

# Agility

## World Agility Open Championships: Netherlands 2019, Part 2



Borrowed chocolate kelpie Dazzle in action with Misha.

*Following on from our article about New Zealanders competing the World Agility Open Championships in Ermelo, the Netherlands 17-19 May, Misha Baxter gives us her impression of the event.*

My road to competing in the Netherlands started with the search for the right dog, or any potential candidate that would fit my reasonably low criteria. I received some important advice from Ultimate Agility's Greg Derrett, the main person behind WAO. He was, by chance, sitting next to me in a friend's lounge after attending a judging seminar: "Whatever dog you get offered, make sure that the dog will run for you. Last time an Australian competitor was competing with a dog that didn't want to run for him. It was very disheartening. Let the owner test the dog with a person the dog doesn't know." That became my main criteria; speed and handling skills would be a bonus.

At the end of 2018, a trickle of dogs started to pop up and Lisa Duff and I had to decide on our team mates. I was still hoping more dogs would become available since European team trials had finished and their teams were decided. Matilda van Rijnberk, our newly appointed manager, and Monique Lukassen, our supporter with Dutch connections, put out one more call. A terrier, a dog I am

confident handling, came up first. After watching a few videos and a few podium photos of Billy, I was happy to contact the owner. I provided a few videos of me running my terrier, Trixie, and the deal was done.

Now to choose my bigger dog. I looked at a collie and a pumi but settled Dazzle, on a chocolate kelpie, once his owner confirmed he would run with someone else.

I arrived in the Netherlands five days before the competition. You would be right to think that no-one can train a dog in five days. My plan wasn't to train the dogs but to suss them out and see if they would follow my handling. In agility, apart from exceptions where the dog is being led by verbal commands, the majority of the commands come from the handler's body language. This language is universal: if you run flat out straight the dog will too; if you slam on the brakes and turn 180 degrees, so will the dog. The dog looks where you look and that is how they know which obstacle to take next.

I chose Billy and Dazzle not for their awesome agility skills but because they followed their handler's body language. So our first training session was all about connection and supporting their

play drive, the most crucial part when connecting with a dog. In this part the dog is not particularly confident so tasks have to be simple and achievable with plenty of reward.

Our training sessions had to be extremely well planned due to the very limited number of runs I could do before the dogs got tired. None of the owners had their own training field so we had to travel, which was a big ask for both owners and dogs. Also, it would be unwise to train every day and expect the dogs to perform well during competition. We trained Dazzle on Saturday and Sunday on his owner's friend's sandy arena. It was hard work since the sand was soft and deep; I was glad I had spent most of my physical preparation in New Zealand on sandy tracks and the beach. Billy's owner organised a grass area for us to train on. I was relieved because I needed to show more speed with Billy which wasn't possible on sand.

After a couple of training sessions with each dog we knew we would be fine. The dogs were keen and happy and their biggest issue was contact behaviour. In agility, for safety reasons, the dog has to touch a coloured zone at the end of all contact equipment. In Europe, most dogs are taught by shaping their stride to hit it without slowing down. Handlers spend months, even years, perfecting the dog's stride and then comes a girl from New Zealand who undoes all the hard work. Both dogs pretended they had no idea about striding and were happily leaping off. I reassured both owners that my low criteria hadn't changed and I was happy that the dogs were running for me and were following my handling commands.

Dazzle and I arrived at the grounds at Ermelo on Wednesday, about an hour before our scheduled training. The facilities were amazing: the padded sand surface was great to run on. Billy did struggle a bit, a combination of the sand getting softer due to the dogs before him creating deep soft take-off and him being nearly nine years old. But he tried hard and had the time of his life, proven by his constant barking while on the course.

On Thursday, following a check-in and vet checks, we had one more short training session indoors (only six minutes) but that gives you an idea how small our team was. Other teams had 20 to 30 minimum. We had plenty of time to absorb the atmosphere and watch other competitors' skills. I dare say New Zealand agility is right up there when it comes to skills and competitiveness. Our top dogs and handlers would definitely make their mark on a world stage and I wish we could show off our top team.

Only the New Zealand and Australian teams had borrowed dogs. Fair enough: it would be extremely hard on a dog to travel such long distances and be expected to compete at world level. Our borrowed dogs had to deal with their own challenges but I feel



the right dog can cope with a change of handler so much better than with travelling. Dazzle's owner said many times that he runs for me exactly the same way he runs for her. I took care of Billy over the competition days since his owner was coaching and managing the Dutch team. Once on a stroll we walked past his owner; he just sniffed him and kept walking with us without even a wag of a tail. I'd say he loved the attention he was getting from his new mum.

For me, the competition itself was very odd. I was expecting nervousness, shortness of breath, dizziness and stiff muscles. That's how I used to feel when running finals at Dog Agility Champs. Instead, I felt relieved that I could trust the dog next to me, that my legs were still running when asked to (after several training sessions my leg muscles decided to stop working for a bit), that every course in front of me was doable, and that I had a good execution plan in my head. I was very happy to be there, at the WAO, representing New Zealand.

From a competitor's point of view, I loved how they split the countries into three groups, each of about 100 dogs. Each group then competed in one ring. Once all the heights in that group ran we rotated to the next ring, so there was never a clash. Also, those who followed the live stream had to only watch the ring we were in. By the way, I loved all the supportive comments and messages coming from those back in New Zealand, and also those who were able to be there with us. This experience was much more enjoyable when sharing it with so many others. Thank you to all; I hope you got as much of a thrill out of it as I did.

My trip wouldn't have been possible without huge help from our first managers, Sue McKee and Michelle Jopson, who got us over the few starting bumps. Michelle also organised our smart uniforms. Matilda, our manager, and her Dutch connections were extremely helpful. Thank you, ladies!

Also big thanks to my husband who took care of our canines and supported me even though he couldn't really understand why anyone would want to put themselves voluntarily in such a foreign and challenging situation. Well, some of us like getting out of our comfort zone! 🐾

Terrier Billy working hard for his new mum.

