



MACH Material We're Not...

And It's Okay



By Beth Widdows

I have two of the sweetest little Westhighland Terriers (Westies) you could ever hope to meet. But MACH (Masters Agility Champion) material, they are not. And, frankly, MACH is not in my genes either.

So why in the world am I running with my dogs in agility? Isn't the goal to Q (qualify) every time? When folks go to school or read articles, isn't their main goal to learn how to take a second off their A-frame time? Truthfully, my Westies need to take TEN seconds off their A-frame time. We do running contacts to add speed, and they have never yet missed a contact because it would not occur to them to jump before they got to Mommy. It is more likely that they would stop and sniff for a while.

So I guess if you are looking for that one idea that will make all the difference in your game, you aren't likely to find it here—unless you are the person who is thinking about entering trials, and you are afraid to get out there because you might look silly. *People might laugh at me and my dog*, you worry! Well, kids, yes they might. But

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It's Okay (continued)

you have to realize that you aren't the first team that has been laughed at and you won't be the last. And you are in control of the situation if you just change your thought processes slightly. No one is laughing AT you if you make sure they are laughing WITH you!

Let me make it easier for you. Think about your goals in agility before you go any further. Forget the pressure to excel unless that's what is really important to you. If that's what you want to do, great. You don't need me. But if you are like many of us in agility, you aren't going to go to the agility championships. You aren't going to be the best darn agility trainer out there. You are going to suffer your share of NQs (Not Qualified). You are not going to worry too much about whether your dog is doing exactly the right footwork. If this is you, it's OKAY! Your goal can be something simple like a Novice title and a lot of fun with your dog.

Let me tell you about some of the stuff that happens on our runs. You won't feel so silly once you realize that STUFF HAPPENS to everyone. Sometimes, I get lost on the course. Or I run by the jump and realize Molly has disappeared... yep, she is back there behind the jump just staring at me. *What... could you mean I should JUMP this thing??* Or Glennie has decided he likes that dark tunnel and thinks we'll just hang out there for a bit.

Let me tell you about my dogs and me. First, picture two Westies – small, white terriers. Westies are rather independent little creatures. My girl is Briarcliff Golly Miss Molly, OAP, NJP, ME, RE. She was born Nov. 4, 1997 and is now considered a “veteran” in some circles. I didn't get started in this competition stuff soon enough with her, to my everlasting regret. Miss Molly Marie isn't built for agility. Ten and half inches tall puts her in the 12-inch category. She can't jump that high so we started and stayed in AKC's Preferred class where she can jump 8 inches. My goal for running with Molly is to give her a great, fun time with me.

Glendennin's Pride (Glennie) is my boy. He came to me as a foster dog and never left. He was abandoned in a plastic carrier on a warm day in March 2001. He had many issues to overcome, starting with a severe fear of men, followed by separation anxiety. And then there was just anxiety in general. Glennie worries. My competition goal was to help him develop self-confidence. It's working. It has just taken longer than it would have for another dog and there are occasional lapses. Unfortunately, many of these lapses have happened in the middle of an agility course.

For example, one day at the Westie Nationals, he was doing fine until he got to the top of the A-frame and spotted the judge. *WHAT is that person doing on MY course?* The judge did her best to keep an

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It's Okay (continued)

eye on him while turning her back, but he was totally unable to refocus. The remainder of his run was accomplished with his head cranked around so he could keep his eye on that other person.

Glennie may not be the world's best athlete but he knows how to work a crowd. He has probably had more standing ovations coming off a course than most of the "good" dogs because he clearly gets freaked but he doesn't give up.

And then there is me. I'm a nearly 60-year-old woman, not skinny, with white hair. People always want me to enter those contests for people who look like their dogs. Add glasses and an asthma inhaler and you have the picture. Remembering the course and not falling down are my ongoing goals in agility. I have certainly done both.

Each trial seems to bring a new way for one of my dogs to humble me, but we are meeting our goal of having fun together so we just laugh and go on. My dogs know when they have done well and they know when they have not. Neither of them has any concept about "the need for speed." But while we can, we will continue to run and "the devil" with the clock. Glennie is getting so much more confident. In his last run he actually got ahead of me and took a wrong jump. I was thrilled. Maybe he will be able to run in Excellent, for which he finally qualified. Maybe he will continue being a clown. I don't care. What we are doing is enough for the three of us.

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Beth worked for the telephone company starting way back when it was still "Ma Bell." She retired in late 1996 and got her first dog, a Westie named Molly, in 1998. Her competition activities include agility, earthdog and rally.

She began doing Westie Rescue in mid 1998 and adopted a foster boy in 2001. She is chair of the local Westie Club's Rescue (West Highland White Terrier Club of Southeastern Michigan www.westieclubmi.com) and National Rescue Chair (West Highland White Terrier Club of America www.westieclubamerica.com/rescue).

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