

Title Shot Has This Canine Hopping

Debra Lappano and Kali
off to Halton Hills for
National championships

BY JULIE DEBRUIN

While many Barrie backyards are filled with swings sets, swimming pools, trampolines and other childhood favourites, Debra Lappano's yard is a little different.

Sure, there is a brightly-coloured teeter-totter, tunnels to run through and a hanging tire, but these 'toys' are for her four-legged companions.



She uses the course to train dogs in the fast paced world of agility. It's a course her five year old standard poodle knows well and Lappano is hoping the countless hours they've been practising will pay off at this week's Agility Association of Canada's National Championship in Halton Hills.

"It's her first time at the nationals", said Lappano, who is happy to have them so close to home. Last year's event was in British Columbia.

Her introduction to the world of agility began a number of years ago with her first competition dog, a black standard poodle named Tango. He retired a couple of years ago and now fills his time working as a therapy dog.

"I started with horses", said Lappano, and she believes this background set the groundwork for her transition into agility. "People who have a horse background often have an easier time with agility because they are so similar". "You can judge distance and there is the same balance and rhythm in agility".

As Tango was nearing retirement, she started looking around for a new dog. She spoke to various breeders in her search to find a dog that had the right temperament and a strong drive.

"I really looked long and hard. The internet certainly helped out." Her search led her to a breeder in Ottawa who co-owned Kali's mother with someone in Alberta. After emailing back and forth and seeing photos of the puppy, something clicked.

"It was something intuitive", she described. "I was right. She's just fantastic".

At seven weeks old, the puppy flew out to be with her new family.

Kali is already a Canadian Champion. When she was younger, the Standard Poodle took many ribbons in the conformation competitions, but her high energy and athleticism were assets in the agility ring as well.

“She’s so bouncy”, said Lappano. “She jumps just like a horse”.

Unlike the high stakes horse competitions, there are no big purses in the dog ring.

Lappano said some events, like the steeplechase (Similar to the equestrian sport of the same name) can have some prize money attached at the higher-level competitions, but most people are in it for fun.

There are three types of games in agility, but the goal is to complete the course as quickly as possible with the fewest mistakes. In the standard event, the handler can run beside the dog as it completes the course, but cannot touch the dog or block any of the obstacles. The most challenging involves directing your dog through the course from a distance using body language and voice commands.

Some competitors, including Lappano, have taken what they’ve learned in the ring and are now teaching others the sport. She is the Owner of Pawsitive Spirit Training and Wellness, and not only teaches dog owners the agility games, but also does puppy classes and obedience training.

Most days, Kali and her owner are in the yard training, although the sessions are sometimes only a few minutes long. “We stop the session before she gets bored”, said Lappano. The secret is to always leave the dog wanting more.

In the winter, they use a nearby riding arena to hold training and give lessons. Kali competes in about 20 events a year, with most taking place over the summer months.

Kali earned enough points at the provincial competition just outside London earlier this summer to qualify. All dogs competing had to earn the right to be there.

Any dog can be trained to perform agility and mixed breeds are welcome to compete at events put on by the Agility Association of Canada. There are several levels of competitions matched to the dog’s size.

“Taller dogs have taller jumps”.

“We originally got a poodle because we have allergies,” she said, and fell in love with the breed’s intelligence and energy.

Kali is first and foremost a family pet. She sleeps on the floor beside Debra’s bed, goes for walks with the family and loves her treats.

“Kali just loves agility”, said Lappano. “She was made for this”.