

Kiwi Dog Agility

Sharky's Diary – Chapter Ten

Can't believe it is time for Diary number 10, Sharky is nearly 15 months old and things are all coming into place. This month I have been concentrating on beginning his jump training, and teaching the weaves. With previous dogs, I have not really thought about how they are jumping, the fact that they know what a jump is, and when to do it has been good enough. Cannon is a pretty successful dog, but his jumping style is pretty awful a lot of the time and may possibly cause him injury at some stage in his career. I have spent a lot of time trying to improve his jumping action once I realised this, but it is more difficult in an older dog. So I decided that teaching Sharky to jump properly was very important to me. Most of us spend a lot more time teaching things like weaves and contacts, but in most courses there are many more jumps than other obstacles, and how the dog performs them makes a huge difference to clear rounds, and time spent on the course.

The tips I have got for jump training have been a combination of Susan Salo's "Foundation Jumping" DVDs, Linda Mecklenberg's "Developing Jumping Skills" book, Charlotte Rundgren's seminars and my own thoughts about what suits Sharky at any particular time. The DVDs and book are in the NALA library available to NALA members, or can be purchased from Clean Run web-site - www.cleanrun.com

I have been using "jump bumps" to train the various handling moves I want to use. The bumps are great because your dog can focus on mental requirements of following your handling manoeuvres, without having to worry about the physical requirements of getting over the jump. Following is a picture of Sharky doing his "jump bumps".



At present I have a double box of bumps set up, and have been practising a lot of different handling moves. All the work that I have done on Sharky's circlework is paying off, because he very quickly has understood what I mean with front crosses, 270 turns, serpentines etc. My bumps are made of guttering purchased from Placemakers cut into 1 metre lengths, and placed over the bottom rail of a jump. These serve the purpose, and were easy for me to get though drainage pipe cut in half is a better material.

Another exercise I have been doing is jump grids. Following is a picture of Sharky doing his mini height jumps set at a distance so he bounces each jump.



I am pleased with his jumping action in this picture – nicely balanced, rounded back, front legs snapped up tight into his body, and focussed on the next jump. In using the grids, I keep the jump heights low as I am more interested in Sharky's jump action rather than how high he

can jump. I either send Sharky over the grid to a toy, or recall him and reward with a toy which I have placed on the ground (to encourage a lowered head position). I do not encourage him to do the grids as fast as he can, though do expect him to drive forward to the toy.

Weaves

Over the last 6 weeks I have been teaching Sharky to weave. I have ended up using a variety of methods which I really did not expect to do, but am pleased with progress to date. My intention was to use weave-a-matics (WAM) partly as a learning experience for me, and I did start Sharky using WAM. Unfortunately the design of the WAM that I had were not quite fit for purpose, and that made me re-think what I was going to do. The WAM were great when they were opened out, and helped me create enthusiasm for the weaves, but I think this would have been similar if I was using the channel method. I did want Sharky to single track weave, and the training with the WAM possibly did assist with this.

I had been training Sharky on WAM for about a week and moved the poles together quite quickly, but then realised that he had no idea about weave entries, and I think using the WAM would have taken him a while to get there. So I started doing some 2x2 weaves as per Susan Garrett's method (as described in her book "Shaping Success"). This enabled me to proof entries from when I was standing behind, in front, running with him etc.

Because Sharky was doing 4 poles from the 2x2, and my 6 straight poles were nearby, every now and then I would see if he could transfer what he was doing with the 4 moveable poles to my actual weaves. I was very careful not to put pressure on him. If he was successful, he would get a verbal "yes" and have a big play, if he was unsuccessful, we would just start again. I have wondered if I let him fail too often at this stage, and I guess time will tell as to how reliable his weaves end up being. Some literature suggests that you should have a 90% success rate with anything you are doing with your dog before you move on. If your dog fails more than that, then you have moved too fast and should go back to a level at which your dog is comfortable.

One of the things I did notice from doing the 6 straight weaves is that his entries were good, but he wasn't always getting the exit right. If I was weaving him on the right, he would do the last weave and come to me, but if I weaved him on the left, he would not always do the last pole. To fix this I used a variation of the 2x2 weaves using a clicker and food to mark the correct exit which worked very well.

When I moved onto 12 straight weaves he had good entries, but not always accurate at the end. Jan (the Muss) Murden had a suggestion for me – to use 2 sets of 6 weaves in a straight line, but with a gap in the middle. With the 2x6 poles, the dog is confident of the exit, and has a break in the middle to balance themselves. This has worked brilliantly with Sharky. If I am testing a very tricky entry and he misses it, then I can just do one set of 6 weaves and reward him for that. His exits have become much better, and he is pretty reliable now doing all 12 poles straight up.

My plan now is to keep on proofing entries and exits with me in any location. I will use jump bumps to create sequences before and after the weaves to simulate what we will actually find in the ring. I will generally only use 6 poles in training at home, only doing 12 every now and then. If at shows, I will use 4 or 6 poles with my jump bumps because they are more portable. I also plan to do some distraction training eventually as well ie leaving toys on the ground close to the weaves, putting a tunnel close to the end etc. In doing this, I need to ensure that Sharky is totally sure of what he should be doing in the weaves first.

So in training the weaves, a few months ago I said that the way this is taught is more important than the method. Seeing as I have used about 5 different methods and am happy with progress so far I must believe

that statement! I have had a lot of fun experimenting though, and as usual this has added to my knowledge of how Sharky reacts to different situations and training methods.

That's all for this month

Fiona Ferrar

Is New Zealand Agility Fair For Mini Dogs?

Kate Butler had just turned 18 months old when the first NZKC agility regs were introduced. An agility trainspotter from the age of seven, she began competing with her midi Sheltie in 1997 and has since gone over to the 'dark side'. Her Kayne Toad needs no introduction to competitors from around the country - indeed, on trips to the south island Kate has discovered that his fame far outstrips her own! Kate has been keeping busy instructing a class where minis outnumber maxis 2:1 while taking an enforced break from competing, but will be out embarrassing herself in a ring near you soon.

Over the years, there has been a lot of discussion on whether mini dogs achieve their fair share of success in agility. This debate has been going for at least ten years, and earlier this year I did some research to answer the burning question: is agility fair for little dogs, and is it becoming easier or harder for them to keep up with the big guys?

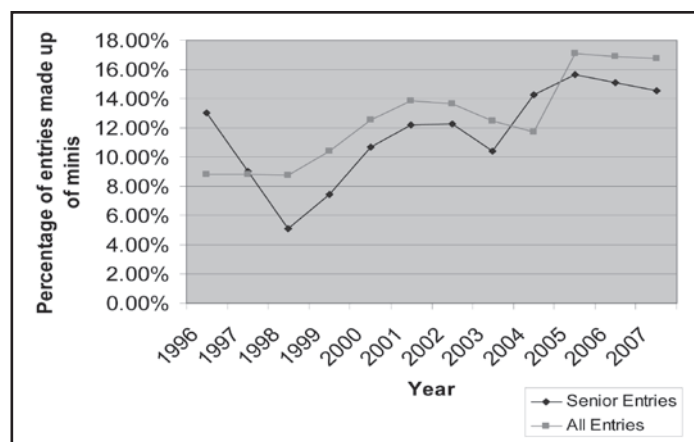
For the purposes of the study I examined two measures of success – Agility Champion and Agility Grand Champion titles, and top three placings at championship shows. Let's start by looking at the number of Agility Champion and Agility Grand Champion titles awarded since the AgCh title was introduced in 1998.

Table 1: Dogs earning Agility Champion & Agility Grand Champion titles by height and year

	AG CH			AG GR CH		
	Maxi	Midi	Mini	Maxi	Midi	Mini
1999	5	1	0			
2000	17	1	3			
2001	10	5	1			
2002	7	0	0	2	0	1
2003	4	3	2	6	0	1
2004	10	3	0	2	0	1
2005	17	1	0	3	1	0
2006	13	2	1	4	1	0
2007	10	1	0	4	1	0

To determine whether minis were evenly represented in the number of titles awarded, I had to know how many minis there were competing around the country during this period. Without access to show catalogues from throughout the country, the only way to estimate this was to look at the entries for the NDTA. Based on the figures I obtained, it can be seen that the proportion of mini dogs in New Zealand agility is increasing. Comparing the two lines, it also appears that mini dogs are underrepresented in Senior entries.

Chart 1: Percentage of entries at NDTA made up of minis



Based on the number of dogs qualifying as Agility Champions each year and the proportion of Senior entries at that year's NDTA that were minis, I have worked out the number of mini dogs that could have been expected to qualify as Agility Champions each year.

Table 10: actual vs expected number of minis achieving AgCh title

Year	Actual new AgCh minis	Expected new AgCh minis
1999	0	0
2000	3	2
2001	1	2
2002	0	1
2003	2	1
2004	0	2
2005	0	2
2006	1	2
2007	0	2

The results came as a bit of a surprise to me, as I was expecting to see a gradual drop-off in the successes of mini dogs. What we can see is that until 2003 the number of mini dogs earning their AgCh titles was in proportion to the number competing in Senior. At that point the little dogs' success rate drops off suddenly. Over the last four years we should have had eight new AgCh minis – instead, there has been just one.

I also investigated the number of placings achieved by minis at the past few NDTAs. Based on the proportion of dogs entered, minis should have had 1 to 2 wins and 7 to 9 placings each year from 2001 to 2004, and 2 to 3 wins and 12 to 13 placings per year from 2005 to 2007. Added together, this came to approximately 14 wins and 71 top five placings over a seven-year period. The results fell well short of this mark, with minis taking home 3 wins and 27 top five placings. The last minis to win at the NDTA were Alan Shrimpton's Indi and Karen Forrest's Candie in 2002.

So the minis are not achieving as well as they should at the top level. What about at local shows? I surveyed championship agility event results published in the NZKC Gazette and on the NZAgility list for the first six months of four different years – 1995, 1998, 2003 and 2007 – to see how often mini dogs were taking away one of the top three placings. Again, I worked out the number of placings that mini dogs should have won based on the proportion of NDTA entries made up of minis.

In 1995 minis should have achieved 7 wins and a total of 22 top three placings. They actually had 10 wins and 30 placings.

In 1998 minis should have achieved 6 wins and 19 top three placings. They came away with 7 wins and 17 placings.

In 2003 minis should have achieved 26 wins and 78 top three placings (the number of classes with results published in this period was more than double that for 1995 or 1998). They had 19 wins and 80 placings.

Over these three periods it seems that mini dogs were winning and taking out ribbons in about the right proportion. Contrast this to the 2007 survey period, when minis should have achieved 37 wins and 111 top three placings. The actual result was 6 wins and 50 placings, which mirrors the recent drop-off in minis earning AgCh titles.

Based on these figures, I have concluded that while the number of minis in agility is growing, their results at both a national and local level have dropped off sharply since 2004. With the current trend towards smaller dogs as pets, the sport risks losing an increasing number of newcomers if competition is not seen as being fair for all dogs. It is time to take action and work out what has caused this sudden decrease in success in mini dogs, and what can be done to level the playing field.

Kate Butler