

Class is Sweeter...The Second Time Around

By: Faith K Gordon (as published in the Pinscher Patter, Dec 1996 and Mar 1997)

GO FIGURE! Wouldn't you know that the same week Sari and I are scheduled to start our long anticipated Agility Classes, we get the latest Pinscher Patter and while browsing through it, get smacked in the kisser with that awesome picture of Cathy Smith's "Pixie" in her (by now famous, and much talked about) agility jump photo. Our new role model! A picture like that is enough to give us agility beginners a case of low self-esteem. Fortunately, Cathy's attitude is "Been there, done that, and I'll help talk you through any problem areas." That is good to know, 'cause Agility Class here we come!

By the time you read this the Buffalo, NY area will probably be flooded out. Every time I start any kind of class, it RAINS.

Class' #1 Friday 13 Sept.: Of course, it is raining (pouring) as we scurry into the building for class, and I had to blow off a close friend and fellow exhibitor's Surprise 50th Birthday Party to make this class. First time I've been here for any classes. It is well lighted, with well padded bench type seats that came from some type of vehicles. Very comfortable and "dog friendly". I am squirming in my seat, and can't wait to start. But first we have to get the "first class" lecture from the instructor. While she is briefing us on the next 6 weeks, I take this opportunity to glance around at the other dogs in my beginner's class.

GULP! The largest is a Great Dane...the smallest is...you got it --Sari! Next up in size is a sweet Sheltie. OK! I am pumped! For three years I have been listening to my friends Butch and Doreen Redmond tell me about how they do the Agility Trials and demonstrations with their Min Pins. It is hard not to catch their enthusiasm. All right! Time to move into the working area. We are told that we will only go on 2 obstacles tonight, the "board walk" and the "short chute". In a class of 8, I am second last in line. The Great Dane is in front of us (naturally) and the Sheltie is last.

But wait...the first dog is afraid to climb the board and after several attempts they finally pickup the dog and place it on in the middle of the down board, and guide it to the bottom. This same scene is repeated for the rest of the dogs, up to and including the Great Dane. It's our turn now. The instructor turns to us and says, "It is always easier for small dogs, do you think she will do it?" I reply, "I won't know until I ask her." So with the instructor shuffling from one foot to another, anticipating a Min Pin revolt, we approach the narrow ramp, and I say

"Sari, get on this, OK?" ZIP! Up the board, across the plank, and down again. The Sheltie (an obedience class summa cum laude graduate) is right behind us...up, across and down! She made it! All right! More clapping and the instructor turns to us and says, "You have both done this before haven't you"? NO! NO! NO! We are total raw material, here to learn and be molded under your experienced guidance. (But, I'm willing to bet there is more width and better footing on that plank, than there is on the back of my couch, which the Min Pins run back and forth on at 100 MPH in semidarkness).

So with that behind us, we now face...the "short chute". No size advantage for anyone here. As we approach the chute we are told to casually hand the lead to the instructor who remains stationary at the mouth of the chute, while I continue on past to the end of the chute and enthusiastically call my dog. The instructor will not release the lead until the dog stops trying to go around the sides and heads down the chute to me. Keep calling her! Clap your hands! Everyone before me had to get down on the floor and partially enter the chute to get their dog to enter it. Caught up in the excitement, I threw myself and my arthritic bones on the floor, and started calling my dog! Spitting out Collie hair, and calling my dog. Really spitting out Collie hair and calling my dog! Boy could they use a good shop vac! I'll be coughing up hairballs for a week. Finally, Sari came down the center of the chute and I was presented with the problem of "getting off the floor without calling a Chiropractor." (Note for next week: take 2 anti-inflammatory pills before leaving for class in case you have to get on the floor again). That's it for tonight, buy a hula hoop at the toy store and practice the "jump" command for next week. This was FUN! It's Tuesday as I write this--and still raining! (Note: Since when do hula hoops cost \$10.00? Nix the hula hoop and bring out an old bicycle tire).

Oct. 28th: We have a few classes under our belt now, and had a 2 week pause in our classes due to local dog shows. I don't know who is more anxious to get back to class, Sari or me. She has a new "agility collar", flat nylon web in a psychedelic tie-dye print. That collar means maximum fun and she screams when she sees it come out of the drawer.

We have a whole slew of obstacles under our belt now: the dog walk, table, several jumps including the tire and window, A-frame, tunnel, chute and weave poles. The weave poles require a lot more at home work, because it is not a "natural" obstacle for a dog as is a jump or climbing obstacle. Sari keeps accepting new obstacles without refusals and once executed, looks forward to doing it again.

This is a really FUN class. The NO command is not allowed, and everyone in class is so UP and they cheer for each dog and the dogs are loving it. We work on

all the obstacles as a group during practice, and then towards the end of class, each dog handler does the pattern on their own, and everyone else acts as spectators cheering them on! I wish I could take her to this 5 nights a week, it's like going to the puppy playground.

Jan. 28,1997 Well, we have long since finished with the last of our Agility (Beginner) Classes, and even with some weeks off because of local dog shows, we were done before the holidays. And I miss it, and so, I do believe, does Sari. So we are signed up for the next level which starts this week. I am proud of my dog, and her attitude when it came to new obstacles. She was the "test" dog when they first brought out the Teeter Totter, and she smoked over it like she had seen it a zillion times. This is not always good, as we all know...our Pinner's are sometimes all guts and glory..and need to be reigned back, and encouraged to show a little caution. Not an easy task for any Min Pin owner. :-D = smiley face (isn't that cool..I learned that on the "net"...which is a whole 'nother topic!

When we got to our last class of the session, we were told that the instructors would run a "mini" agility match..and grade our dogs on their performance. I am way pumped for this..as I know Sari is going to love it. As it is...she "screams" and moans and groans and mumbles and yodels whenever another dog is working the course alone, and she is forced to wait. She is like a self appointed cheerleader. I think her mouth is obnoxious, but my fellow classmates think she is a hoot. I thought about taping her mouth shut with duct tape...but they would not let me, and I was outnumbered. Lucky Sari.

So! They put all the dog's names in a hat..with a random draw as to what order we will run the course in. Please understand...we were not yet up to actual agility qualifying times...but in our own way...all of us were REALLY HAULING !! They cut us a little slack..and we were allowed to keep the mini leashes on our dogs if needed.

We're off! The first few dogs run the course...we all watch in frozen attention...our eyes glued to each dog and obstacle...mentally etching in our minds how we will approach each obstacle, in an effort to bring our time down, yet put the emphasis not on speed...but on correctly and safely guiding our dogs over and through each obstacle. How we do holler...oops..off course.. . missed a jump. . .etc. etc. We clap and moan for each of our fellow exhibitors...mentally keeping track of their score.

It is our turn...we are READY! We get behind the start poles...and Sari holds a nice sit/stay while I move closer to our first obstacle before calling her through the timer...through the tire jump. . .to the A-frame. . .weave

poles...tunnel...table for sit/stay...over the dog walk...through the chute...and then over the flower jump and a set of doubles...and back through the times poles. Whew...I am dying...I must remember that it is OK to breathe when running the course. Sari however is pumped..and would like to go back for seconds. My time...my time! What is my time!?! Aiieeeeeee..... we have the best time so far...she did a great job..and only passed by one obstacle, then came around and did it right. Sari is jumping up and down like a kangaroo..boing...boing...boing.. !!

The rest of the other dogs take their turn..and as we get ready for round 2, Sari is skill in the lead with the best time and cleanest round.

They start drawing names again, and oh oh..I see that my crafty and sly fellow exhibitors have modified their technique a little bit..and are using more control on their dogs in guiding them towards each new obstacle...so as to not waste time in calling their dogs back to them. Hmmm, this new approach of theirs is going to warrant some watching.

As the scores are called out, it is apparent that everyone is shaving considerable time off of their first round, and some could shave off 15-20 seconds...and still not be close to an actual qualifying time. :-) Whoa, here comes the Malamute, a tall specimen...with a tall owner. I sense something...maybe in the set of his jaw...but HE definitely has a plan. His dog stays in a heel position at his owner's side, between each obstacle. As the dog comes off of each obstacle, his owner just moves his hand and is able to take the mini leash tab and guide his dog to the next obstacle. He does this after each obstacle..and the dog never breaks a trot. He also does NOT waiver off of the course or over shoot an obstacle. Just steady and consistent. He has cut his time in half! With a totally clean round. I say to myself, "Self, I think we in big trouble here."

After a few more dogs it is our turn again...clearly the Malamute is still in the lead...but I have a new plan. I am going to follow his plan...but faster. In order to maintain more control and guidance..I attach the short tab lead to Sari's collar. Bearing in mind that the difference in height between a Min Pin and a Malamute is considerable...it was necessary for me to run the entire course...totally bent over..so I could grab her lead after each obstacle. Looking back...I would imagine that this was NOT a pretty sight. :-) But no matter...we were off and running, and jumping (Sari..not me), and climbing (not me again). The blood was pounding in my temples..but we pushed on through the timer poles! Safe! I was still bent over...my back was killing me, and I was sucking wind like a broken down race horse, while Sari was boinging all over, waiting for him to call our time. We

shaved 5 seconds off of our first time...and ended up in second place...behind Mr. Didn't Break A Trot Malamute. But Sari added insult to injury when she snidely made a remark about how I slowed her down, and if I expected us to do better...I was going to have to work harder to keep up with her! And for that remark..she cannot watch any Scooby Do cartoons for 2 weekends!

Miniature Pinscher Club of America, Inc.