

## Small but Mighty Agility Dogs

**Although short in stature, diminutive agility dogs pack a punch.**

*Terry Long*

I have a confession to make: For many years I was a large-dog snob. It's the truth. My rule was that the dog must be a minimum of 40 pounds, or you'd better check the DNA to see if it was really a dog. The pinnacle of my large-dog ownership came in the mid-1980s when I owned two Great Danes, followed by a Wolfhound mix and later a Labrador-Rhodesian Ridgeback cross – my first agility dog.

Then a funny thing happened. In 1996 I started my dog-training business and soon became captivated by several of my clients' itty-bitsy dogs. The ones that caught my eye were athletic, energetic and feisty – the exact characteristics that were creating behavior challenges for their owners. Over the years, I found myself adopting smaller and smaller dogs. Recently I astounded myself by adopting a client's miniature Rat Terrier when they made the difficult decision to find her a new home, better suited to her seemingly endless energy. All of 10 pounds, Pretzel is providing me a firsthand opportunity to learn about the differences in training and handling a small dog. It has been a delightful experience, one that comes as no surprise to Trisha Stall of AgileDogs Agility Training.

The owner and handler of various sizes of dogs, Stall is also an agility judge for CPE, USDAA and TDAA. Stall first started competing in 1996 with two crossbreeds, Sandy, a Terrier-Beagle cross, and Crystal, a 21-inch Border Collie-Husky cross. Both dogs went on to win CPE Nationals, in 2003 and 2002, respectively, as well as attaining highest titles in CPE, NADAC and USDAA, all three organizations allowing dogs of crossed heritages to compete. Her next dog was a rescue Border Collie, Buddy, who spent the first seven months of his life in a pet store. "He turned out to be a typical Border Collie: fast, driven, ball crazy, and reactive to any motion. So I learned a new facet of dog training, handling the large and fast dog," says Stall.

Stall's introduction to small-dog agility came in 2004 when she rescued Jart, a 14-inch Border Collie-Papillon cross. The handling differences were distinct. "Medium- to larger-size dogs take their cues primarily from your shoulders and arms. Small dogs, however, cue mainly from your feet, as well as your hips and, to a smaller extent, your shoulders. So the direction your feet are pointing is much more important to the smaller dog."

Small dogs also have a shorter stride length and make it easier for many handlers to stay in front of them than with a longer-stride dog. This provides more opportunities for front and blind crosses, according to Stall, who also cautions, "The key to handling a small dog is to keep moving. Because small dogs cover ground less quickly, their handlers sometimes outrun them and then wait for the dog at the next obstacle. Standing still slows dogs down, and over time, the dog becomes slower and slower."

This all assumes that you are competing on courses that are designed for both large and small dogs. Courses designed with large dogs in mind often give small-dog handlers an advantage because their dog has more ground to cover between obstacles, thereby giving their handlers more time to react. Handlers can be a bit off in their timing and still have time to make a correction in direction or to call their dog away from an off-course choice. Not so in TDAA (Teacup Dog Agility Association) competitions.

Created in 1996 by Bud Houston, a respected agility teacher, author, and operator of Dogwood Training Center, TDAA provides a unique agility experience for small dogs and their handlers. The equipment is scaled down and the spacing between obstacles is typically about 10 feet. TDAA's stated purpose is "to provide a competitive venue for dogs of small stature without regard to breed or pedigree, and to encourage course challenges that are comparable to the course challenges which face large-dog handlers in other popular venues."

TDAA trials are currently held in about half the states across the country and are open to any dog over 12 months of age that is 17 inches tall or less. Jump heights range from 4 inches to 16 inches with height adjustments for long-backed and short-legged dogs. Recent changes to the rules have also addressed competitors' concerns about their dogs jumping higher than their shoulder height, making this venue even more appealing to small-dog handlers. But it is the shorter distance between obstacles that make TDAA trials exciting and challenging for both dogs and handlers who must have good timing and fast reactions to navigate courses with such tight spacing.

To earn the TDAA TACH title (Teacup Agility Champion), dogs must first earn their Superior title and Games III title, and



then 10 additional qualifying Superior scores and 10 qualifying Games III scores, three of which must be wins, in at least five different games.

Stall, who is also a TDAA judge and Chair of the TDAA Rules Committee, believes that TDAA provides something unique for the small dog. "Small dogs are more relaxed at TDAA trials because there are no bigger dogs around; some small dogs don't compete well at other organizations because they're stressed by the constant threat of larger dogs attacking them. It's unfortunate, but many smaller dogs have been terrorized at trials by bigger dogs. The atmosphere is quite friendly at TDAA trials; there's always a cheering section for each dog, each run, each accomplishment. It often feels more like a fun party than a trial. I love being a judge at TDAA trials and seeing the small dogs really shine."

For more information about the TDAA, go to [www.tdaa.org](http://www.tdaa.org). And me, you might ask? Are there more small dogs in my future? Without a doubt.

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