

# Review:

## In FOCUS:

A book by Deborah Jones, Ph.D. and Judy Keller

By Martha Faulk

Books to be reviewed for *Clean Run* always seem to arrive just as I need help with specific training problems. *In FOCUS: Developing a Working Relationship with Your Performance Dog* is such a book, chock-full of useful advice for the less-than-perfect agility team. I'm certain there *are* some nearly perfect agility teams out there—I see them having great success at national and international events. But for most of us, a book with a workable program for improving the relationship with our performance dogs is a valuable contribution to our training library.

Authors Deborah Jones, a Ph.D. animal behaviorist, and Judy Keller, three-time competitor for the AKC/USA Agility World Team, have compiled a concise but thorough guide to solving training and performance problems. The “FOCUS” in the title means Fun, Obedience, and Consistency leading to Unbelievable Success. Jones and Keller divide the universe of performance dogs into two categories, “Dogs that aren’t having any or enough fun,” and “Dogs that are having too much fun.” You’ll recognize the behaviors described below from your observations of performance dogs in training and at trials. Here is how they summarize the characteristics of the dogs.

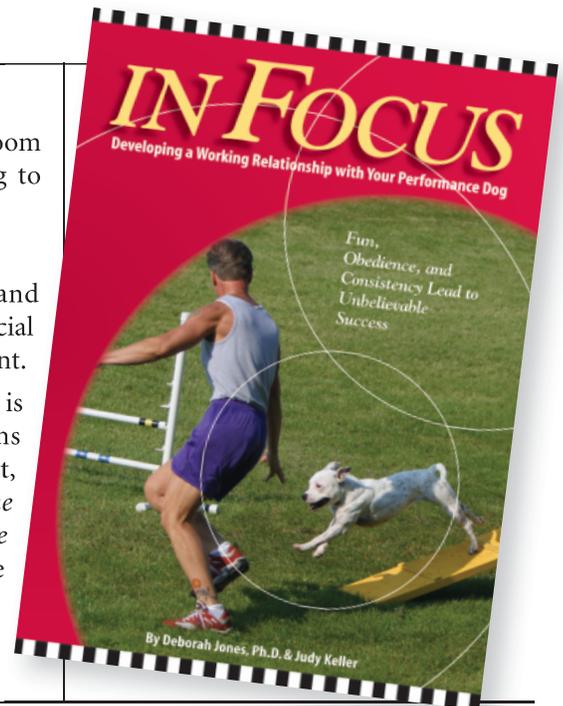
*Dogs not having enough fun* (ruling out any physical problems):

- They perform agility slowly, sometimes not making standard course times.
- They seem distracted and disinterested while doing agility.
- They sniff, scratch, and/or yawn before and during agility.

*Dogs having too much fun:*

- They eagerly and enthusiastically zoom around the course, not listening to direction.
- They choose their own course.
- They visit the judge, stewards, and spectators, viewing agility as a social event provided for their amusement.

Jones and Keller believe that there is one answer for all of the problems identified above: more training. But, they emphasize that *the causes of the problems and the solutions required are different*. To illustrate how they have overcome the behavioral tendencies just described, the authors use their own dogs as examples of the two



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attitudes. Jones’s Papillon, Copper, although very obedient, is a dog who easily becomes stressed and worried. Copper is not having enough fun. Keller’s Sheltie, Sabre, is described as a dog with a lot of speed who prefers to run around the ring rather than to work with his handler. Sabre is a dog having too much fun.

In an early chapter, the authors explain “How to Read Your Dog” and present helpful “dos and ‘don’ts” for training both types of attitude problems. They suggest, for example, *don’t* “cheerlead” your not-having-enough-fun dog, but *do* stop before your dog wants to. For the having-too-much-fun dog, they recommend that you *don’t* ignore the problem but that you *do* start an obedience program based on positive reinforcement. This chapter

offers a number of other useful tips for the handler.

In the chapter titled “Foundation Focus,” the authors describe operant conditioning and emphasize the importance of a behavioral marker to guide the dog. They outline the steps for getting desired behaviors with a clicker and illustrate the training with step-by-step photos. They explain further that the FOCUS program is divided into three distinct steps which condition the dog and develop involvement with the handler.

Step One is about controlling the Fun, which Jones and Keller describe as “using the dog’s desire to work as the reward for exhibiting control” rather than “constant drilling and suppressing all of the dog’s natural enthusiasm.” Dogs that are

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extrinsically or externally motivated will need more work on the FUN aspect of the program. These dogs may have a soft temperament and will need help from the trainer to raise their confidence level and make agility more fun. Jones says her dog Copper fits into this category.

But what if your dog is already highly motivated, like many herding breeds? Keller's Sheltie, Sabre, whose story appears throughout this book, exemplifies the challenges of how to train the having-too-much-fun dog. Although this type of dog may require little or no external reinforcement, the authors warn that even internally motivated dogs need a trainer who controls the fun and knows how to keep the dog's attention.

Step Two is the Obedience section. The authors are careful to point out that obedience is not a bad word for agility handlers. They define it to mean, "the use of positively based, highly motivational methods to teach the behaviors, skills, and abilities necessary for successful agility performance." If we do our foundation work in obedience first, they explain, we'll have a dog that's responsive to cues and signals. Dogs that are out of control obviously need more obedience work, but even sensitive dogs require an obedience foundation to perform to their potential in agility. This section sets out various steps toward achieving both stationary and moving control of the dog, as well as advice about adding verbal cues and signals.

Step Three means Consistency. Sabre's development as an agility dog provides the example in this section. If he listened and responded correctly to Keller's commands, he not only got to continue playing agility, but he also got extra reinforcers such as a jackpot or playing ball at the end of his run. This chapter emphasizes the importance of following through on your training by maintaining criteria and contingencies. The authors suggest developing and maintaining performance rituals to help prepare you and your dog for competition.

They also alert us to expect regression as a natural part of the training process. I appreciated the suggestions for working through regression phases and found them a welcome addition to the training program. The remainder of the FOCUS program—Unbelievable Success—will come through our commitment and determination to improve our relationship with our dog.

Overall, *In FOCUS* is a nice mix of behavioral theory and practical advice for improving your relationship with your dog. Within each step of the program there are "Training Focus" sections giving more in-depth explanation on subjects such as "shifting criteria" and "varying the reinforcement schedule." Illustrative step-by-step photos accompany the text. And finally, the authors' experience with their own dogs makes the training procedures seem realistic and worthwhile. I have one dog of each type, so I'm starting my program right now. I'm looking forward to helping each dog have just the right amount of fun and some "Unbelievable Success" with both of them. 🐾

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