

K N O W L E D G E

EQUALS SPEED
By Dawn Weaver**THE DOG'S PERSPECTIVE**

Great Britain did well in the World Championships this year in Austria. Congratulations to Natasha and the Large team who came away with medals. I do feel overall though that we could have done even better. I believe there are several reasons for this and thought it might be interesting to explore my theories with you - a captive audience!

1 The reason for this title, Knowledge Equals Speed - The Dog's Perspective, is to point out that dogs are not going to go fast onto or into equipment that could move or they could slip on. I noted in Austria that our dogs, particularly the Large dogs, shortened stride and decelerated slightly on the approach to the contact equipment, especially when it was a bad angle onto the contact. Whereas the European dogs in particular ran on at any angle of approach at top speed and on maximum stride, even accelerating onto the contacts. The reason being of course is that they are used to using an anti-slip surface that the dog is safe on as soon as a paw hits it, unlike in the UK where we use gloss paint surfaces on our contact

equipment! (Sounds ridiculous really.....).

This is where my Puzzle failed in the team. He refused a bad angle onto the dog-walk because he expected it to be an unsafe footing. However, with this equipment there is no such thing as a bad angle onto a contact, angles are safe. Shame he wasn't used to this equipment before he went. Why don't we have our dogs running on this type of surface here in the UK? The simple answer is money. The surface is far more expensive than paint but are our dogs worth less than theirs? Don't our dogs deserve this type of equipment so that they can have fun and stay safe and be able to compete internationally on a level footing? I know I for one would pay more per class to see this equipment here. In fact I am importing some of the surface for my own dog-walk at home and if anyone else is interested in some then feel free to contact me.

Tunnels also come under the same heading...of course they don't use metal brackets over there. Flat tunnels are also better, with a thick rubber surface on the base that seemed to keep the tunnel from twisting even unpegged at an indoor venue and also stopped the dogs slipping inside. The flat tunnel must have had good grip because it is the first time I have ever seen Puzzle leap out of a collapsible! If in training you use weaves and tunnels that aren't pegged, the dog will learn to take the speed off just before he enters, as he will come to realize that it is hard to stay in weaves that move if he touches them and hard to stay on his feet in a tunnel that moves sideways. The occasional non-pegged piece of equipment won't affect him much but if consistently done then it will affect his drive into these obstacles.

2 Another reason our dogs are not always competitive abroad is that we are just not used to running the obstacle discrimination type of course which they favour. I think any team that goes abroad needs a lot more time and opportunity to train on these courses, like other countries do. No handler can tackle a course flat-out when they are not well-practised and confident on that sort of course.

We have a shorter minimum distance between obstacles in this country than they do abroad so our courses tend to be tighter which means the handler is usually with the dog for any obstacle discrimination that happens to be on the course. The European courses have more space between obstacles so the dog goes faster and is farther from the handler when obstacle discrimination is required. Therefore much more skill is required on these courses. Also, generally

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speaking, our judges seem to set tight, twisty courses with lots of pull-throughs and with the handler right on top of the dog, rather than obstacle discrimination at speed and difficult weave entries.

- 3 Competitors from other countries seem a lot more practised at 'going for it' on a course than we are and, therefore, more successful at it. When I thought about our classes in the UK I suddenly understood why. When do I really, really try hard to get a minimum time on a course and run flat out? A Champ final obviously but certainly not the first two rounds and how often do people get into the final when there is only 20 out of over a 100 go through? What about qualifiers for Crufts and Olympia? Well, only a top-ten place is required for these so once again it is just a case of keeping it tight and going clear. (Obviously the Crufts qualifiers are better than the Olympia ones from this perspective as it is a points system where the dog that wins it gets the most points.) I think handlers in the top grade need to practise running competitively more often and it would be interesting to come up with some ideas to achieve this. I definitely feel that this would be a way forward to making agility more exciting and also make us more competitive abroad.

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