



He's Not a Natural... So What!

Training the "Unusual" Breed

By Moe Strenfel

When I think of an unusual breed as it pertains to the sport of dog agility, I think of any breed that is not “predominant” by sheer numbers. I also think of one that is not necessarily built for speed or turning ability or that may not have a genetic predisposition to work with humans. Take for instance a Clumber Spaniel. This breed was genetically

designed to push through heavy brush for hunting, not for blinding speed and turning ability. A Clumber’s mental attitude is coined as being gentle, unexcitable, and independent.

Does that mean a Clumber or any other unusual breed can’t do well in agility? Of course not, but it does mean that the trainer needs to be acutely aware of both physical and mental characteristics that

may present challenges along the way of making an agility champion.

Each breed is designed for a purpose, whether it be herding, guarding, hunting, or being a companion. They will have temperamental tendencies, but with some guidance, a trainer can turn on the agility star inside.

Mental Challenges: It’s Not All in His Head

Go Operant

Any dog can be a success if he is given the right tools for learning. Using operant conditioning will make your dog an Einstein in a short time. Okay, I lied... *you*, the human part of the team with the bigger brain, has to know how to apply operant conditioning to help the genius in your dog bloom. So do it now, without delay. Take that clicker class, read that book, buy that DVD, and hone your skills so your unusual breed can flourish in a performance sport.



Plan and Organize Before You Train

Don’t waste your dog’s time and focus by standing around chatting with others, setting up equipment, or fumbling for treats. Get everything ready ahead of time. Set up the equipment, get your targeting materials out, cut up your treats. Walk the sequence until you feel like you could do it in your sleep. And only then get your dog out to practice.

Less Is More

Practice for only short time periods. Practice for two minutes or less and work fast and furiously. Then stop and play, practice some tricks, or take a walk together. If *you* need to practice more, do so without your dog so you can practice those handling maneuvers until your footwork is perfect. Remember that you may only get one chance if your dog can only tolerate a couple of repetitions of an exercise. So get yourself trained first before bringing out the real student, your dog.



Reinforce, Reinforce, and Just in Case You Didn’t Hear It, Reinforce!

Dogs that must make a hard physical effort on obstacles (such as a large dog crawling through a tunnel or a small dog climbing an A-frame) must have a high rate of reinforcement while learning that obstacle, and then intermittently throughout their agility careers. Dogs that are nervous and fearful need high-value reinforcers, while being kept in subthreshold situations (see *Control Unleashed* by Leslie McDevitt). Dogs that lack focus (not connected to fear) need to be on a “Nothing in Life is Free” program (see *Ruff Love* by Susan Garrett).

Be a Kid Again

If you want to know how to play with a dog, watch a child play with her pooch. Kids wrestle, tease, pounce, push, make funny noises, laugh, are just downright silly, and incite “Chase the Human” games. Awaken your inner child and let her come out to play with your dog! Get down on the floor and play. Wrestle, tease, pounce, push, and make funny noises. Play Hide and Seek (with the dog finding you), Duck Duck Goose (tap the dog on the head and take off running) or Keep Away (tease with an exciting toy or food treat until your dog becomes wild).



Is your dog a terrier or a sighthound? Incite play by tying a long line on a fuzzy toy and dragging it behind you as you run around wildly. Can't run? Then swing it around you! Try a rabbit fur toy. One Bichon owner told me she took cat hair off a brush and bagged it with her dog's tug toy. The toy suddenly took on high value which was heightened because the cat-scented toy only came out in conjunction with agility training. After each training session, the toy was rebagged with the cat hair to keep it fresh and interesting!



Play with Your Food

Do you have a food hound instead of a toy hound? Then find special foods that your dog will receive only while doing agility such as steak, liverwurst, or meatballs, and make the food *move*. Roll the meatball or cheese ball out in front of your dog as a reinforcer for moving faster. Let him chase it down and eat it. Before he has a chance to sniff and become distracted, run off, and as he catches you, roll another out in front of you. Try tossing your food treats up in the air so he has to leap up to catch them. If he misses any, quickly grab them up, tease him, and run off to try tossing them up again. Don't point out any treat your dog missed on the ground as this will encourage foraging and sniffing. Instead, grab it up, tease your dog with it and run off again. Reinforce your dog for coming away with you instead of sniffing.



Control Your Emotions

Many dogs, not just unusual breeds, tend to be sensitive to their handler's emotions. When mistakes are made, laugh, play, and resolve to do better, but control any frustration or anger that you feel. Do not sigh, yell, or let your body look disappointed. When my Whippet makes an error I laugh and play and get him even more pumped up and then I try the exercise again. The only way he knows he made an error was because a reinforcer such as food or a toy was not given immediately following the exercise. This way, he never wilted because of an emotional outburst from me. Keep it fun, fun, fun.

Let Go of Breed Barriers

Let go of any preconceived notions that your breed is just plain "stubborn" or you can't teach a lead-out because your dog is "that" breed. Behavior is behavior and all of it can be changed to a certain degree. Instead of accepting barriers, become a better trainer so your dog can outshine any other of the same breed.

People told me I would never get a reliable recall from my Whippet, Scorch, because he is a sighthound, and therefore, he must always be on leash—forever! If I had believed what all those breed people said I never

would have tried to train a recall. I used the principles of operant conditioning and at an early age, Scorch had the best recall out of all my dogs, even in the midst of a mad chase after ground squirrels.

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Marshmallows Need Understanding

Dogs that are soft natured, easily frightened, or pain sensitive must be handled appropriately so they can flourish. Scorch had several significant traumatic events surrounding agility that reminded me of how any dog can react differently to upsetting events.

Whippets and other sighthounds are an odd combination of power, speed, and fragility. Their skin is paper thin and tears extremely easily. That also means they bruise easily. When Scorch was quite young, before he ever competed, a dog chased him at a trial and nipped him, tearing a hole in his side. After that he was constantly on guard, looking for any other dogs that appeared as though they might lunge at him. I worked through a counter conditioning program with Scorch, but it was still up to me to keep him safe at every trial. I watched carefully when taking him to and from the ring, always planning routes that took him away from boisterous dogs, and I had plenty of high-value treats on board. He learned to relax and just stay behind me when other teams approached us to chat.

If I had not taken his fears seriously and forced him to “face his ghosts,” as many traditional trainers would have insisted on, he would have never gotten better and would have easily spiraled downward. Dogs that are forced to perform while displaying fear are under huge amounts of stress. These dogs often start to leave the ring, refuse to



move at all, or do so very slowly.

In another incident, Scorch slipped in the barrel portion of a chute while going at a good clip at a rainy trial. He crashed into the side of it and screamed for a good 20 seconds. A crowd immediately surrounded him. As I helped him from the cloth, he saw all those faces peering at him. I did not give the crowd a second thought; my only concern was making sure he was not hurt. I had him examined immediately on the show grounds by a knowledgeable veterinarian and chiropractor. He seemed physically fine, but mentally he was not. As you probably predicted, he stopped performing the chute anywhere, whether at home or a trial. In a Standard class he would do the course very slowly in anticipation of the chute, get to the chute, refuse it or slowly do it, and then *race* (whew, what a relief) to

finish the rest of the course. Retraining the chute was not the biggest problem that resulted from this accident; I soon discovered that to him, crowds equaled *pain* and therefore fear.

When I finally helped Scorch from the chute cloth, the crowd that had surrounded him was murmuring their concerns. I had to work through his fear of crowds and that took much longer than retraining the actual chute itself. I enlisted the help of my students and organized them to stand in small clusters around different places on the field and talk very quietly. As Scorch got more comfortable with this, I had them talk more excitedly and then worked up to clapping and cheering. He still startles sometimes when people are close to the ring, but now he trusts me even more and follows my lead without fail, since I never overfaced him in training.



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Physical Challenges: It *Is* Hard

Accept Temperature Challenges

Many unusual breeds are sensitive to heat and cold. Learn to deal with all these challenges and set the stage for an optimum performance from your star in the ring. Learn how to keep cool or to retain the heat if that's what's necessary. Scorch was extremely sensitive to heat



and would require a cooling coat in temperatures that other dogs found mild. He wore the cool coat until literally seconds before his run. In cold weather, he turned into a wild man; so to prevent the loss of focus on me, he wore a jacket for warmth, which again, I kept on him until seconds before he ran. Part of his reward at the end of a run was to get back into his warm coat or sleeping sack. Brachycephalic (short-headed or broad-headed) breeds have problems in the heat and must be managed carefully, so take the time to research how to care for them properly so that agility remains fun for them.

If the dog's temperature extremes cannot be worked out, you may want to consider only trialing when temperatures are optimum for your team. Try trialing only one day instead of two or doing only morning classes when it's cooler.

Train to the Extreme

If your dog is broad chested, work with your teammate on walking, trotting, then running a narrow plank, 8" or 10" wide, placed on the ground. Compared to that, a regulation board of 12" seems wide. Then gradually raise the board up on cinder blocks and get the same behaviors. Teach your large dog to crawl under a chair or coffee table in preparation for tunnel work. If your tiny dog is fearful of other dogs, try teaching him to jump into your arms at the end of an exercise or run. If that same small dog is afraid of heights, start by clicker training him to jump up and walk along the back of a sofa, then maybe a low wall at the neighborhood par course. You get the basic idea.

Scorch was also very sensitive to "discomfort." Dropping into a down position on hard surfaces was really tough for him, so I could foresee that the pause table was going to be a problem. While he was still quite young, I taught a fast down on just about every surface I could think of including gravel and cement. I used high rates of reinforcement with high-value reinforcers and I trained when he was hungry. This prevented the table from ever becoming a nemesis.





Work that Body

Dogs that have to put forth more physical effort than other “naturally gifted” breeds need to be kept very fit, so that exertion for agility becomes easier. Take advantage of a canine physical therapist’s knowledge and set up an appointment to get exercises specifically for your dog’s challenges. Or buy some DVDs such as *Pilates for Pooches* by Sarah Johnson or *Get on the Ball* by Debbie Gross Sanders. Swim, hike, and train tricks for body awareness. Small dogs that are unfit have a very hard time climbing an A-frame, so it makes great sense to hike your dog up hills to build his and your physical condition. Scorch swims (yes, Whippets are good swimmers, but he only enjoys it when the water is above 78°), hikes, does balance work, and he even uses a treadmill to keep fit.

Take the Jenny Craig Challenge

Many dogs are overweight. No matter what your reason—“he must look this way because the breed ring demands it” or “he just seems so hungry all the time”—if you want your dog to be comfortable, healthier, and able to work hard, he must be at an optimal weight. This is especially important for small dogs where ounces can make a big difference. “Thin is in” is the motto for a performance dog, no matter what the breed. Remember that agility is about physical performance, not beauty.

A “one-style-fits-all” training program may not be effective for many unusual breeds due to certain physical features, so don’t be afraid to modify the “normal” training plan for agility.

Moe teaches agility and uses operant conditioning for both team members. She got involved in competitive agility 10 years ago and has put USDAA and AKC titles on four different breeds: Border Collie, Mini Aussie, Whippet, and Boxer. Her Whippet, Scorch, has earned both a MACH and ADCH and was the number one AKC agility Whippet for 2006 and 2007. Moe instructs for Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California (www.powerpawsagility.com) and lectured at the Clean Run Instructor Conference in 2007 and 2008. She is available for agility workshops, seminars, and video consultation. Moe can be reached by email at RxBehave@comcast.net.

Tipsy, Topsy, Turvy—Change the Plan!

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Tall, long-legged, deep-chested breeds have a hard time maintaining balance when performing a nose touch. For the A-frame, I taught Scorch nose targeting, but the first time he came at speed over a 5' A-frame and did a nose touch, he went into a handstand before he was able to right himself. His subsequent training sessions on the A-frame were very slow and careful. He had scared himself just that one time, but it was enough to change his behavior for a long time. I quickly recognized that his conformation and mental attitude required that I change what I had planned for his A-frame contact. I revised my training plan and moved to a modified running contact, which he seemed much more comfortable performing.

Don’t be afraid to research different methods to teach contact behaviors and those devilishly tricky weave poles. Or go find a trainer who has many tools in her toolbox so she can guide you in picking out more suitable agility behaviors to train your unusual breed.

Before Scorch, I had a Boxer that also had a hard time doing a nose touch and often would barely touch a target. What I discovered was her sagging lips often hit the target before her nose. That meant she was often pinching her lips when she tried to nose touch with force. Ouch! I discovered this by videotaping a training session with the camera set at ground level. So I went to a foot target with much more success.

I am now working Kyna, a young Border Collie that acts more like a Whippet. She is very pain sensitive (knocking a bar can cause her to hold her paw up for 10 minutes), she won’t sit on oak leaves (too prickly) or in wet grass (goodness, can you see her at a trial in the rain?), she can’t take repetition, and she is very sensitive to environmental changes. I am working my program for unusual breeds, calling her my Whippet in a BC suit. Is she progressing? Yes, but only because of my past experiences with my other unusual breeds. Thank you Scorch for those training lessons! 🐾