



## FEATURE

### Akitas in Agility,

--Lawrence Collins

After Angie and I moved to Texas last year, I started seriously training our two Akitas in agility. A few of you get the updates that we send out documenting our successes and challenges. And recently, Wilma and Carol asked me to write a little about what I'm doing. I've never done anything like this before, but Carol was nice enough to give me some prompting with a series of questions...so I thought I'd make the articles a little like an interview. I hope that this is informative...

**What made you think of doing performance activities with your Akitas? What were you seeking when you decided to give it a try?**

Both of these questions are related, so let me turn back the hands of time and tell you a bit about my past, and a discussion that I was having with some online friends.

As a kid, I had no experience in conformation events (or any other AKC venue for that matter), but I grew up walking the fields with my father hunting rabbits with Beagles. Our Beagles may not have ever won an award in the ring, but "Lucy" could tell the difference between an old trail and a new one, and "Slick" had the endurance to run a rabbit to ground whether it was a cottontail or a swamp rabbit. The value we placed on the Beagles that we kept and bred was based on their performance in the field.

So spin the dial on the clock forward 20+ years and I'm living in the city with two Akitas and we're getting our first exposure to conformation events and "showing". And one of my observations was...yes, your Akita looks nice, but can he/she hunt? The reality, as I saw it, was that although they were beautiful, most were unproven in ability. I'm not one to suggest resurrecting pit-fighting, nor is it realistic that there will ever be more than a handful of Akita owners that will use them for hunting (I've only ever known one). So I went looking for a venue that would demonstrate the athletic ability of the Akita – some type of work to prove that the Akitas were more than beauty contestants.

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### EDITOR'S NOTES

Does anyone have a book they would like to suggest for reviewing in the next edition?

I found the story of Edgar Sawtelle to be very good. It is a novel, though, and is not specifically about Akitas.

Also, if you have news to add, please send it on to my email. [speier2@hotmail.com](mailto:speier2@hotmail.com)

Thanks to all who heloped, with ideas, articles and with your comments on The Dog Man. All was appreciated.

Maybe next time I try to do a crossword I will try using excel instead of the table option.

### ACA REGION 4 NEW

### PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

--Wilma Montz

Hi Everyone,

Can you believe it...the Dog Days of Summer are upon us and the heat is on. So much has happen since the last edition of HOT NEWS but as a club we pulled together and accomplished some great things. First of all, kudos to Team Allen (Jessica and Daniel) for working so hard to give us a year's worth of high quality issues of HOT NEWS. Not only

did you spoil us but you certainly raised the bar from our old paper editions.

Next, I'd like to thank all the terrific folks that made our 2008 Specialty Show such a success. Mike Bennett and the Show Committee did a terrific job for our 10<sup>th</sup> consecutive show and Jill Drennan worked her magic as web goddess and held the Texas Combined Specialties Association together. Thanks to Jill's hard work that organization went from almost biting the dust to its present 19 member clubs.

Sincerest thanks go to our ACA Region Rep, Donna Bennett, who helped recruit trophy donations and party-goers for our after-Specialty banquet even of she couldn't join the festivities. Donna has done an amazing job getting many former ACA members to rejoin the organization and rallied us to provide input on recognizing Japanese Akitas as a different breed, changing the breed standard and of course voting for directors at large and National Specialty Judges. In addition to handling her Region Rep duties, Donna and Jessica also helped Jill up-date our website and up-date the HOT list with all our new members.

We all know that an organization is only as good as its members and we certainly have some terrific new members. Carol & John Speier and Lawrence & Angie Collins were life savers as they helped with *Meet the Breed* during the Ft Worth KC show and most recently, Carol has agreed to take over the publication of HOT NEWS with help from

Teresa Brown as well as coordinate *Akimatsuri* 2008; while Lawrence is helping Jill with the Combine's e-list and website. Thanks Laura Gosnell for helping Carol & Jim Sjoberg with the Rescue Auction and volunteering to help select the slate of officers for 2009 as well doing site selection for our recent picnic/meeting.

I also want to take time to thank Jim & Carol Sjoberg, Mike Bennett and Jill Drennan for agreeing to another term in office and to Carlos & Javier for agreeing to coordinate our annual

meeting, Fun Match and our 2009 After-Specialty Banquet. Special thanks to Terry Jo Pyper for her excellent Introduction to CGC training and three cheers to our Akitas for giving us reason to get up in the morning.

Team Fudge had her own Texas-size cheering section as she dazzled many judges on the Southern Show circuit and we thank Dawna Mauldin for all her posts on "Sid's little girl." Sadly, we bid farewell to many truly great friends: Cowboy, Booray, Little Bear, Mugsy, Zima, Mongo and Sasha as well as Pat Szymanski. *Domo Arigato* for being you.

Till next time, thanks everyone for all that you do. Keep up the great work!



### BOOK REVIEW

#### **Dog Man, An Uncommon Life on a Faraway Mountain**

**--by Martha Sherrill**

This review is based on responses from members who have read this book.

#### **Question 1: Did you like the book?**

Everyone who read and responded to these questions liked the book very much. Most

commented that they could not put it down, and read it in a matter of hours or a few days.

### **Question 2: What did you like the most/least?**

1. Although the focus of this book was the story of Morie's life, readers were pleased to see a book containing Akita history that was not written by someone who had a "dog agenda". Martha Sherrill's voice was that of a reporter rather than someone who was promoting or bashing the breed we love. Through her many interviews, she provided insight into the lives of Morie, his family and their lives together.

2. The story of the life of Morie Sawataishi was a compelling read, especially since his life's focus was the survival, restoration, and improvement of the Akita dog. He strove to restore the character traits of *kisho*, (boldness, courage, and presence) along with the necessary physical structure to enable the Akita to reclaim its' status as a companion, guardian and hunter. Kitako, Morie's wife, described kisho as being a certain calmness and intelligence that special Akitas exude.

3. A point of interest for many of us was Morie's objection to what we would consider obedience or canine good citizenship training. He felt that this sort of thing would detract from the Akita's natural ruggedness and primitive instincts. This is in direct contrast to

what is today considered responsible dog ownership.

4. The book had numerous great photographs, which tracked the course of Morie's life, his family, how and where they lived, and the developmental changes and refinements in the dogs he loved.

5. Morie's story provided insight into the culture of the Japanese people who lived prior to and following World War II. This was a difficult and unpleasant time, during which, the

Japanese people exhibited perseverance and acceptance of life as it unfolded. Morie's unwavering determination in pursuit of an ideal was considered an honorable way to live in this culture. The values he exhibited as he lived his life were the measure of the man. Focus and stoicism were attributes necessary to survival.

### **Things people did not like about the book**

1. Morie's treatment of his wife and children seemed to exhibit a lack of concern for their welfare, or perhaps, even cruelty. The dog's needs were met, but wife and children underwent great hardship and loss.

2. Martha Sherrill, the author, was criticized for her failure to convey an understanding of Eastern culture and its differences, as compared to Western culture, particularly in pre and post-World War II. A man was expected to exhibit certain character traits including focus and dedication to an ideal. How one lived his life was more important than possessions or wealth. Hardship had value in character development and conveyance of life lessons. Women and children were of secondary importance to a man's life work.

### **Question 3: Are you ready to head for the snow country?**

1. Most of our readers declined the possibility of going to the snow country with or without

their dogs. Things such as, both owners and dogs, being spoiled by climate controlled environments and food that does not have to be caught and killed immediately before eating.

2. Some of our dogs, given a short adaptation period, would probably be quite happy to head for the snow country. (Having lived in very

remote Alaska with Akitas, I found that they adapted very readily to the cold and were more than ready to hunt, if allowed. My concern was that they lacked experience with predators such as bears, wolves and wolverines. However,

their instincts and learning curve are nothing short of amazing.)

3. Some of us wonder what it would be like to visit Morie and Kitako at their mountain home. Although they are now of advanced age, we wonder, do they still have Akitas?



## FEATURE CONTINUED

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### Akitas in Agility, *Lawrence Collins*

So...I looked at the typical events and asked myself what I felt would best demonstrate the athletic ability that would be required of a hunter. And of those venues available to us, because we lived in the city at the time, I felt that agility best fit the bill – requiring a demonstration of intelligence, athletic ability, training, and the ability of both Akita and owner to work together – besides which, it looked like fun for the “team”.

**What kinds of attitudes do the Akitas need, and at least as important, what kind of attitude should the human part of the team have or convey?**

This is a tough question for me because I'm relatively new to agility, and we've only ever

owned four Akitas; and truthfully, only the two we have currently “work” for their meals. Our first two had it easy, comparatively speaking. But I'll do my best to answer this question based on the limited experience with my two, because they are VERY different.



Starting out...Blaze and Teddy were about as different as they could possibly be as puppies. Blaze, at eight weeks, was trying to *run with the big dogs*, as evidenced by this picture of her with “Lucy” and “Merlin”. My goal when I picked her (or when she picked me)

was to find an Akita that seemed to have natural athletic ability.

My goal with Blaze from “Day 1” was to train her in agility. And believe me when I tell you that one can never place a high enough value on obedience training. Competing (or hunting) requires a great deal of control. Her attitude, ability, and intelligence were demonstrated early in life. She had a desire to “work”, but was a constant challenge to keep focused. She would rather run, jump, and chase, than work off commands. She has a VERY high energy level, as evidenced by her lean appearance, and agility is the perfect outlet for that energy.

When we chose Teddy (or when he chose Blaze), we brought a very different Akita into our family. He had a natural “build” that was pleasing to the eye, and his movement was good; but his nature was also much more relaxed. He didn't have to run with the big

dogs, he knew he could if he wanted...but was just as content to lie in the shade and chew on a bone. Comparatively, he was easier to train in obedience, but is harder to motivate to “perform” on command. When he's working, he can be outstanding. But he is also much more likely to take a break on his schedule, rather than yours. If you come to watch him at Reliant, don't be surprised if he decides to take a nap in a tunnel midway through the run.

In terms of the human attitude, patience is the biggest hurdle I think most people will encounter. Very quickly you learn how to tell when your dog is “done”. Training is not just physically taxing, but also mentally taxing for the dog, especially early in the training when everything is new. You have to train yourself to have a good attitude, even when your dog is not

doing what you think it ought to. None of the training comes quickly or easily...and I'll share a few words about that in a bit.

One other thing that needs mentioned is the importance of positive reinforcement. You can't make an Akita enjoy agility. They have to naturally enjoy it...and you can enhance that through positive reinforcement. When you are just starting, there is a lot of "cheerleading" and rewards for small steps forward. As they get more advanced, the rewards change as well. We even differentiate between "normal" treats and "high-dollar" treats. They know the difference...and react accordingly.

**How much of a time commitment is needed to be competitive? Did you start out with the idea of being competitive?**

Yes – I had every intention of being competitive, at least among Akitas, from the

very beginning. My goal has always been to receive an invitation to Eukanuba, and I believe that we will get there eventually. We may never outrun a Border Collie, but it won't be for lack of trying.

In terms of a time commitment...well, that's really up to you and how fast you want to get to the point of being competitive. Blaze's play buddy when she was a puppy was "Mack", a Rottie. He trains an hour a day, every day, 365 days a year at Obedience and has several titles, including at least one HIT, to show for it.

We started out a little more relaxed than Mack and Jeremy. When we were just getting started, and our Akitas were still young, we trained 1-2 hours per week. Sometimes all we did was obedience. Sometimes we attended beginning agility class and did small obstacles for exposure. We did not do anything that might be considered strenuous until

they were 18 months of age. Today, I work 4-5 hours per week.

Blaze can work 45-60 minutes with short breaks without issue, even in the 90+ degree summer weather here on the Gulf Coast. Teddy might last 15 minutes. We train early in the morning or late at night, always keeping water on-hand, and a sharp eye on the Akita for mental and physical exhaustion.

A friend of mine said to count on at least a year of training before you are ready to begin competing, and I would concur with that.

**Are there negatives to overcome?**

The biggest negative that I've encountered is the perception of our breed. Whether we like it or not, and whether we agree with it or not, what we see as "regal", most people find

intimidating. So...one of my goals is to change the mental image of our breed among the people with whom I train, and my instructors. My current instructor told me that she was scared of Akitas when we first went to class, but now she is perhaps their biggest fan...but we both recognize the limitations that come with a breed that can be dog aggressive and we keep a short lead on their behavior.

The only other issue I've encountered is the requirement of a CGC certificate for certain training facilities for insurance/liability reasons. Both of our Akitas earned their CGC shortly after completing their basic obedience. I cannot emphasize enough that I believe every Akita owner, and certainly every conformation participant, should take the time to earn this recognition for his/her Akita for two reasons.

1. The basic obedience that is required for the CGC test will serve the owner well for participating in other events, such as agility.
2. Having an overwhelming number of Akitas with their CGC serves to combat the image of our breed as a "bad" dog.

A friend of ours in the UK was excluded from participating in agility class because she sought to train with an Akita, rather than something more “ordinary”. It is our responsibility to change the image of our breed, and successful completion and competition in events such as agility serve that purpose.

### Do you need prior training? What about the physical mobility of the owner/trainer?

You do not need prior training, nor do you need to be particularly mobile, to train and compete in agility. I have seen video of people with physical limitations competing

successfully in agility...not with Akitas...but if you are willing to do the training, I have no doubt that anyone can participate. I will say that it would be easier on me if I weren't 40 lbs overweight. Grin...

But seriously, basic obedience is the only training that I would judge to be absolutely necessary. Start the puppy early. Susan Cargill starts her puppies with small ramps and “wobbly” objects before they leave her at 8 weeks old. If the goal is performance when picking a puppy, look for energy and confidence...these will serve a puppy well in attaining the team goal.

### What do you really need for equipment and training? Is this a costly thing to do?

You don't have to have your own equipment, but you do need access to a facility. I spend about \$50/month/dog on training. Entry fees are about the same as for a conformation event, although there are typically more entry possibilities each day. And basic items like jumps are easy to make for practice at home.

### Beginning training, practice...What are the first steps?

The first step is to complete basic obedience. Your Akita needs to be focused on you for what it is

supposed to do. “Recall” is such an important aspect of the training that I can't even begin to tell you how many times it has saved my butt. And since you are doing basic obedience, go get your CGC (see my previous note) to remove any barriers you may encounter at training facilities.

The second step is to find an introductory agility class. Two things to take into consideration when choosing a class...

1. For you to take instruction (criticism), you need to find someone with whom

you “connect”. Choose an instructor that is right for your team. Go to a class and look at how the instructor teaches. If unsure, and you have choices, try out a few different facilities/instructors. Just like when you were in school, every teacher is different and you will like some better than others.

2. I like to be in a class with similarly sized dogs so that a lot of time isn't wasted changing jump heights.
3. And one of my friends pointed out that some instructors specialize in different groups. My instructor, Kathy, has an entire class of pit bulls...because nobody told her that pit bulls couldn't do agility...and she has a few that are really excelling at the work given them.

Other than that...get out there and try it.

### What are the good days like? Is it mostly luck, or just plain hard work?

When everything goes off as planned, a good run is a huge adrenaline rush. You know that your dog nailed it...which usually means you didn't screw up the commands. :-). I've caught myself pausing on the course because Blaze or Teddy executed an obstacle picture perfect, and a couple of weeks ago my instructor forgot to watch the rest of Teddy's run because she had this mental image of him going over the triple jump.

Some of it is just work. With the large breeds, the “contacts” and the “weave poles” are the hardest part of any agility course. Akitas have a long stride, and when they are moving, it is easy to miss a “contact” because it falls between strides. I had a judge tell me that he sees too many handlers hurt their large breed dogs by trying to shorten their stride to hit the contacts regularly, rather

than accepting that they will occasionally miss a running “contact”.

And with an Akita’s size, the typical set of weave poles can be difficult to navigate. This has been our biggest challenge.

Luck comes when you see the course that has been determined by the judge. Some courses are better for small dogs than large ones. Some are better for large rather than small. All you can do is train hard and hope for a good judge – the same as conformation.

### What determines a high score at trial? And how are titles awarded?

A qualifying run, or “Q”, is a combination of completing the obstacles successfully under a certain amount of time. The fastest run with the fewest faults determines the high score.

For example, you lose 5 points if your dog tries to skip an article, but then completes it successfully. You lose 10 points if you skip an article or do it unsuccessfully. You must always be under the time allotted for the event, and you can never drop a bar on a jump.

1. At the novice level, you are allowed 15 faults.
2. In open, you are allowed 10 faults.
3. In excellent, you have to be perfect.

AKC offers three events:

1. Standard – includes all agility obstacles – tunnel, teeter, chute, jumps, a-frame, dog walk, table, weave-poles, and tire

2. Jumpers with weaves – includes jumps, tunnels, and weave poles
3. Fast – this is a game to accumulate points under a certain amount of time and requires you to teach your dog to work away from you off commands –

VERY CHALLENGING at the Excellent level.

But apart from AKC, there are several different agility organizations offering trials: CPE, NADAC, USDAA, DOCNA, etc. Each of these organizations has their own criteria/rules for successful completion of a course, but all of them come down to the same thing...titles are awarded based on the number of “Q’s” in particular events.

I like CPE for the novice at agility. A level 1 title is easy to earn while your team is still training, and the success for the dog-handler team is inspiration to continue. Level 1 does not have a “teeter” or “weave poles”, the two hardest things for most dogs to learn, and they allow you to drop one bar on a jump.

**Would you do it again? What would you change?**

I would absolutely do it again...without hesitation. And I wouldn't change a thing...not the Akitas I have, not the schedule I've kept, nor the places I've trained. I think this has been the most fun I've had with a dog, since the days when I watched my first

Beagle pup catch the scent of a rabbit for the first time and learn what it means to run with the pack.

<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	1.	10.					
<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	9.	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	11.
<b>X</b>	2.			<b>X</b>	3.					
<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
4.							<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	5.			<b>X</b>	6.			
7.		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	8.					<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>

Across

1. The Japanese Akita who set the standard for loyalty.
2. The letters standing for a Texas Akita Club
3. Traditional Japanese Hunter
4. Canine athletic performance competition.
5. Japanese word meaning "dog"
6. Particularly ferocious moonbear
7. Our state abbreviation
8. Japanese Akita preservation group

Down

4. Large Japanese dog
9. The Dog Man
10. Japanese Fall festival
11. Wife of the Dog Man