

Goals, Challenges And Joy: Reflections On The Canadian World Team Dog Agility Tryouts With This!

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Last weekend, I competed at the Canadian Agility Dog World Team Tryouts, and I competed with my dog This!. Now, every dog I have ever tried out for the Canadian World Team for the World Championships of Dog Agilities, I have got on the team with each and every dog that I've tried out with.

But This!, for those of you who follow this podcast, you know, my dog This! isn't just like every dog I've ever owned. So, I thought today I'd give a little debrief about the experience that Thisy! and I had at Tryouts and what my reflections are from that experience and how I think these reflections are going to help each and every one of you that listen to this podcast that share your life with a dog.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. You know, it is less than a year ago that This! ran [her first ever agility trial](#) and completed a run. Last year during the World Team Tryouts, I took her in the ring for each run and ended up playing games with her because I just didn't feel like she was having as much fun as she could have.

She was still very overwhelmed because it was just a few short months since I discovered her nutritional problems and how I could help her have more fun in training. And not just training in dog agility, but training for anything.

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And though life with This! had been a struggle to train, it never was a struggle to love the dog. I've always just been crazy about her, even before she was even born. And so, when I could tell early on that she wasn't learning and progressing the way all of my other dogs, Border Collies or otherwise had, I had to assess my goals.

I had to assess my processes with her. Because it was those processes that led me to the goals that I achieved with my past dogs.

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And so, instead of saying, I would like to get this dog ready for world team tryouts when she's two and a half years old, which is approximately when I thought she might be ready. My goals were, I would like to see this dog have as much fun possible while training with me.

Training, doing anything. And of course, my goal was for her to enjoy agility as much as I enjoyed agility. But I wasn't going to train those agility skills, those courses, those sequences, the weave poles. I wasn't going to train any of that until I could reach her and help her to have just a little more fun each day.

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So, that was my goal. And looking back on this past weekend, I had three goals going into the weekend. Number one, I wanted This! to have fun. It had been over a month since I'd been in the ring competing with her and every trial, she seemed to have a little bit more fun than others. And that's a really difficult thing to evaluate. How do you evaluate it?



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Well, I do by based on the speed she's running and little things that she's doing. For example, at our building, which is artificial turf, so the surface is different, maybe a little more secure. She will swim through the weave poles with one foot leg than the other leg.

When she's competing on dirt, she will bounce with two legs. Now, is it because the footing is loose and she's not as secure? I don't know why, but to me, that's a way I could tell, "Well, she's actually driving harder if she could ever swim through those weave poles." That was just one thing I looked for.

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Eventually through this process, she started jumping off her contacts, which meant, 'Wow, you're going faster. You're having more fun.', I had to go back and evaluate my processes that helped her to know how to do a running contact. And that happened maybe three or four months ago. So, back to this weekend.

Number one goal, I wanted her to have fun. Like every single run out, I wanted to see that she was having fun before we entered the ring, while we were in the ring. Number two, for me as a handler, I wanted to make sure I stayed connected with her throughout each and every run. No matter what I did, I wanted to keep my eye on her because I knew that gave This! confidence.

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That maybe with some of my other Border Collies, I could send them to do a job and I could take off and run. But with This!, she would often slow down. Think of a dog chasing a rabbit. If the rabbit is maybe three or four or five feet away from that dog, that dog's going to run as hard as it can.

But if the rabbit's thirty or forty or fifty feet away, the dog might give a little bit of, "Oh, there's a rabbit." and then, "Oh, that's just too much effort. I'm not going to do it." And so, with This! I had that effect in agility.

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If I stayed, her bubble of driving hard was about ten to fifteen feet. If I got much more ahead than that, she certainly didn't drive as hard as when I was closer. But it was a balancing act because I'm not as fast as most runners that I'm competing with at this level. And so, I needed to be able to take off at times but stay connected.

So, number one, for her to have fun. Number two, Susan, stay connected. And I knew if number one and number two happened, there was a very good chance of me reaching my number three goal. And that was for This! to end up in the top ten of all five classes.

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Now, I thought if she got in the top 10, she might actually even maybe make reserve on the world team. And part of me said, "Susan, put top five." And when I was writing these goals down and I just said, "No, I can't." And that's unlike me because normally I would go, "Yeah, let's go for number one." But I felt I don't want to put pressure on This!.

Not that my goals ever put pressure on my dogs, but that's what I thought. So top ten, that's reasonable. Number one, number two, it might bring me number three. So, day one, we had one run. Lo and behold, Thisy! started off a little slow, but she was barking before we went in the ring. And guess what? She was swimming in her weave poles.



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Two signs that she was having fun. She was a little more cautious early on, which is not unlike her at the very beginning of any trial, but she still ended up in sixth place. Now that's important because in order to be considered as a dog selected to the Canadian world team, you needed at least one class in fifth place.

And I thought to myself, well, she wasn't even really running that fast for her and she ended up sixth. This is encouraging. Well, day two, there were little bobbles caused by my not meeting my second goal in that I would take like a microsecond of disconnection from her, and I would get a refusal.

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And so, day two, I had two runs with little bobbles in each run. And guess what, we still ended up in the top ten of each run. She was seventh and eighth in those runs. And so, here we are at the end of day two, three top ten placements, and she's in fourth place overall and just one point out of third place.

Mind blown because the top three dogs at this event had a guaranteed spot on the Canadian world team. And I started to think, part of me was like, "Is she really ready for that? Is she really ready for me to consider taking her to Europe? Was she ready to be running on that big stage?"

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Now I know Thisy! was potentially three to five seconds behind the Canadian dogs. And I know that might be another two or three seconds behind the best dogs in the world. Could I help her to have more joy if we got on the world team by September?

I said, "Susan, that isn't part of your goals. That's not part of what you should be thinking of this weekend." So, I parked it. Went into day three with her in fourth place, the first run was a jumper's run. And there was one little miscalculation on my part with handler pressure in that a dog is running in one direction and the pressure of the handler perpendicular to that will push the dog in a direction you don't want them to go.

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That bobble cost me another refusal, but otherwise she ran beautifully. And then the final run, it was a very complex course. The first really challenging course of the weekend. And I thought this is our jam. This is something we can do well. And guess what, more than halfway through the course, she was on fire.

She was running harder than she'd ran in any of the other classes. And then I broke rule number two. I felt she was weaving, and this was my chance to get far away from her down the dog walk. And I let her go. I saw her finish the last pole. I called her name, and I took off running hard.

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And in that moment of disconnect, she did not go up the dog walk, but she went around the dog walk and went into an off-course tunnel. And I knew right then our chances of going to Europe representing Canada were gone. But as she came out of that tunnel, rule number one was also gone, Thisy! having maximum fun.

I threw up my hands and I knew exactly I'd let her down. My moment of disconnect was followed by an obvious moment of disappointment for Thisy!. She could see that things had changed. That I wasn't doing what I'd been doing at all those other seventeen obstacles.



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And so, I got her back to the weave poles, and I restrained her. And I said, “Are you ready? And are you steady?” And I made it fun again, right in the middle of the course, I stopped everything, and I just made it fun. She went off and she didn't finish with the same drive as she was going up to that point. But we still finished as a team with great connection.

And I can't tell you how good I felt about the five runs that we did. I look at the weekend with a dog who for the most part, up until she was 20 months old, I questioned whether she would ever do agility. And I was okay with it. I just wanted her to have joy in something. I went from that to less than a year later, being in a position where we were almost considered a dog for the Canadian world team.

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And so, the reflections on all of that to me are, ‘What are your goals with your dog? And are your processes leading you to those goals?’ And for me, any of those processes we have with our dogs need to include the dog's emotional state about what we're doing.

Meaning that you need to have a way to evaluate that your dog is having fun. And having fun means they are attacking. This! was barking and screaming before we went into the last two runs at the tryouts. And that just brought me so much joy.

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I don't know if it brought the people around me that much joy, but we can fix that. And so, whatever your goals are, maybe your dog, you've got a chronic [house-training problem](#), or you have a [leash reactivity](#) challenge with your dog, or your dog won't bring back the toy, or your dog [barks too much](#).

Whatever your challenge is, if you have not progressed in your goal to overcome that challenge, please evaluate your processes and include one that maximizes the joy for the dog. And if you aren't maximizing the joy for the dog, then what gives us the right to have any expectations for that dog?

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What gives us the right to believe that dog shouldn't be reactive on leash? That dog should bring your toy back or that dog should stop peeing in your house.

What can you do to [arrange coincidences](#) for the dog, to establish an environment where they feel safe, where there is a way for them to have joy.

And if you haven't, please go back and listen to [podcast episode number 203 and 204](#), where I talked about This!'s journey in my discovery of her GI problems. And the massive turnaround and how that discovery and how when I changed her diet, absolutely was a huge exponential jump in her ability to have joy in our training.

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Now, did it change overnight? No, here we are a little over a year later, we're a long way from where we are. And one of the most important things that happened this weekend, besides her swimming her weave poles, was when I had those little bobbles and I had to bring her back, she didn't shut down and sniff. She said, “Let's go.” That's a dog who's saying, “I actually like what we're doing here.”

And if that is what you measure with your dog every day, that you progress that joy while you're progressing your goal, then your processes are in place. And if your processes aren't in place to lead to your goal, then reevaluate your processes.



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You don't have to reevaluate the goal, reevaluate the processes. So, my goal is still to get This! on the Canadian world team. That has always been my goal. And if it never happened, well, guess what? Some of my goals I don't reach. That doesn't mean I don't love the process of attempting to attain those goals.

So, I don't alter my goal. I alter the processes that lead me to the attainment of those goals. So, if you're not progressing, overcoming those challenges because those challenges are going to affect the relationship you have with your dog.

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If you aren't doing something that helps you to progress at least on a weekly basis, if not a daily basis, progress towards a better outcome for whatever your challenge is. If you're not progressing towards where you want to be, reevaluate your processes.

Something, my friend, is flawed. Something in the process. And if the first note, the first change you make is the ways that you've attempted to have more fun with your dog, then I promise you that is a great first step to come up with new processes that lead you to that eventual outcome, the ultimate goal that you're trying to attain.

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For me and This!, we're going to continue to train hard because training hard is just having fun. Back at home, doing the little things that make her drive with more joy, planning to take her to more locations. And when I get more joy in all of these different obstacles, then we're going to take it on the road and have more fun at more agility venues.

And I just want to give a special shout out to every one of you listening to this podcast that has been a supporter of Team This!. We feel your love, we feel your support, and that's what keeps us going and trying harder every time we go out there and train.

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So, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you to each and every one of you. Now, if you're listening to this podcast, jump on over to YouTube, because at the end of this video, I'm going to include all five of This!'s runs from the Canadian World Team tryouts. So, you can see all five of the runs and listen to me talking to her, giving her the cues that I give her as we go through each and every run. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 206: First Dog Agility Competition: Creating Joy For This! By Maximizing Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 254: Why Your Older Puppy Or Dog Is Not House Trained And What To Do About It](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reactive or Aggressive Dogs: Key Insights with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 240: Stop Barking Dogs! Step-By-Step Action Plan And Anti-Bark Strategies To Avoid](#)

[Podcast Episode 44: Using Coincidences and Positive Associations in Dog Training](#)

[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](#)



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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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