

# Working for fun

TRAINING A NEW PUP FOR AGILITY

BY ALYCE SUMITA



Max and I had to overcome many obstacles during his agility career, the most difficult was his inability to stay with me during our agility runs. Our first year (yes, year) in Novice was spent with Max sniffing, staring at distractions outside the ring, or zooming around the agility course, while I tried to get his attention. I would eventually learn these were all variations of avoidance behaviors because Max was either not comfortable or was unsure of what was expected of him. I did not want to repeat that very long year with Miko; I needed to learn how to keep stress from ever affecting her.

An “aha” moment occurred when my breeder was discussing Miko’s temperament testing. Miko was very interactive with the tester and when a crumpled ball of paper was tossed, Miko picked it up and brought it back. While her siblings would all run after the tossed paper ball, she was the only one who actually retrieved it. The tester tossed it several times and each time Miko confidently retrieved it, happily wagging her tail, wanting to continue the fun game. Here was my answer—make agility a game Miko loves to play!

## OVERCOMING STRESS IN THE RING

When Miko came to live with us at ten weeks old, I immediately began her agility training through enhancing her prey drive. Every day Miko and I played fetch, chase, and tug. After a couple of months I slowly began incorporating some jumps (at this age, the bars are placed on the ground), tunnels and a hula hoop (to represent a tire jump) into our play time. The plan worked; the first time I took Miko to a fun run there was no stress sniffing or zoomies. Instead she was happy and relaxed as we played the agility game together.

Next I ran her in a CPE trial; again, she was happy and playful, coming in second place

for her run. The true test would be AKC trials; now, after several AKC agility competitions, I am convinced my decision to make agility a game for Miko was the right way to go. All of her AKC runs have been stress free, with no signs of the avoidance behaviors Max exhibited.

Here in Southern California, most of our agility trials are held outside on grassy terrain or under a covered arena on packed dirt. Recently though we attended a trial held indoors in a warehouse. Normal trial noises echoed throughout the building sounding louder and more intrusive than usual. Miko was not the least bit fazed (I was a bit stressed!) and she actually earned her first Novice Jumpers leg. My hard work was paying off.

## AVOID TRIAL ANXIETY

Another issue Max had at trials was separation anxiety. All of the sights, sounds and scents at a trial kept Max on high alert and it was difficult to get him to relax in his crate or x-pen while I walked the course. Since he normally had to wait a while before his runs, I really needed him to be able to relax during crate time, especially since he was so stressed in the ring. I tried Rescue Remedy, Comfort Zone spray and collar, chew bones, toys, clothing with my scent on it and doggie friends. For Max doggie friends worked best! For a time, Max and I only seemed to qualify on days when he spent x-pen time with his Sheltie girlfriends, Misty and Brandi!

To ensure Miko felt comfortable at trials, I began taking her to Max’s competitions. Although she was too young to compete, she walked around the rings with us, visited other competitors, greeted the other dogs and became familiar with all of the sights, sounds and activities of an agility trial. Now, although Miko is aware of the activities around her, she is able to relax and take short naps while waiting her turn to run. I highly recommend visiting several agility venues with your dog before you start competing so

he can get accustomed to the trial atmosphere without undue pressure to actually perform.

## WORKING ON FOCUS

Unlike Max, whose focus did not seem to kick in until he was over 3-1/2 years old, Miko is doing quite well focusing during her agility runs at a little over 2 years of age. The use of toys is a great way to enhance a dog’s play drive and when engaging in play, it brings the dog’s focus back to me. Recently, I’ve replaced some of Miko’s food rewards with a few tugs on one of her favorite toys to get her focus on me; the excitement incited by this play usually gives Miko an extra burst of speed during her practice runs. I also play tug with Max prior to his runs to try and rile him up a bit and get his focus but Max has a very calm, laid back personality, and his focus is not as intense as Miko’s.

Once I have her focus, I need to keep it on me. My goal as a handler is to make sure I give Miko her cues early so as not to open up any opportunity for her to lose focus and wander. Right now, rear crosses are a challenge because instead of seeing the direction I want her to go, she sees a variety of things to check out: score people, the judge, or incorrect obstacles. So focus is a work in progress.

## AGILITY DRIVE

For every full second you are under Standard Course Time (SCT) you earn one point towards your Master Agility Championship (MACH) title. Avid lure coursers, masters of the indoor B-500s, speed should not be an issue for our breed but it became a problem when Max and I moved into Excellent B. Max’s normal agility speed is a slow lope; he makes wide turns and takes his obstacles rather casually. While a qualifying leg is nice, earning MACH speed points is even nicer, therefore the play drive I am fostering in Miko is teaching her to drive towards each obstacle at full speed.

To develop play drive, I use a toy Miko loves, such as a raccoon or foxtail tied to a

leash. I toss the toy while holding Miko by her collar, then say “go” and we both race to the toy. If Miko gets to it first I let her run and play with it a little bit before I grab on so we can play tug. Once your dog understands this game you can incorporate a few agility obstacles to get him driving ahead of you toward the next obstacle.

## THOSE DARN “WEAVE POLES”

Max and I have always been plagued with weave pole issues. While he routinely hits his entrances, Max tends to pop out around the tenth pole. Then there is his footwork. There are two types of footwork seen in the weave poles; a single step method or a double step method where the dogs bring their front paws together and bounce through the poles. Some dogs do a variation of the two methods and if completed correctly, the dogs are rhythmically completing the weaves. Max’s footwork is still inconsistent which further complicates his weave pole issues.

Thankfully, training weave poles was less daunting the second time around. I read up on several methods and ended up using a modified 2 x 2 method recommended by Miko’s agility class teacher vs. the Weavomatic method Max learned on. Miko has learned quickly and is now actually using the two step pattern and bouncing rhythmically through the poles. Currently at the Novice level, Miko has only completed a set of six weave poles under competition conditions. However, I am pleased with the enthusiasm she shows as she completes this obstacle and using her tug toys as motivators has sped up her footwork.

## CONTACT OBSTACLES

One obstacle Miko and I are having problems with is the teeter. When Miko was under three months of age I would stand her on a table that rocked a bit and she seemed comfortable with that. At around six months she would play with Max following him up and down a moving teeter. Believing my teeter





Max, Miko, and Timu  
take a much needed break  
from agility practice

training was done I put away the teeter and discontinued any movement training.

When Miko first started her agility classes I discovered she was scared of the teeter movement and sound. This was completely new to me because although Max does slow down at the pivot point, he never had an issue with the movement and he loves to bang it to the ground. I was told that Miko, being 1/2 Native African Stock, may startle more easily than domestic Basenjis; this may be part of the root issue but I'm sure it is not all of it.

What to do? I went back to the basics with Miko. Once she was comfortable with the movement on the inflatable disc, I moved to the rocking disc. After one or two sessions on the rocking disc she was still hesitating and walking slowly onto the disc and would only rock it if it was in grass. After multiple sessions, she began to enjoy rocking it on grass.

In class we worked on a small training teeter with padding on the ends to muffle the banging noise but she was still hesitating

when stepping onto the teeter and was slowing down at the pivot point. Since the class is held in an indoor warehouse with rubber matting, the noise of the teeter hitting the ground is much louder than on grass. We have just recently moved up to a full size teeter but we are still holding the end and slowing the descent. What we have found is that if there is an obstacle before and after the teeter she is less concerned about the teeter itself.

The two on, two off (2020) method teaches the dog to stop on cue with his rear legs on a mat. That mat is then placed on the contact zones and when the dog is cued he will assume the 2020 position.

The goal is to have Miko run straight to the teeter's contact zone and get into her 2020 position without hesitation. With patience, desensitizing her to the movement and sound of the teeter will pay off.

Max was taught 2020 position for all contact obstacles. He was taught to touch his nose to the ground at the end of the contact

when he was in the 2020 position. I found this method was not really conducive to the desired position since it is not a dog's normal stance to touch his nose to the ground at the end of the A-frame. Max had no problems offering this "nose to the ground" position on the dog-walk or the teeter but when he tried on the A-frame his back legs would actually lift off the obstacle since, compared to his rear, Max was chest heavy at such a steep angle.

In order to avoid this continuing problem, I switched Max to a running A-frame contact. I don't recall using any specific method other than making sure I waited long enough to cue the contact zone so he didn't jump off the side to follow me.

Videos of Max's runs shows he takes two strides up the A-frame, one over the apex and then he walks, kind of shuffles, down until he touches the contact before jumping off upon my moving away. Not a very quick descent but my training for this was non-existent or at best, non-directional. For Miko's A-frame

contacts I am using the box method. The box method is a more natural way of training the dog to adjust the length of his strides so they hit certain spots on the A-frame, with the final stride in the contact zone. Ideally I am looking for two strides up the A-frame, one over the apex and two strides coming down, the last stride of course in the contact zone. Miko has been hitting her contact zones consistently with this method and at this point in her training she is keeping her footwork and speed while going up and down the A-frame.

#### WHAT I HAVE LEARNED

After writing articles for *The Basenji* and now for the *Bulletin*, I have come to the conclusion it is not the learning curve of the dog that makes the difference (though it definitely helps to start training a puppy vs. an established adult). It is about setting a goal, with the expectation of the performance I want from Miko—and having a training plan in place to meet that goal.

Much of my training with Max was trial and error, just plain perseverance and hard headedness. With Miko, I know what I want, I researched the different training methods, I then selected those I believed were best suited to meet my goals with her and I train for that performance.

Fast forward six years and Max no longer displays avoidance behaviors during his agility runs. While it was difficult to know he was so stressed his first year of competing that he did not enjoy agility, the payoff of working through his struggles is the ability to apply all of that knowledge to Miko, creating a happy go lucky, tail wagging, agility Basenji! I look forward to many, many unbearably happy years and exuberant runs with her. 🐾

*My agility dogs:*

*FC Maximillian RA SC AX MXJ VB (Max) &  
FC SkyHi's Native Infinite Hope SC (Miko).*

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