



SEE SPOT RUN

And jump and tunnel and weave—in dog agility training. **BY MATTHEW HALVERSON**

Scared, indifferent, or just plain stubborn, he ain't moving. An obsessive-compulsive sniffer, my three-year-old skittish terrier Jack has smelled and re-smelled—and re-re-smelled—the air inside the eight-foot-long articulated vinyl tube that yawns between us, seeking an explanation for my insistence that he run through it. But now his nose has stopped twitching, his butt is rooted to the dusty rust-colored mulch in this converted horse-riding arena, and he's shooting me the same bemused "How dumb do you think I am?" look that I get when I try to lure him into the bathtub with a Milk-Bone.

Yet here I am, on all fours at the other end of the giant bendy straw, flashing a fake smile, barking words of encouragement that with enough repetition and reinforcement Jack might eventually acknowledge as a

command, and refusing to believe that my dog can't do what I watched a papillon—a papillon!—do the other day. "Come on, buddy. Come on, Jack. Tunnel!"

I brought Jack here, to Sandra Katzen's open-air training facility in Kent, for a one-on-one consultation because he has the qualities—smart, (normally) obedient, in-

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quisitive, high energy—that seemed to make him a natural for competing in the sport of dog agility. Whether or not you know it by name, you've probably seen at least a clip of a dog agility championship late at night on ESPN or Animal Planet: amped-up owners racing against the clock alongside their equally amped-up pooches, shouting directions, and guiding them through a

Fur in the hole! Trainer Sandra Katzen's dog Trek is a master of the tunnel.

canine-specific obstacle course of tunnels, teeter-totters, and slalom poles. And if you have a dog, even money says you glanced across the room out of the corner of your eye, sized up Spot, and thought, "D'ya think...?"

"You can train any kind of dog, and the majority of them have fun doing it," Katzen, the owner of Vortex Agility and Dog Training, told me days before our session. But then, having no doubt met one too many overly optimistic owners who dreamed of turning their untrained, sad-sack dogs into whip-smart heroes of the agility circuit over-

night, she tried to temper my expectations by adding, "Although, every once in a while, you'll get a dog that doesn't have fun with it." Sure, sure, there's always a party pooper, one bum puppy. But it wouldn't be Jack.

I blame ESPN for feeding my fantasies of joining Jack in a SportsCenter highlight reel, but I blame Katzen—a longtime trainer and cofounder of the North American Dog Agil-



Taking the leap Katzen has an impressive training pedigree.

ity Council—and her experienced, deceptively casual training style for making me think they could come true without months of work. The day after we talked, I watched her coach four owners on how to praise their companions for a job well done (treats are good, but playful interaction is better). I watched her coax the dogs—including that damn papillon—to prance up one side of the teeter-totter and back down the other. I watched her fire up the pups and launch them through the tunnel like it was the one thing they'd always wanted to do but had never been given the chance. And it all looked so fun, so stress-free, so easy.

Fun? Absolutely. Stress-free and easy? "Oh, no. It requires a ton of patience and a ton of practice," Katzen said later. What had seemed like a breezy get-together for animal lovers was actually a deliberate, me-

thodical workout for owners who respected her insistence on honing a hound's skills from the beginning, because in competition a flawless run is just as important as a fast one. "Dogs are like humans," she said. "If they learned something wrong, put them in a stressful situation—like a competition—and they'll go back to their foundation," even if they relearned it the right way. And learning takes commitment. A novice dog that's predisposed to like the sport can be ready to compete in a year, but once-a-week lessons with a trainer won't be enough to get it done. Without short, daily practice sessions at home, even a clever canine may never progress past the remedial learning stage.

I knew these things before I led Jack into his one-on-one session with Katzen. (Or at least I'd listened when she warned me about them.) But the misguided pride that fools every owner into thinking his pooch is, like, the best ever, had scrubbed from my brain any possibility of failure. That's why I was down on my knees, patting the mulch where who knows how many other dogs had peed, smiling through gritted teeth, and thinking, "Come on, Jack, even the papillon could do this!" but not saying it because shame isn't exactly an effective motivator for dogs. So when Jack suddenly stood up and shook himself off, trotted through the tunnel, and playfully tackled me on the other side, I finally understood why so many people get hooked on this: Like playing the slots, the buzz of a little victory has a funny way of erasing all the defeats. ✨

GET TRAINED



Sandra Katzen offers six-class packages for \$90 or private lessons for \$70 per hour. Dogs should have a basic grasp of commands like "sit" and "come" and should not be aggressive toward humans or other dogs. For more information on schedules and class times, email her at skatzen2@juno.com or visit vortexagility.com.