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# Agility Expert Articles

## Training Beep - Part 1 by Toni Dawkins

I have been thinking about writing some articles for CSJ for a while and couldn’t really decide what to write about.

I now have a puppy though so who better to tell you about than Beep and her training, good and bad, then as I go along you can see what works and what doesn’t.

First a little about Beep. She was completely unplanned but when Ray Alway who owns Kite’s brother, Fleck used him for stud I couldn’t resist. I had a vision of a beautiful merle that looked just like Kite but hopefully a little taller.  Mmmm.... I now apologise to everyone I have laughed at or taken the mickey out of for owning what I call, funny looking or plain collies. I am still praying that the swan story applies to Beep but it doesn’t look like it. She has floppy ears, looks black and white although registered as blue, lurcher legs, no coat, bald floppy ears and a tail that a Pomeranian would be proud of.

Of course as she is mine, I love her which means no one is allowed to say anything bad about her. In this first article I will just bring you up to date with what I have been doing since I got her. She is now nine months old.

**Toys**

Before you start anything with your puppy make sure they love toys. Everything is easy if you do that first. I use titbits for obedience and tricks but for agility toys really are the best. When doing training days I hear so many people say ‘my dog is not into a toy’. If this is your first agility dog then its understandable but if you get a puppy to do agility with there is no excuse for not teaching this first You must be able to reward your dog and a toy can be rewarded from you, by throwing, and from other people, so you can teach all aspects of agility and reward lots. Titbits are much more restrictive and often dogs will start sniffing the ground to look for them which is the last thing you need. All breeds will play if you give them the right incentive, yes, even the small ones!

**Obedience**

Beep is has learnt a lot in the last few months, some agility related and some not. I think the important thing with a puppy is that they learn to learn and enjoy learning as soon as possible. It doesn’t matter what you are teaching as long as you are teaching something from an early age. From 10 weeks Beep and I attended a local puppy obedience class, it is important that you find a good one though so the pup gets the right atmosphere to learn in straight away. You want nice natured dogs, quiet handlers and positive training, I particularly hate any negative methods of training and this includes training discs and wouldn’t take any of my dogs to a club that uses these. I am very lucky as there is an excellent club near me and I have been there on and off since I was a teenager with my first dog. In fact my mum taught there at that time. The reason I take my puppies to puppy class is more to get them doing anything for me with other dogs around than to get perfect obedience. If they will do this then agility training is also easy in a class of other dogs.

By the time Beep was 6 months she could do the following:

- Sit
- Stand
- Down
- Recall
- Do heelwork on both sides
- Wait for as long as I like in any position
- Retrieve (it did take a while to get her to bring anything back to me though)

Unfortunately the agility class I wanted to take Beep too clashed with this one so once she got to 7 months I had to stop this class. I carry on everything from home though in particular the wait training as this is the area I always struggle with. I have waits with both my other dogs but they are what I call twitchy waits and I am determined that Beep’s will be solid.

**Tricks**

I also teach my puppies lots of tricks. Tricks are great for getting your pup to know how their bodies work so anything that involves moving each leg is great. The better they know how to move the easier agility is for them, plus getting their muscles moving keeps them fitter. Don’t stop when they are puppies though keep thinking of new tricks to teach all through their life. Every time I find a new one trick I teach it to all my girls. This also helps you to work out how each dog learns and how well they can move, if a particular trick is difficult for one dog it may be they have pain in that area or that muscle is not used enough or it might just be difficult in general and you can apply all this to your agility. For example by teaching tricks to all my dogs I found out that one is latent learner. This means that unlike most dogs that can learn a trick in a very short time, sometimes 10 mins, my dog has to have a few minutes of learning and then a complete day or two of nothing before I repeat it. Then she can learn but if you don’t give her the time off she won’t ever learn it properly.
This is very important as if I didn’t know this I may well have given up agility with her so don’t underestimate how important simple tricks are.

Tricks I have taught Beep so far:

- Shake any paw (front and back legs)
- Wave either paw
- Rollover
- Walk backwards through my legs
- Push an exercise ball around
- Stand on her hind legs and stretch her front legs up in the air
- Spin left and right in front of me and when doing heelwork
- Reverse
- The elephant trick (if you look at Bernadette’s sheltie site you will know what this is)
- Climb onto and sit on a tin of quality street (empty of course)

This is all ongoing and I will teach tricks each month as and when I think of them.

I attended a balance and co-ordination workshop this month run by Hannah Banks. This was great, Hannah used a combination of ladders, cones, wobble boards and planks to try and get the dogs to use their whole body, more importantly their back legs as well as their front. I was really pleased as although I have done none of these things I have of course taught a lot of tricks to get Beep to use her back legs and it showed as she did everything really well. I even got her shaking her hind paws on the wobble board and to do this she had to check her balance first before lifting a leg. I would recommend this course to anyone especially if you are not sure what to do t help your dog with balance.

This is Beep’s first try on the wobble board and in the ladder but after just two tries she was doing them on her own.

**Agility**

At nine months Beep has done very little ‘real’ agility training but what is important is that I have a plan of what I want from each piece of equipment and how I want to teach that. Before you start training your puppy you need to look at your other dogs, what do they do well/what don’t they do well?  If you look at most people’s second/third or more agility dogs you will see that they generally bring each dog out the same as the last one with same problems or weaknesses. There are not many that improve and I want to bring out a better dog this time hopefully improving on both of my other two. As well as that you have to look at how agility is moving on and watch the best dog and handler combinations to see how you can better them as well. Remember though that each dog is an individual and you need to be open minded enough to change you training methods or plans depending on your dog.
So, rather than tell you what I am doing at the moment I will tell you what I am aiming for with some pieces of equipment.

**Jumps:**

I have a tight turning quick enough dog and wider turning but very fast dog. With Beep I want a tight turning very fast dog of course. With this in mind I will teach turns and speed on the straight separately to start with so that Beep can learn the difference.

**Weaves:**

With the weaves I want to be able to tell my dog to weave and then think about and go to whatever is next with out worrying that she might come out. This should not be too hard if you do it from the beginning, most people go wrong here because they start training the weaves very close to the dog and then of course if they move away the dog comes out of the weaves too early. I will use channel weaves as these are my personal favourites and will start with a wide channel and with tunnels and jumps all around so from day one Beep will learn that whatever is around she stays put until she has finished.

Contacts:
I really love teaching contacts and never understood why some people found it so hard. I do now though it’s their inconsistency!  You really must know what you want and stick to it every time. The major problem I find with 2 on 2off contacts is that you must reinforce this in the ring to avoid teaching your dog the difference between training and competing. This means that I throw 90% of my runs every year to keep them perfect. Yes, this works but I travel for miles to train and I want to compete in everything. With this mind I decided to try and train running contacts as surely if you can 100% perfect running contacts this has to be the ideal. I started this early with Beep though as it is a lot of work. I will let you know how I am getting on in the next article.

Well that’s it for now, I will update you every month with how every thing is going and hopefully add some video clips.

Love   Toni and Beep x



Beep

(posted 29/02/2008)