down. Very often the dog sees a turn away from an obstacle in front of them as a correction.

NG: How is agility changing in the U.S.? Are we in any way changed by being able to send teams to compete in Europe?

MP: At the top level I think we’ll start seeing more and more very physical handling. I also think we will see more and more BCs. However, “down in the trenches” I think that agility will not change a whole lot. The nice thing about the sport in this country is that you don’t have to be a 22-year-old male who can wear spandex pants and run fast to have fun and succeed—and, you don’t have to have a BC or a Sheltie.

NG: What advice can you give to a handler who is having trouble associated with the speed of their canine partners?

Don’t race the dog; don’t fight with the dog; don’t chase the dog—the dog will always win. Teach the dog to “check in” and work *with you*. Don’t be afraid of the speed. Find an instructor who can teach you how to “channel” the speed so that *you* can control what happens on course. The handler who enters the ring with a frightened look, desperately clutching the dog so that he won’t get away, is in trouble from the start. Likewise for the handler who walks backwards onto the course, begging the dog to stay. The handler must feel that he’s the team captain and can direct the dog. When I used to run Lazer, I felt like I was on the inside of a pinball machine—the ball just wildly bounced around out of my control. Now I go out with the attitude that I can make the ball bounce the way I want—I can make things happen. If I see that one of my students is looking scared before a run, I remind them—“Who’s driving?” I keep asking them the question until the answer is “I AM!!!”.

NG: Do you think you have a handling style or philosophy you try to impart to students when you teach?

I try to teach people how to work with their dogs in a positive, stress-free manner. I want my students to look to themselves first when an error occurs on course. Too many people are too quick to blame the dog. I believe that *all* dogs and handlers can enjoy agility at *some* level and I try to help handlers develop a training plan and handling style that fits their particular abilities, attitudes, lifestyle, and goals.

NG: Do you have any one tip you could give readers today that would help them find that “Clean Run” they need tomorrow?

Approach every exercise you run in training as if you only had one shot at it—putting pressure on yourself in training is the only way to prepare yourself for the pressure that most people feel in the ring. Practice running full courses as well as sequences. I see many handlers who have brilliant moments on the course, but aren’t able to hold everything together for 20 obstacles. Just as we have to build up the dog’s ability to focus and perform longer sequences, we have to build up our own ability to focus and handle longer and longer sequences. ☐

Handler: Monica Percival

Home: Turners Falls, Massachusetts

Occupation: Dog Trainer and Desktop Publisher; former Technical Writer and Technical Documentation Manager

Current Dogs:

Boomer, AD, 2-year-old All-American.

Lazer, ADCH, 4-year-old BC. 1996 USDAA Top Ten: All lists. USDAA Grand Prix Semi-Finalist 1995-1997. USDAA Grand Prix Regional Placements: 3rd 1995, 2nd 1996, and 1st 1997. USDAA National Nonstandard class placements: Gamblers 1st 1995 and 4th 1996; Strategic Pairs 3rd 1995 and 5th 1996; Time Gamble 2nd 1997; Standard Agility 7th 1997; Steeplechase 2nd 1997. USDAA DAM Championship placements: Gamblers 1st 1995, 1997, 2nd 1996, and 3rd 1994; Snooker 2nd 1997 and 4th 1996; Jumpers 2nd 1997; Team Relay 4th 1997; Steeplechase 1st 1997. Two time winner of Darlene Woz’s infamous Tunnel Crossover Game.

Maginna’s Making Waves Splash, AAD, TT and 60% breed champion, a.k.a. Splash, 7-year-old English Springer Spaniel. USDAA Grand Prix Regional Winner: 1993.

Former Dogs:

Hard-Headed Hannah, AAD, CD, TT. 8 1/2-year-old English Springer Spaniel. USDAA Grand Prix Regional Winner: 1991 and 1992. USDAA Grand Prix Semi-Finalist 1991-1993.

Jessa, All-American, died in 1996 at the age of 16 years.

Your next dog: Another Border Collie. I’ve loved the breed ever since I first met Hazel and J.C. Thompson’s BCs in 1991. The dogs’ demeanor and interaction with their handlers outside the ring impressed me even more than their performances inside the ring.

First agility show: New England Agility Team’s 1990 USDAA Grand Prix Regional Qualifier in Durham, New Hampshire.

First clean run: October 1990 with my Springer Hannah at BB Agility Center in Danville, Virginia.

Biggest agility moment: Finishing Lazer’s ADCH in September. It was the culmination of a lot of dreams and hard work, and the people I care about most were all there to share it with me. No matter how many titles I may be lucky enough to put on future dogs, this one will always be the sweetest. It was one of those magical agility days—Lazer and I qualified in and won every class.

What I like most about agility: It’s a tie between sitting under a tent by the ring on a beautiful day, watching dogs run and talking with friends; and that incredible feeling when you and the dog execute everything on the course in perfect harmony.

Biggest influence: Julie Daniels.

Favorite show or venue: Promised Land’s DAM event in Fryeburg, Maine. Despite the fact that it’s one of the hottest events of the year (and the bugs are bad!), I always look forward to leaving for the show early on Friday and spending the day playing with the dogs in the Saco River. The host club is also one of the nicest around!

Favorite class: Anything but Jumpers! I have a horrible time remembering Jumpers courses—they always look so different when there are no longer sixty people standing around the jumps!