

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

For the Love of Dogs

When Dr. Donna Chester steps onto the dog agility obstacle course with Penny, her 3-year-old papillon, she brings a team approach to the task ahead.

It's them against the course timer.

That sense of alliance isn't lost on Penny, either, said Dr. Chester, an ob.gyn. who practices in Anchorage, Alaska. "We're a team out there, and she knows it. It's giving her a job and it's giving me something to release my energy and have fun with."

To date, Penny has earned three "double Qs," meaning that she has run three agility courses perfectly and under the time allotted. She's also earned 350 points toward her first Master Agility Champion (MACH), which is the ultimate American Kennel Club agility title. (A MACH designation is earned when a dog runs 20 courses perfectly and runs them under the time allotted.)

Seven years ago, after watching her husband, Michael, guide dogs through agility tunnels, over teeter-totters, and between weave poles in competitions as a hobby, Dr. Chester decided to follow suit. Her first experience came with Mysti, the family's wheaten terrier, who is now 9 years old and is the retired house dog. Dr. Chester worked with the terrier for 3 years on agility, and during that time she also learned a little about herself. At one competition a fellow trainer approached her and said, "You're too tense when you're out there. Mysti feels your tenseness. So if you don't relax, she's not going to."

Dr. Chester took the advice to heart and incorporated relaxation exercises into her precompetition regimen, a fix that led to positive results. "After that, I had 2 really good years of agility with her," Dr. Chester recalled. "When you connect like that with your dog, it's awesome. There is not a better feeling; there really isn't."

These days, she spends 1 hour 2 days per week and 10-15 minutes per day the rest of the week in training sessions with Penny "to keep things going." She and Michael and their daughter, Krystin, who is currently a high school senior, devote 10 weekends between May and September to attending dog agility competitions in Eugene and Portland, Ore., and in other Northwest locales.

"We're one of the few families that are doing this," Dr. Chester observed. "You might see a husband and a wife out there, but usually it's the husband or the wife, and there are very few kids out there, which is a shame because you can get college scholarships from this."

A family highlight came in 2006, when Teller, a papillon trained by Krystin, earned a MACH title. Teller "was an abused dog that we rescued; we'd had a lot of anger issues with him and tried to get him past those," Dr. Chester said. "Krystin became the first teenager in Alaska to get a MACH title, which is the highest title you can get with a dog. It was awesome to watch her do that and



Dr. Donna Chester gives a command to Mysti, her wheaten terrier, during a run.

to also watch her bloom doing it, because she was always a reserved child. This helped bring her out."

The Alaska climate poses certain challenges to a consistent agility training routine. During the winter months, the family trains its dogs in an 80-by-60-foot building owned by friends. "You need a 100-by-100-foot space to have a really good training center, but this is good to keep them remembering what they are supposed to be doing," Dr. Chester said.

In the near future, she and her husband intend to build a training center on their own property that would serve as a competition site during the harsh winter months. For now, "all of our competitions are compacted into 3 months during the summer," she said. "It's frustrating because we spend almost every weekend during the summer doing dog agility. We'd like to fish, camp, hike, and do other things, but the dogs are taking so much of our time. We're hoping that if we put up this facility, we'll be able to spread out the competitions more."

But Dr. Chester isn't complaining too much. After all, she said, the magic that comes in the connection between dog and trainer is beyond measure. "It's a wonderful feeling to be out there training your dog, seeing that your dog 'gets it,' and to learn how smart dogs are," she said. "It's amazing how a little flick of the finger will send them one direction or another and that they understand these subtle commands."

A Whole Different Ball Game

Dr. Karen Reed has practiced dog obedience training since she was a child, but 7 years ago, she added dog agility training to her list of hobbies, which she considers a whole different ball game.

"Obedience training is so strict," said Dr. Reed, a pediatrician who practices in Wichita Falls, Tex., and is membership chair of the Obedience Training Club of Wichita Falls. "In agility, you can't touch the dogs when you're competing, but you can talk to them and cheer them on. It's so much fun."

In 2002, she was "looking for something new" to do with Allye, her then 4-year-old bearded collie, so the duo enrolled in weekly dog agility classes at a training facility in Rhome, Tex., which is a 1.5-hour drive from Wichita Falls.

"Many people in our obedience club also got interested, so we carpoled down there with our dogs and went through the beginning foundation class and up to training level 5," she recalled.

She did the same with Madeleine, a 6-year-old bearded collie she rescued from a shelter, but she and Allye, who is now 11, differ in their skill set on the agility course. She described Allye as "very focused" and Madeleine as a "wild child."

Allye "watches me all the time and is eager to do everything just right; when she finishes, she has the biggest smile on her face," Dr. Reed said. Madeleine, on the other hand, "is very social. During a competition if one of the club members she knows is in the ring as a steward, she's liable to go over and visit that person before completing the course. She also tends to work ahead of me, and sometimes she would rather take the A frame than go over a triple jump."

She and her dogs have competed in shows around Texas such as in McKin-



Allye makes a jump as part of the obstacle course at a competition.

ney, Las Colinas, Longview, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Houston, and they've also traveled to events in North Carolina and Colorado.

"We're competing, but I don't pressure them to compete rigorously," she said. "I'm on call almost every other weekend so I don't get to a whole lot of shows, but my goal is to get out there and have fun. I like to go to the shows and talk with the other dog lovers and watch the dogs run. I've learned a lot from how other people run their dogs."

She recently added another bearded collie, Sterling, to her family. Not yet a year old, Sterling is progressing with obedience training but Dr. Reed will wait until his joints and muscles mature (around age 2) before starting formal agility training.



Dr. Karen Reed trains her three bearded collies: Allye, Madeleine, and Sterling.

For Dr. Reed, dog agility is a form of therapy. "Dogs are so forgiving; they just want to be with you, please you, and have fun," she explained. "My work as a pediatrician is pretty serious most of the time. I tend to worry about patients and take those worries home with me. But when I can just go out there and forget about my worries and concentrate on the dogs and how much fun they're having, it's a good bonding time with them. It's a good stress relief, as long as you're not too terribly serious about competing."

These days Dr. Reed doesn't have to cart Allye and Madeleine too far for competitions. The Obedience Training Club of Wichita Falls launched a club that stages twice-yearly local agility events sanctioned by the American Kennel Club. The club also offers agility training for people who live in or near Wichita Falls and are unable or unwilling to travel farther for training. "Many of these students are now competing in shows with their dogs and doing very well," she said. "It's opened up a whole new area of training possibilities in our area of Texas."

Dr. Reed would like to "get Sterling up to [the age when] he can train and get out there and have some fun, too. Mostly, it's to enjoy and be around the people who are also crazy about their dogs. There's a wide variety of people who train and compete in the sport. I've really enjoyed them, being part of their lives as well as spending time bonding and playing with my own dogs." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

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The purpose of The Rest of Your Life is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.