

## Agility Expert Articles

### Building up to Events – Crufts 2012



I was delighted my Bearded Collie mix, Bitz, and I qualified for Crufts 2012 as part of the Billingshurst Agility team. But as important as qualifying for the 'big' finals of the year, is the preparations of arriving at the event 'ready'.

For me 'ready' means several things. Firstly it means my dog and I are physically fit and well. I run several times a week with my dogs. I am lucky enough to live in the Dorset countryside where my dogs and I can run for miles without seeing much tarmac. I also supplement this with swimming my dogs at the local canine hydrotherapy pool, really helping with fitness levels without impact on the body that the running and

specific agility training can have. Bitz is a timid dog but the hydro therapists have been great, working with me to make her feel confident in the pool environment. She swims for 30mins once a week which she now adores! Being close to completing an ICAT Canine Remedial Massage Diploma I also massage her regularly to relieve any muscle tension she has built up through exercise and being a nervous dog it also helps her to relax.

'Ready' also means being mentally prepared. Many little pieces add up to the whole that is 'the partnership' you see in the ring. Bitz is already an experienced agility dog having competed in many finals including Olympia, UKA Grand Finals and the European Open, so I begin by running courses similar to those that the judges of our class (Lynne Shore & Ton Van de Lar) have designed in the past. This is to identify any sequences that their courses may show up for us that I didn't feel confident with, so that I can break them down, work on and improve them. This year whilst I was at this stage of our prep I attended two UKA shows. I took advantage of the

opportunity to qualify for the CSJ Grand Prix final and also most importantly of running 'not for competition'; rewarding all our key skills in the competition environment- startline waits, contact behaviour and handling manoeuvres. I chose those two particular shows as they were indoors hoping to recreate a little piece of the atmosphere you may get indoors at the NEC.

As Crufts week drew near, as I always do before important events, I went back to gently working simple jump drills. Rewarding and revising; front and rear crosses, serps and pull throughs - the basic skills that make up every run in agility no matter how difficult.

Being the first time Bitz would ever have competed on the 'special green carpet' I joined some other handlers at a sports centre. Where we took a few jumps, a tunnel and the weaves on to an astro turf pitch to help our dogs get some idea of what the footing would feel like. We worked through both speed and control sequences, particularly with the weaves, where foot placement is so important. I was pleased with Bitz; she adjusted quickly to the new surface, realizing the difference in grip.

The week of Crufts I did very little jumping and rewarded contact behaviour and did plenty of 'circle work' the underpinning of the handling system I use. Being a little paranoid about injury before 'The Big Day' (after having had toenails accidentally torn out days before finals with my last dog) I exercised Bitz separately from the rest of my dogs and didn't take her on the long runs.

The day arrived and I felt we were 'ready': physically fit and prepared for the agility job in hand.

Benched with the rest of our team and semi final course plan in hand the day began. We were last team to run in the semi and I moved straight into 'our' competition routine - walking circles, hand targets and tricks; keeping us moving, focused and thinking as a team, so important with Bitz who being a nervous dog can be overwhelmed by the other dogs, crowd and event.. I run first for our team and I continue our routine up to the line.

Bitz ran a lovely clear, unfazed by the carpet and occasion. The rest of the team gained a few faults but we made it through to the Final. Where Bitz ran another calm clear, but our team captain had an unlucky brick out of the wall, leaving us in second place and reserve team champs!

I was pleased with our performance, the preparation paying off with two great clear rounds and Bitz thoroughly enjoying herself. The coming weeks see a little break before our preparations begins for the World Agility Open

Championships in Belgium in May, a different challenge requiring a slightly different lead up.

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Swimming



Ready