

Building a Dog Agility Team

Sue Nettleton and her dogs went from couch potatoes to agility competitors.

Terry Long

The early model compact car pulled up to the curb, the passenger door opened and then slammed shut. The car sped off. There on the curb sat a small red dog, clearly confused. Sue Nettleton, a teacher passing through the park with her students, had taught the children an important lesson: take care of those who can't take care of themselves. She picked up the little dog and took it back to her classroom.

Sue called her friend, Terry Brown, who worked in the school district offices. "This woman just tossed this dog out on the street and drove off! She's just lying on my desk – so quiet and cute." Terry said that she'd come and take the dog to the local shelter for Sue because Sue already had two dogs and Terry had three dogs and three cats. Without intending to adopt her, Terry kept the little red dog overnight.

By morning, Terry was convincing her husband Troy and her two children, Trevor and Taylor, that it wouldn't be much work to keep the dog because she was so mellow and small. All of their family dogs had been large: a Dalmatian, a Golden Retriever, and shepherd mixes weighing from 50 to 80 pounds. This little tyke was only 12 pounds! They voted the little dog in and named her Tawny.

Getting busy

Sue wanted Terry to try agility training. Sue had just tried it for the first time, enrolling in a class with her Poodle-Terrier cross, Toby. Neither friend had ever ventured into the world of dog training beyond basic housetraining and manners. Terry was surprised to find that her friend seemed hooked, signing up for more classes and talking about entering Toby in competition one day. What had gotten into her friend? This was a new side of Sue she'd never seen: running around a field with Toby, shouting Tunnel, Over, Teeter, Yes!

"I loved Toby to death," said Sue, "and a trainer who came to our house mentioned how much fun Toby would have doing agility. He was just so full of energy and seemed to have springs in his feet. I decided to give it a try and was having so much fun that I wanted Terry to try it with Tawny."

Sue gave Terry a gift certificate to a class that was already in progress, convincing the instructor that her friend would catch up quickly.

"It seemed to come so easily to Tawny," Terry said. "She surprised me at how quickly she learned." Terry was not new to animal training. She had worked at Lion Country Safari where she clicker trained a variety of exotic animals. Now, she learned how to apply the clicker to agility training and appreciated the perks: improved communication with her dog, a respect for the individual dog's learning capacity, and the exhilaration that comes when they both got it right.

"I have never had relationships like this with my pets before," said Terry. "Most of my life my dogs have just been house dogs. I loved them and took good care of them but I never took them places or fussed over them. Agility has brought me closer to my dogs than I ever thought I could be."

That's right: dogs – plural. Because while Terry and Tawny compete at the novice level in USDAA and NADAC and Level 2 in CPE, she has adopted another dog.

The more, the merrier

Tinkerbelle came to Terry via a friend who works at an animal hospital. One day a repairman was getting ready to leave. The hospital staff assumed the dog sitting next to him was his. He thought she was the hospital mascot. No one knew where the Miniature Poodle came from. But Terry's friend knew that Terry's daughter wanted her own dog. "I told Taylor that if she was going to get a dog she had to do agility with it," Terry said. "She agreed so we brought Tinkerbelle home. Taylor did some foundation – skills classes with her, but didn't work with her at home, and so I took over the training. She became very attached to me."

Terry and Tinkerbelle joined a class that had been in progress for almost a year. Sue was in the same class with her newest dog, Shay, a Sheltie adopted from the shelter. "The beginning class was already months old, but it was the only class I could make, and it was taught by one of my favorite trainers. They were getting ready to start weave-pole training,

and I wanted to get in on that, so they let me start with Tink and see how she would do.

“At first she just didn’t get it. It seemed so hard. Jumps were easy for her, but I thought she would never get the teeter or weave poles. Then, all of a sudden she could do stuff. I was working on the teeter with her on a very low level, and she was getting the concept. During one of our practices, I was standing next to a full-height teeter and all of a sudden it slammed down to the ground! Tink was standing at the bottom. So I tried her again. She loved it! She just kept running on it and slamming it down to the ground. It was so exciting. When she finally got the weave poles, that was the best ... that was the hardest thing to get through.”

Tinkerbell had been in agility for only a year when Terry entered her in Level 1 at a CPE trial. Tink Q’d and took 1st in her first three events and got her Standard title. For someone who never thought of participating in dog sports, Terry surprised even herself. Sue is not surprised at all. “With her love of dogs and training abilities, I knew she’d be great at it,” Sue said.

For Terry, agility is the icing on the cake of a lifelong love affair with dogs. “I think the greatest thing anyone can do is to open their home to an animal in need. I will always have rescue dogs and now I can’t imagine passing up on what agility gives us. But, agility has been so good for me, personally, too. I have been a couch potato for years, and now I am more active, not just with agility but with other sports and activities.”

Terry Long, CPDT, is a writer, behavior specialist, and agility instructor in Long Beach, Calif.

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