

History of Agility, Part 3

By Brenna Fender

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, American agility was a force driven by two organizations: the National Club for Dog Agility (NCDA) and the United States Agility Association (USDAA). As America's love for the sport grew, so did its desire for more options and opportunities.

North American Dog Agility Council



Sharon Nelson, founder of NADAC. Courtesy Sharon Nelson

In 1993, a new agility group was formed by Sharon Nelson. Nelson was a member of the first USDAA World Team, and had some new ideas for the sport. At first the new organization, known as the North American Dog Agility Council (NADAC), seemed similar to USDAA in its classes and regulations. There were a few differences: NADAC had no Pairs or Snooker classes, spread jumps were not used, and jump

heights were slightly different. But USDAA and NADAC were comparable forms of agility, especially when contrasted with NCDA's unique equipment and focus on accuracy over speed.

NADAC held its first trial July 3, 1993 at Frontier Park in Graham, Washington, an idyllic setting for the birth of a new agility association. "Frontier Park is a great spot for agility," says Jo Ann Mather, who attended NADAC's debut. Kay Jackson's Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Britches, was the first dog to step up to the line. Many exhibitors witnessed Britches' historic clean run. "The competitors came from all over Washington, Idaho, Oregon, and California," Jackson says. "We didn't think anything of traveling several hours or days to a trial back then."

The second day of the trial produced the first NADAC titled dog: Sharon and Amanda Nelson's Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Sunny. Because handlers were allowed to enter their dogs at their equivalent levels in USDAA, Sunny earned an Elite Regular Agility (EAC) title.

Also in attendance was Barb Benner, who would later attain significant achievements in NADAC and other registries. Benner noticed that at this first trial there were more dogs jumping 24" than any other height. Perhaps that reflected an appreciation of the opportunity. Benner says, "It was such a novelty to be jumping our dogs at 24" instead of the 30" that they had to jump in USDAA!"

Sharon Nelson stressed the historical importance of this first trial, but some exhibitors dismissed it. "I think most of us had no idea that this new thing would ever really take off," says Mather. "It was just another place to run our dogs," she adds.

Yet, Nelson had specific plans for her organization. NADAC stated a goal of creating a "fast, safe, and enjoyable form of the sport of dog agility." Also, NADAC declared a focus on having dog and handler work as a "smoothly functioning team." Doing so meant omitting course designs and games that impaired flow.

As Nelson might have predicted, NADAC grew successfully and quickly. By July 1, 1995, the organization had crowned its first champion. Benner and her Belgian Malinois, Lexy, earned the first standard NADAC Agility Trial Championship—the NATCH. This title required earning points from three Elite level classes: Standard, Jumpers, and Gamblers. That same year on October 13, NADAC hosted its first National Championship in Olympia, Washington. Exhibitor Carol Hibbard was impressed by the awards at that first Championship. "There were more fantastic trophies and huge ribbons than most of us had ever seen," she says. The NADAC Nationals later became known as a test of endurance, as dogs and handlers completed courses of 30-plus obstacles.



Amanda Nelson and her Corgi Sunny earned the first NADAC agility title in 1993 (with her mother Sharon Nelson). Courtesy Amanda Nelson



Barb Benner and Lexy of Spokane, Washington earned the first NADAC NATCH title. Courtesy Barb Benner

"It was such a novelty to be jumping our dogs at 24" instead of the 30" that they had to jump in USDAA!"

- Barb Benner

1993-2004

By the late '90s, NADAC had an active Junior handler program. Juniors run the same courses as handlers in the Standard division but are given 10% more time in Regular and Jumpers. At first they were placed with the Standard dogs, but later they were moved into a separate division. On August 1, 1999, Amanda Nelson earned the first Junior NATCH title with her Corgi, Sunny.

In the 21st century, NADAC has become known for rule changes focused largely on dog safety. NADAC established use of displaceable tires, contact obstacles without slats, and jump height exemptions. A flexible trial atmosphere, two Standard runs a day, and the addition of games like Tunnelers, Weavers, and Touch N Go also differentiated NADAC from other American agility organizations, including its early counterpart, USDAA.

Having unique classes may have increased NADAC's popularity, spreading its trials into many states. Exhibitors seem to love the games, and Tunnelers has made many an agility competitor into a NADAC junkie. Vizsla owner Hope Tiesman says of her first Tunnelers run, "It was fun, fast, and I was hooked!"

NADAC's future will bring continued changes designed to better the organization and to increase dog safety. By August 1, 2004 NADAC requires an A-frame with no slats and a 5' apex. The Gamblers class is also changing. Previously similar to the USDAA's style of gathering points during an opening period and requiring distance work in the closing, NADAC's new take on Gamblers is to combine it with the Standard class. There will be no point-gathering period in which handlers create their own possibly awkward course. A Standard/Gamblers combined run will allow a handler to qualify in both classes in the same run if distance handling is used for the "gamble" portion of the course. NADAC officials expect to see increased flow on Gamblers courses, and a savings of time during today's crowded trials. NADAC exhibitors expect more fun and unique challenges from this organization in the future.

American Kennel Club

The American Kennel Club (AKC) developed a casual interest in agility as the sport was picking up speed in the late 80s. As early as 1988, AKC obedience trials occasionally included a demonstration of NCDA agility.

Then-director of obedience Bob Squires expressed some concerns about the sport. Because agility is space- and labor-intensive, Squires was uncertain that AKC clubs would be able to become involved. It wasn't until August 1993 that the first advisory committee met to consider AKC adoption of agility as a performance event.

At that first committee meeting, the AKC asked Sharon Anderson to serve as their agility consultant and eventually as Director of Agility. Anderson began her agility career in NCDA, but she then became enamored with USDAA. She formed the Minnesota Agility Club, and later won a USDAA regional event and competed at the finals. Her experiences in agility made her an important part of the AKC's development as an eventual agility powerhouse.

The AKC's program was created by people involved in both USDAA and NCDA. Former AKC Vice President Bob McKowen said that the AKC's program would be unique, and not based on any existing form of the sport. As part of this originality, Anderson says, "We made sure we avoided any conflict of title designations."

The AKC started with four jump height classes. Obedience trials customize jump heights to each dog, so the concept of having dogs of different heights jumping within a class was unique to agility for AKC. The first divisions created were 8", 12", 18", and 24". In 1996, the program was expanded to include five heights: 8", 12", 16", 20" and 24".

The first AKC trial was held in 1994 in a fully-sodded Astrohall in Houston, Texas. Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake



Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake



Rebecca Raths O'Sell and her Corgi, Colby, at the AKC's second agility trial, where they earned the first NA title. Courtesy Rebecca Raths O'Sell

The first licensed AKC agility trial was hosted by Flash Paws Agility Club at the Houston Astrodome in Texas on August 13, 1994. Judge John Loomis presided over the 181 dogs entered. Like most AKC events at the time, only one titling run was offered per dog. The Standard class was divided into three levels of difficulty: Novice, Open, and Excellent. Exhibitors could enter based on their previous agility experience in other organizations or they could choose to compete at the Novice level. The AKC grandfathered dogs in to higher levels for some time, although it was confusing for AKC operations.

Anderson and McKowen were among the spectators, exhibitors, and AKC officials at that first event. The first trial looked a bit different from today's events. "There were many more decorated wings at that time than you see now," Anderson says. Trialing in those early days could bring a dog face-to-face with a cutout of a cow, wolf, or other creature holding up jump bars. Some wings were large barrels and chute entrances were often decorated. NCDA obstacles like the sway bridge and window jump were also used, although they were later removed by advisory committees.

The second AKC agility trial produced the first title. On August 26, 1994, Rebecca Rath's O'Sell and her Corgi, Colby, earned the Novice Agility title (NA) at the St. Croix Kennel Club in Minnesota.

The early years of AKC agility were a time of camaraderie. One-ring trials offered exhibitors plenty of opportunities to get to know each other. Many of them traveled from afar for a single run each day, so there was time to visit, sightsee, and play with their dogs. Friendships were formed. AKC judge Kelli Carter says, "I had one of those really cheap \$20 dining canopies at my first agility trial in the fall of 1995. Of course, one of the typical Florida storms came up midway through the day and my little canopy was a total mess. Right next to me was Barb Budnar and her tent was still standing. She invited me under and we have been friends ever since."

In 1996, the AKC was asked to provide a team to represent the U.S. at the FCI Agility World Championship in Morges, Switzerland. A large dog team was sent to that event on October 4, and they finished in ninth place overall. Later AKC/USA World Teams included small- and medium-sized dogs as well, and earned several medals for their performances.

In November of that same year, the AKC held their first National Championship in Tulsa, Oklahoma. With 220 dogs entered,

judges Darlene Woz, Patty Drom and Janet Gauntt chose one overall winner based on yards per second: Dixie Nobel and her Shetland Sheepdog, Delta. Exhibitors were awed by the experience. Bev Thorsteinson, who attended with her Papillion, says, "The atmosphere was electric, the 'Macarena' was playing constantly, everyone was laughing and happy, and oh, such stellar runs we saw, with lots of risk taking."

Interest in having more than one run a day was high, so the AKC auditioned two non-titling classes. Call-Direct-Send (CDS) required distance work reminiscent of the USDAA's Gamblers class. Jumpers with Weaves (JWW) involved fewer obstacles and faster times. In 1998 the AKC responded to comments from exhibitors and added JWW as a second titling class. Handlers continued to enjoy multiple agility runs, regardless of titles, and so at the Nationals that same year, the ISC/State Team Tournament was held for the first time.

The AKC introduced an agility championship title in February of 1999. The Master Agility Champion (MACH) title involved both speed and consistency. Dogs were required to qualify in both Excellent B level classes on the same day. Twenty of these "double Qs" were needed and 750 speed points, to complete the title. On June 26, 1999, Marquand Cheek and his Shetland Sheepdog, Wyatt, earned the first MACH.

Over the years, the AKC has increased the difficulty of its program by reducing the number of faults allowed qualifying runs at the Excellent level. At first, dogs running in Excellent could have wrong-course or table faults and still earn a qualifying score. Now, rules allow only time faults for Excellent A teams, dogs in the B classes must be perfect and weave poles have been added to Novice Standard courses.

The future of AKC agility looks bright. When the organization first started playing the agility game in 1994, there were 23 AKC agility trials held, totaling 2,000 entries. By the time Jumpers with Weaves was added in 1998, there were 539 trials and 143,828 entries. In 2003, AKC clubs hosted 1,379 trials with 557,750 entries! What will 2004 bring?



Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake



Stuart Mah, Jane Simmons-Moake, Pati Hatfield-Mah, Nancy Gyes, and Karen Moureaux are selected for the first AKC/USA World Team and travel to Morges, Switzerland in April 1996 for the FCI Agility World Championships.



Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake

The Road Ahead

New agility organizations are forming. Canine Performance Events, Teacup Dog Agility Association, and Just for Fun agility are groups that enjoy popularity in different parts of the country. Agility in one of its forms is a sport for nearly every breed—or mix—of dog. The U.S. is unique in having so many different expressions of the same game.

Early agility exhibitors were truly pioneers of the sport. There were no big-name trainers, websites, books, or videos, and no real instructions on how to play this game. Now entire schools of thought on reinforcement, correction, and handling have been promoted. The first exhibitors had to stumble through—no shortcuts. Bud Houston, who went from agility pioneer to instructor and judge, says of the early days, “We made every training mistake imaginable. Today’s agility competitors benefit from every mistake we made and hopefully don’t have to repeat them.” 🐾

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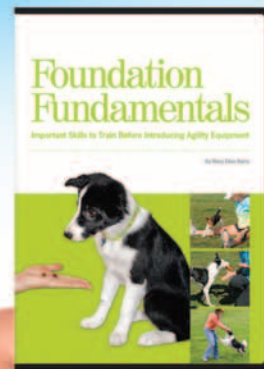


Jen Pinder and Static are the first U.S. dog and handler team to compete at Crufts. Courtesy Sharon Anderson

Marq Cheek of California and his Sheltie Wyatt make history by earning the first AKC MACH title. Courtesy Marq Cheek



Fabulous Fun!

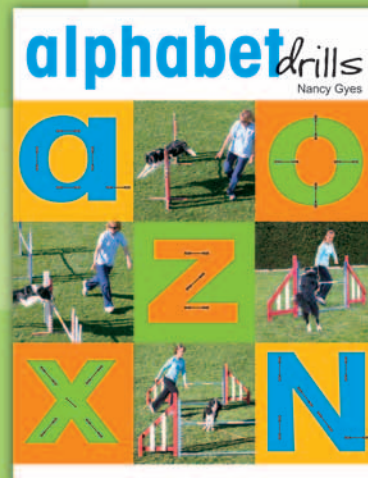


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