

News

Traveling at MACH speed

February 11, 2009 - Linda Brady certainly has a knack for training fast dogs.

Two months ago, the Oxford resident had her fourth canine, a 6-year-old Belgian sheepdog named Schooner, earn his Master Agility Championship (MACH) title.

"Most people don't even see one (MACH dog). Very few people see two," said Brady, who's been teaching dog obedience since 1978. "I'm just really fortunate to have dogs that have been physically healthy and mentally sound. They absolutely love it."

The MACH is the highest rung on the agility ladder of titles handed out by the American Kennel Club.

In Brady's mind, earning the title is the equivalent of an amateur athlete taking home a gold medal at the Olympics.

"A lot of dogs just can't do it," she said. "They're not fast enough or their owners don't have the capability of training them to be a MACH dog."

Agility is the fastest growing dog sport in the United States with the AKC holding its first agility trial in 1994.

During competitions, dogs demonstrate their agile nature and versatility by following cues from human handlers through a timed obstacle course consisting of bar and tire jumps, tunnels, weave poles, an A-frame, a dog walk, a seesaw and others.

It took Schooner three years to earn his MACH, but he finally did it Dec. 13 at competition in Dexter.

"This past year he's just like blossomed. Everything came together," said Brady, who operates the Canine Community Center, a school specializing in obedience and agility training with locations in Warren, Troy and Clinton Township.

To attain a MACH, a dog must achieve two perfect scores in two different rings (a standard ring and a jumpers ring) in 20 different shows. In other words, the pooch must flawlessly complete 40 different obstacle courses in 20 shows to earn the required 20 Double Qualifying runs needed for a MACH.

MACH dogs must also earn 750 "speed points," which are given for the number of seconds under the expected time in which a dog is supposed to complete a given obstacle course.

At the Dexter show, Schooner completed the 65-second, 180-yard standard ring in 45 seconds and the 40-second, 150-yard jumpers ring in 29 seconds.

Schooner is only the fourth member of his breed in the United States to earn both a breed championship and MACH title.

Belgian sheepdogs are normally very active canines, but Schooner's typically pretty calm and gentle, according to Brady. She was once able to photograph Schooner posing next to a fawn curled up in her backyard.

But as soon as Schooner gets in the agility ring, he unleashes all that energy he stores up like a battery and turns into a "maniac."

"It's like Jekyll and Hyde."

Ironically, Brady's first MACH dog was another Belgian sheepdog named Wiley. He too was a breed champion.

Her other two MACH dogs are both Golden Retrievers - Riggs, who earned her title in March 2005, and Chatter, who earned her champion status last October in Traverse City after 1½ years of competing.

For a while, Schooner and Chatter (whose mother is Riggs) were competing to see who could get their MACH first.

"It was a race between the two of them," Brady said. "She's very consistent, but not quite as fast as Schooner. We were kind of betting on who was going to finish first. My money was on her, so I won."

Both Chatter and Riggs are now in the Agility Hall of Fame.

For those interested in seeing if their dog's got what it takes to earn a MACH, Brady warned it takes time (both in and out of classes), commitment, training and the proper equipment.

"Agility training takes patience," she said. "It's not something that comes overnight."

Obedience training is a must.

"You cannot get through an agility title without off-leash control," Brady said. "Your dog has to be sound around other dogs."

Above all, a dog must be in good physical condition and well-groomed in order to compete.

"It can't be a little couch potato," Brady said. "It must be like a little athlete."

CJ Carnacchio is editor for The Oxford Leader.



Oxford resident Linda Brady and her MACH dogs Chatter (center) and Schooner. Photo by C.J. Carnacchio.