

First Dog Agility Competition: Creating Joy For This! By Maximizing Reinforcement

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG If you listen in on [podcast episode number 203](#) or [episode 204](#), you would've learned about my two-and-a-half-year-old dog, This! and the fact that she was coming along to World Team tryouts with her mother, Momentum. Well, today I'm going to share what my plan was, how I achieved it, and how it could impact you in your dog training.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. So, I mentioned in the last couple of podcasts that I was going to take This! to the World Team tryouts. Now, was she ready to be trying out for a world team? Heck no. But I mentioned that my criteria for her was joy. Now that is so vague, how can joy be a criteria? Well, I'll share how it can be and how it was a criteria.

I'm also going to share with you the exact plan that I used that I think anybody can use if they are going to say, a class that they want to inject more joy in, or maybe a match that they want to inject more joy in. What I was going to was an agility competition where you could declare yourself as 'for exhibition only' (F.E.O.) or some people call it 'not for competition' N.F.C. runs, whatever they are, I'm going to share the exact strategy that I used, and I really think it's going to make a massive difference to you and your dog.

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But first, let's talk about my attitude going in, and all I kept thinking was I have this criteria of joy which like Susan, that's just so vague. This! has great agility skills. She doesn't have the confidence to show a lot of speed and enthusiasm when doing those agility skills. Now, it's not like she's terribly slow. She doesn't get distracted normally. But going into this competition, I planned a month ahead of time, but I knew no matter what I wanted to have a light heart in order to create this atmosphere of joy for This!.

And so, I contacted my friends at [4MyMerles](#) where I get my tug toys and my leashes, and I said to Brian and Shirley, "I want to create a leash for This! that when I look at it, it just sparks joy. When I look at it, it makes me lighthearted."

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So, they came up with this great leash, beautiful bright colors. If you're listening to this podcast, it's pink, it's blue, it's purple. And they wrote her name on the collar in a really funky font that just makes me smile. And that's exactly what I said to them. And they did a little extra, they put Handling 360 on the handle. I said, "I want to pick up this leash at the tryouts and just be happy and just be grateful for how far that This! has come in her progress in loving to live life to the fullest."

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And so, I planned everything for this event for her. I planned when she got her meals at a minimum of two and a half hours before she was supposed to go into the ring. I planned what toy I would use. I had somebody standing outside the ring so that when I finished the run and I probably was sucking air, that they could enthusiastically tug with her. So, it wasn't just up to me to bring that joy at the end of the run. So, we were all ready. First run she was just geared up to go in the ring. I've never seen her so amped up to go in the ring. I got her lined up between my legs.



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She was actually growling at me as I left. And as I was leaving the start line the Gate said, "Oh wait, they want to rake the weave pole, so can you just wait for a minute?" And really what I should have done, I should have taken my dog off the line. I should have gone outside the ring and played with her some more and brought her in at that same peaked up state. There's lesson number one for you all.

What I did was I engaged with her. I went back, I left her in the sit, and I got her charged up by challenging her. "Are you ready? Are you steady?" And then I led out. Now just as I was about to release her, somebody right behind her crinkled a water bottle and it spooked her. She got very low and turned around and broke her sit and started walking towards the jump.

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Now, I kind of heard this, but not really. I knew there was some sort of distraction, so I asked her to sit. She immediately sat, and then I released her. And at this moment I released her that crinkling of the water bottle happened again, so she again flicked around. I had to wait till she looked back at me. When I released her then she was not high on the joy scale.

So, this was lesson number one. I couldn't give every run like an evaluation of joy. It had to be at some points the lowest it got and the highest it got. So that's what I did with every run. So run number one, the lowest joy it got was three and a half. The highest joy I gave, it was like five and a half.

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And she actually did pick up some speed and was going a little bit faster. I might have given her a six. But then when I sent her to the weave poles, she saw the person who was raking the weave sitting in a chair and it spooked her, and she came away towards me.

So, we killed about five seconds as I got her back into the weave poles. But I remembered, this was her first agility trial. She'd been to a match before, but she'd never seen people at the ringside ready to jump in and help out and do some work. So that was new for her.

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She finished weaving. She picked up some more speed. Had a little bobble at the end, but she finished pretty strong. So, when I looked back at her time, because of all the little bobbles, even if I took out the five seconds delay at the weave poles, she was still 12.5 seconds behind the winning time. So, 12.5 seconds, that's a pretty big gap for a Border Collie to a Border Collie gap.

But I'm not discouraged. And I did consider let's go F.E.O. next. But I'm like, "You know, there was such a crazy circumstance with the crackling water bottle, I'm going to do better next time." And so, when we do things at Flyball, we just cue everything with a 'ready, set, go' and it's a trigger. And I thought, I'm going to do the rest of my runs with a 'ready, set, go' to get her amped up before I release her at the start line. And that's what I did for the rest of the runs.

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So run number two was a jumpers run. And This! she got a joy— the lowest joy she got on this one was a five and it went as high as a seven. And she was going places. She didn't like it when I had to call her back, so she would slow down a little bit, but she ended up only eight and a half seconds behind the first-place dog.

And so, I was enthused. I said, "Let's keep going." The next run is an agility run again. And so, this one I made a massive handling error for a young dog.



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I just expected too much of her. So, obstacle number three, she went off course. And so, I just turned her around and I repeated one, two, and three. And when I did that, I really didn't amp her up the way I should have. And so, she started off 1, 2, 3, 4, a little bit slow. Joy for her was around a four there.

But she finished. In the middle of the run, she actually got up to a seven and a half and an eight for joy. And so, she was powering in some places. I was so encouraged, but it was agility. She's slower on the seesaw so she was again 10 seconds behind the first-place time on that. But we had a lot of bobbles, so I was okay with that.

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I thought, I'm going to give her one more run. And I'm really glad I did. So, her final jumpers run, I decided this was going to be her last run and then I was going to go for exhibition only for our last run. And again, she had some bobbles, a couple run outs, but she was 6.2 seconds behind the first-place time.

So now that gap is going from 12 seconds down to 6 seconds. Definitely high on the joy. Actually, there was no low joy. I thought she was an eight the whole way around on this one. So, for those first four runs, what I loved was her recovery. She came back. She actually knocked a bar in one of these runs, and normally she would stop dead and look at the bar. She kept going. She acted as if she didn't even notice it.

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So that was huge. So that led me up to our fifth and final run. So, I said to the organizers after her fourth run, that's enough for her. I would like to go F.E.O. for exhibition only. Let's maximize the joy. And what is maximizing joy anyway? That was my goal for the weekend, I want to maximize joy.

And that is, I want to create a positive experience for my dog. Because if you can create a positive experience that is going to be reinforcing and the dog's going to want to repeat it again. So how do you create that positive experience? Well number one, there's clarity. Correct is easy. You create an environment where the dog's excited to do what you're doing and what you ask them to do is super easy for them.

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So, you [create the clarity](#). The clarity makes it easy to achieve success. The success gets reinforced, which creates an entire positive loop for the dog. They want to do it again. So, creating joy is creating confidence. It's teaching a dog this is a fun place to be, and that makes them look forward to wanting to go again. And when I took her in the ring for her fourth and fifth run, she was actually barking to go in the ring. She was excited. So I knew we were creating joy for this dog.

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And so going into my F.E.O. run or going into any training environment, guys, like I said off the top, it doesn't matter if you're going into a classroom, you want to create joy. You're going into an obedience match, anywhere that you can train and make it look like competition or anywhere you just want to add more joy to your training, I suggest you follow these five steps.

Number one, you've got to have a goal and my goal - maximize joy. I didn't know what the course was going to look like. I knew there'd probably be about 22 obstacles and I had a plan that I wanted to strategically reinforce her at different places around the course.



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And so, I knew that I had 60 seconds in an F.E.O. run. And I figured she'd get the biggest reinforcement, or the longest reinforcement, when we were done at the end, which meant I wanted to put in two more reinforcements somewhere in the middle. And my reinforcements, I engaged the help of two of my friends.

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And so, what I wanted them to do, I wanted me to be handling the dog. So, she saw Susan, the dog agility handler, the same thing she sees every time. But in the middle of the run after an obstacle where I've planned one of my friends is going to take off and drag a toy. And then I'm going to send her to that toy.

And so, the reinforcement process is chase, tug, restrain. Restrain in front of the next obstacle for the next go round. I anticipated it might take 10 seconds for those reinforcement processes.

It actually only took eight. But regardless, I knew I couldn't run all 22 obstacles and take two sessions of reinforcement out, so I had to eliminate some of those obstacles.

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The one that she's not as keen on is the weave pole, so I just left out an entire loop of weaving so that I could maximize joy. So, my plan, I was going to start with the same verbal trigger "ready set go," but this time I'm going to have one of my friends restrain her, get her a little bit excited, build an anticipation for the go.

There's no obvious reinforcement that she could see on me. Now, I could have put something in my pocket, but I really wanted to maximize the impact of the reinforcement. Number one, have a goal. Number two, know the rules. I knew that I had 60 seconds. I knew that I could not bring food in the ring, but I knew I could bring a toy in the ring.

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And so how could I maximize the value of that toy? I could have it be a squeaky toy, but I think that's walking the edge of the rules. It might be a distraction to a dog outside of the ring, so I didn't want to do that.

I knew by putting it on, having a long toy, create a drag would add excitement if that was something she got to chase rather than something she got to drive to and tug.

Sure, she likes to tug, but chase down and then tug? We are [maximizing the value of the reinforcement](#).

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So that came into my plan. I knew my rules. Number three was my plan. What's my reinforcement going to be? How can I maximize that reinforcement and how could I strategically get that reinforcement put in place where I needed it to be within the ring?

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I knew that I didn't want the dog to see me carrying a bunch of reinforcers. I wanted my dog to see me handling in agility. I wanted me as the handler doing the moves, be the trigger that we are conditioning that meant joy is following.



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Somewhere along the course, once I walked it, I would strategically say, "You're going to go here, and when my dog finishes this obstacle, I'm going to say, Go, go, go. You're going to take off." And she's going to chase the toy and have a game of chase, tug, restrain.

Which meant the person playing with her had to get the tuggy out of her mouth, get it behind her back, and restrain her, set her up to go and chase me for the next sequence.

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So, this was really well choreographed almost as if we'd rehearse it over and over again, which we didn't. But what we did do is rehearse the game of chase, tug, restrain at the warmup jump long before we ever went in the ring, actually long before the ring was even set.

So that I knew that I was using two people who had really good dog training mechanics that they could tug, quickly get the toy out in a way that wasn't deflating the dog, get the dog set up to look at the next obstacle, and then I could just start handling again.

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So, number four, rehearse the plan. Now, the only rule I had for this run was, there was no rule for Thissie. The reinforcement was coming out at these strategic points regardless of what happened. So, at one point I sent her to the backside of a jump, and she wasn't sure what to do. She slowed down and I'm like, "No rules. You get in the tunnel. You do not have to take that jump even though I cued it. No rules, you get in that tunnel."

I told my friends, the first reinforcement was going to happen after the seesaw. If she flew off the seesaw, she jumped off the seesaw, no rules. This one time you just keep running and she chases you.

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Now Angie, who is handling her within those two points within the ring was really, really good about the [placement of the reinforcement](#) that helped create excellence in her behavior before she got the toy. But she knew even if the dog jumped off, she was getting the reinforcement.

One time learning is not going to kill my dog's ability to do agility. And again, my criteria wasn't about getting a perfect dog walk or a perfect seesaw, it was about having maximum joy.

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Step number five is to execute the plan with joy and celebrate. So, I had my 60 seconds. I knew I was going to do two installments of chase, tug, restrain. And then another installment at the end of the run.

I kept it fun. I kept it flowing. We went from doing the first opening, ended at the seesaw. I ran out to get to the next handling position. Angie got her in a great position to do the next jump. I went all the way through, Angie had to run to the other end of the of the field to get ready to reinforce her after the dog walk.

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Now This! was a little distracted seeing Angie run, but that's okay, she kept working. She did her dog walk, got another installment of joy, chase, tug, restrain. Restrained her in front of the tunnel. I did the final loop up over the A-Frame and home, and then my friend Andrea was there at the end to drag the toy that This! could chase out of the ring.



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Now This! knows Andrea really well. She trains with us all the time. She actually owns This!'s litter brother, Mission. And so, she was so happy to tug with Andrea at the end of the run. Now, what made this even more perfect than I had planned is that my fellow competitors outside the ring were cheering and clapping and whistling and egging us all on.

And I have tears in my eyes just thinking of it. So, shout out to all the people over at McCann Dogs, Kayl McCann leading the way, screaming at the top of her lungs for us all to run faster for This!. It was just such an amazing feeling to have the support of everybody in the agility community who knew what we were doing, who knew we were maximizing the love of a sport for a dog who was less confident.

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It was such an amazing experience. And one that I think translates to anybody who is going in an F.E.O., going into a match, going into a training environment where you want to maximize joy. Now maybe you don't have really good dog training friends that can help you, but you could carry a toy with you and just reinforce after one obstacle.

I see so many people going into these F.E.O. runs or not for competition runs and they have their toy out, the dog sees it, and they do nothing until the end, and then they throw it over the last jump. Or the dog misses the weave entry three or four times, and then they reward them because they see the dog sniffing and they don't want to lose them.

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Be strategic. Now listen, we all start somewhere. I started exactly where you are. So don't feel bad if you feel, "Oh, I've just blown an opportunity. I see what Susan means now." Give yourself grace. We were all there. We all start with not knowing what's the right thing to do. But just think about how you can maximize the joy by maximizing the clarity because that's what grows the confidence.

The clarity comes through your [strategic use of what the dog loves as a reinforcer](#). Go into every training opportunity, keeping things short so that the dog can experience an amazing feeling. And I promise you, every one of those positive training opportunities builds for the dog and - until you turn around and you say, "I've got a dog who now absolutely loves agility."

Thissie and I, we are on that road and it's not too far in our future. I just know it. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 203: Reactive, Unmotivated and Fearful: Finding Resiliency For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 1](#)

[Podcast Episode 204: Dog Behavior And Diet: Recovery For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 2](#)

[4MyMerles Creations \(Tug Toys, Leashes and More\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 172: How To Teach Your Dog Anything With My Training Plan](#)

[Podcast Episode 205: The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know](#)

[YouTube Video: Dog Training Reinforcement Process: How, Where and When Are You Rewarding Your Dog?](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Mastery of Positive Reinforcement Based Dog Training](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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