

Kodi's Wild Ride: The Ups and Downs (and Overs and Throughs) of an Agility Champion **By Sandra Katzen**

Kodi's registered name is Ahlarlay's Kodiak Scamp, but her agility camp name is Burning Fuse. If you've ever seen her waiting on an agility course start line (or, more accurately, not waiting on the start line), you will have no problem understanding that nickname.

I originally bought Kodi as a present for my sister. Ironically, she wanted a bigger dog (Kodi tops the scales at 35 pounds) for protection during the long cross-country trip she had planned. Little did she know at the time that Kodi was a very big dog in a compact body.

As it turned out, the trip was delayed until Kodi and I had bonded. I had already had her for the first ten months, which I was sure would be the most difficult part, so it seemed only right that I should also have her for the easy part. The problem was, there was no easy part.

Kodi is her father's daughter, according to Dee Dee Baldwin, who bred her and then patiently listened as I whined about her "bad" antics for about the first two years of her life. Once Kodi and I discovered the sport of dog agility, however, I discovered that those antics were the hallmark of an agility natural.

Agility is not a game or a pasttime or a hobby for Kodi. It's her job. She loves it, but she also takes it quite seriously. She always has.

Although Kodi has earned championship agility titles in three different organizations (ASCA, NADAC and USDAA), her agility career had a slow start. Part of the reason is that, like many others starting out in agility ten years ago, I began competing while still at the training stage. We subsequently had lots of rocky runs. On some, the vertical distance Kodi traveled jumping up at me was at least twice as far as the horizontal distance she traversed on the course.

But at some point it began to click, and after three years of competition we finally earned our first title, the USDAA Agility Dog (AD). After that the qualifying runs came a bit easier. Never easy, mind you; Kodi is an Aussie, after all. She doesn't let you have anything for free.

It helps that she is so . . . well, agile. Her jumping style has been compared to a Harrier jet, the British fighter that can hover in mid-air. Kodi can indeed turn in midflight, and sometimes it seems she can hover and even back up while still airborne. (All of which makes it even funnier to recall the self-proclaimed jumping expert who once told me that dogs without tails can't jump properly.) But what really helps is that Kodi is driven. When she blasts through the weaves poles you can see her shoving them aside right and left with her nose, and it is easy to imagine her thinking, "Get-these-things-out-of-my-way!" She has always galloped over the A-frame and dogwalk, and although she learned contacts before the day of the "tip" method, she rarely misses a yellow zone. Her performance on the teeter-totter is legal but not at all delicate. And if you make a mistake she will let you know all about it. She will let everyone within earshot know about it. She is, in short, not an easy dog to run. And in my early years in agility a number of people were not shy in telling me that I should not expect a great deal of success with Kodi. Happily, they were wrong. In 1998 Kodi was the first dog to earn the ASCA Trial Championship; before that she earned the NATCH (NADAC Agility Trial Champion), and has since earned an O-NATCH (a second NATCH) and an ADCH (USDAA Agility Trial Champion).

She has also had success at the NADAC Championships. She earned High Overall in the 20-inch Elite division in 1996, Third Overall in 20-inch Elite in 1997, and was a member of the winning Veterans/Junior Handlers team in 1999.

Kodi now competes as a Veteran in NADAC/ASCA, and in the Performance program in the USDAA. She's loving those 16-inch jumps.

Agility is her forte, but Kodi has also competed competently in obedience, earning the CD title in both ASCA and CKC. Her very first obedience trial was at the 1993 ASCA Nationals in Puyallup, Washington. I had entered her well in advance thinking that I would have time to work her in obedience before the Nationals. I didn't have time to do much obedience, so when the time came I decided I would just scratch her obedience run. Once at the Nationals, however, I found to my surprise that I wasn't allowed to scratch, so I had to compete even though I had never done any off-lead heeling with her. We ended up earning second place with a score of 196.5.

Kodi is full of surprises, but because she comes from working lines it is not surprising that she has shown herself competently in herding. In fact, at just over a year old she was named the Most Promising Young Aussie at the 1989 ASC of WA Summer Spectacular. That event marked her first time ever on cattle. She was also named the 5th Most Versatile Aussie at the 1996 ASCA National Specialty. She has earned the STD (Started Trial Dog) title on cattle, sheep and ducks. Those titles didn't come easily either, however. A friend who watched one of Kodi's early training sessions on sheep can attest to that. Kodi had no outrun at the time, just a run up the middle. As she finished her strafing the friend commented, "Left one standing in the corner." Another friend has threatened to splice a soundtrack from Championship Bowling onto a video of another early herding run.

I believe that Kodi splits the sheep because she creates more work that way, and gets to stay in the field that much longer. Kodi is a creative herding dog in other ways. At a Kathy Warren herding camp once, I told her to go to water before I had the gate open. Not having access to the big trough she "went to water" as best she could. Luckily someone had a camera handy, as you can see in the accompanying photo.

Finally, Kodi has one other passion that many, if not all, Aussie owners can relate to. That, of course, would be food. Kodi has a loose definition of the term: swallowable and not especially toxic.

For instance, when she was quite young Kodi had been gnawing on inappropriate pieces of furniture, so I decided to try the cayenne pepper treatment on the table legs in question. First I held out my hand with a little pile of cayenne pepper in it, to show her how yucky it was. She lapped it up, then licked her lips and looked up expectantly for more. I knew then that I was in trouble.

As she matured her eating habits matured as well. Once, left alone in the back of a pickup truck, she opened the sliding door to the cab, crawled through, and helped herself to a 9x13 carrot cake, with cream cheese frosting, that was on the passenger seat. Kodi believes in not leaving evidence. She ate the foil covering the cake as well.

Trying to beat her own record, she ate a 1-lb. bag of Jolly Rancher hard candy once, including the wrappers. Sharon Nelson, the owner of the van Kodi was in at the time, believed she had removed anything edible that would appeal to dogs. She was wrong.

To prove it, another time Kodi ate two entire McDonald's Happy Meals, packaging and all, in the very same van from under the sleeping noses of the children who were the intended recipients. ("Did she eat the toys, too?" someone asked me later. "There were toys?" I asked back.) Alas, Kodi had finally met her match, for she very shortly lost most of her not-so-happy meal. Our theory at the time was that the yellow dye in the cheeseburger wrappers didn't agree with her. At the age of 12, Kodi has slowed down. A little. My housemate recently left a 4-lb plastic tub of red licorice, with the lid on, on the floor of the computer room. Incredibly, there was about a pound of it left after Kodi had had her way with it. Even so, we had very colorful scat in the back yard for days afterward.

But even though Kodi has shown interest in obedience, herding, and especially edible items of any kind, none of those activities has sparked her passion like agility. Even today she quivers

with excitement when we walk to the start line. From the very beginning she took to the sport like a bird dog to water.

A story might best describe Kodi's agility work ethic. It was a few years ago, at a fun match, as I was running Kodi in a round of Regular agility. The teeter at this particular match was a bit too well balanced; that is, it didn't necessarily return to the down position after a dog ran across it. That was the case when Kodi and I approached it: we found ourselves facing the wrong end of the teeter. The up end.

It stopped me cold, but Kodi didn't pause. She ran up to the raised board, half-jumped up to grab it with her front paws, then slammed it to the ground with the canine equivalent of disdain. Looking ridiculously pleased with herself, she trotted across the teeter and continued with the course.

What else could I do but follow?

What else can any of us do? For while we like to pretend to be in charge, all Aussie owners know in their heart of hearts that when you own an Australian Shepherd, all you can really do is hang on and enjoy the ride.