

Interview with Sandra Katzen

Sandra Katzen, thank you very much for giving this interview. Could you please tell how you began with agility and how you ended up being a judge?

- I started doing agility with my aussie Kody in 1989. I heard about an agility course and it felt like it could be something Kody would like, so I entered the course. I was right, Kody was immediately excited about it. After that we continued with the other people from the same course and started a club called Rainier Agility Team. We arranged fun games and courses and also demonstrations. With these we gained more people to this new sport. To tell you the truth a person I made mad said angrily that I could never become a judge. Judging had never even crossed my mind, but I decided to try it because I was so angry by the comment.

In Finland and also in most other European countries competing is according to FCI rules. For most of us there are only two types of classes; agility and jumping. Some people might have heard of games classes and occasionally there have been unofficial trials with Gamblers.

What is the situation in the United States? Do you mainly compete according to FCI rules or do you have more of other classes? How popular are they and are they all called games or something else?

- In the United States there are at the least six organizations with their own agility rules. Most of these have games classes, but each organization has their own type of classes or at the least some version of classes. Many people are also a member of more than one organization.
- Some of these games classes like Gamblers and Snooker require strategy. Some on the other hand require teamwork between handlers, for example Pairs Relay or Team. In jumpers classes on the other hand speed is emphasized. In some organizations the games classes are more about distances, also very long distances.
- Certainly more or less strategy is needed in all agility courses, teamwork between dog and handler and speed, but games in particular especially emphasize one of these factors.
- Generally speaking games are very popular, but – like in many other things in life – we seem to prefer those where we are good. For this reason people who are not very good at “thinking with their feet” do not necessarily like strategical courses like Snooker where this can go wrong with speed. You don't see any more the kind of games classes that used to be very popular. For example Brace where you guide simultaneously two dogs or Strategic Pairs, where two dogs and two handlers switch places during the course.

I've heard that in the United States many agility organizations have their own rulebooks and yearly championships. Do all organizations have games rules or only some of them? And is there an organization that only concentrates on games? Can a person compete in all organizations competitions?

- I can't think of any organization that would not have one or two games classes, but I think they all also have standard classes. Some organizations seem to concentrate more on games and most of them also have some kind of level or qualifying system. Anybody can freely compete in competitions by different organizations as long as they register in the organization in question. The only exception is Teacup Agility where the only requirement for competing is that the dog does not exceed at certain withers.
- Each organization has its own rules and usually there are qualifying requirements to take part in the championships, so that of course limits the competition in championships.

I have tried Gamblers and Snooker courses. I think they are very exciting and fun ways to compete. I also noticed that I could benefit from them for/to traditional FCI trials. I learned a lot about how fast you can perform each obstacle and how far away I can guide a dog. What is your point of view on how competing in games (or training them) can benefit FCI trials? Or do you think that games in itself is so much fun that no other reasons are needed?

- I fully agree upon that the skills needed to succeeding in games can also be beneficial on FCI trials. On the other hand I think that the fun of games in itself is rewarding.

If I would be interested in games but wouldn't know enough about them, what would be the best way to proceed? Is there for example any reason that could prevent me from arranging a competition in my club or even for a larger public? What tips would you give to a single enthusiast?

- I can't come up with any reason why you couldn't try games in you clubs. You can follow rules that already exist or make up you own. Nowadays the NADAC organization offers Tunnelers that were originally the fun games offered by one enthusiast. Novices I recommend keeping the rules relatively simple. You can make them more difficult once the handlers get started.

Is there something in particular you would like to say about agility in general or games in specific?

- I can't think of anything in particular. Except I want to say that agility should above all be about having fun with you dog. It's an excellent way of strengthening the relationship with your dog. If you keep it a fun thing doing together, regardless of your goal, the reward will be much bigger than you can imagine.

Sandra, thank you for the interview!