

For the Love of Dog Agility

Ken Tatsch, founder of the United States Dog Agility Association, shares his vision for the sport.

By April Balotro

While the nation's top agility dogs bolt through obstacles and spectators watch in awe, Ken Tatsch hustles behind the scenes, making sure the Cynosport Games, an annual canine performance sport roundup of competitions and demonstrations hosted by the United States Dog Agility Association, runs smoothly.

Tatsch, USDA president and founder, introduced dog agility to the United States, patterning the sport after The Kennel Club and the Agility Club of Great Britain standards. What started as a small organization in 1986 has grown into an association with 30,000 registered competitors and 150 affiliate groups throughout the world.

Working tirelessly to promote the sport in the United States and abroad, Tatsch (who has participated in agility and obedience himself) eats, breathes and lives dog agility. Taking a few minutes out of his busy schedule, Tatsch recounts his devotion to the sport and its supporters.

Q: Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?

A: I was born in Beaumont, Texas, and moved to the Dallas area at an early age, where I still live.

Q: Did you grow up with dogs? Do you have dogs now?

A: I never had a dog growing up, but I've owned six dogs during my adult life. Presently, I don't have a dog; my last dog, a female Border Collie named Tika, passed away in 2007, and my wife and I had a newborn daughter shortly thereafter. We decided to wait a while before introducing a new dog to the home.

Q: What was your profession before you founded USDAA?

A: I was a certified public accountant working as an audit manager in Dallas with Grant Thornton, a major CPA firm, where I had a diverse client base. USDAA has been my full-time career since 1988. My career in public accounting gave me a firm foundation for the challenges that [were] ahead in starting and growing USDAA.

Q: When and how were you first introduced to agility?

A: I saw dog agility for the first time at the Crufts Dog Show in London in 1985, as a spectator-tourist. I was training one of my first dogs in obedience at the time and immediately sought out the organizers to learn more. I was taken in by the intense and willful working relationship between handler and dog, and the physical nature of this new sporting event.

Q: USDAA has many affiliations abroad, including Mexico and Hong Kong. Is it difficult to introduce the sport to other countries?

A: Yes and no. It isn't difficult in the sense that we don't go looking for others to join; they find us because of the popularity we have enjoyed. On the other hand, yes, because language and cultural barriers can impede communication and, more importantly, understanding.

We are unique in being a non-kennel club affiliated organization that operates as a business, as opposed to a volunteer club or kennel club as is customarily found overseas. Because we are independent, we have the ability to address things creatively with only dog agility in mind, and we are not confined to pre-existing policies and procedures that were designed for other purposes. We simply focus on the sport.

With more than 20 years traveling abroad and learning about different cultures and differences in the "dog world" climate in different countries, we have found each new introduction that much easier. We would not have been as successful had I not learned early on to be observant and to become a student of culture first in developing approaches suitable to my audience.

Q: What makes USDAA so successful? What makes it unique?

A: It's our [participants]. Our philosophy is to recognize that dog agility is a true sport and to treat it as such by being responsive to the sport's needs. [Agility] competitors respect that and are passionate about it. People want different things out of a sport – some for the social [aspects], some purely recreational, some for fitness and some for the spirit of competition. Having programs that address this wide range of needs sets us apart.

Q: What else is in the future for USDAA? For you?

A: I feel we still have a lot to achieve with USDAA and dog agility. I do not believe the sport is anywhere near what it is capable of achieving, although in some respects, it has matured. But in my view, it's a plateau, and there is still a mountain beyond that will take it to the next level. For me, I hope to be able to see it through. I want to continue to seek ways to balance USDAA and make quality time for me and my family. When things get stressful, family life helps keep things in perspective.

Q: Do you have any hobbies? Wild aspirations?

A: My job has always been a hobby, which is what keeps me motivated and focused. But I also enjoy Latin and ballroom dancing, downhill skiing and adventure.

Wild aspirations? Finding the fountain of youth so I can keep working at what I am doing as long as possible, pursue new ideas and use what I have learned to extend to other interests, and meet more people.

Q: How would your friends describe you?

A: You might have to ask them that one, but I would hope it would include being a genuine person, an innovative thinker, a problem solver, loyal to my roots, striving for perfection and having the utmost integrity.

April Balotro is associate editor of Dog World.