

The Glengarry News

Vankleek Hill's Raven brings home championship title at Ontario East regional dog agility competition

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Ten year old 'Raven' brought home a championship title from the Agility Association of Canada's (AAC)'s Ontario East Regional Championships last month where she placed first in the veteran 16" division. The event was held in Harrowsmith, Ontario and brought in roughly 125 competitors and 165 dogs.

AAC Agility Trials are open to all four-legged dogs capable of demonstrating the element of agility and control and the mental and physical ability to carry out the required tests while focusing on good sportsmanship and fun for both the dogs and their handlers.

Before the competitions take place, dogs are divided into categories depending on experience, age and size. However, unlike Conformation events, the focus is not on pedigree or breed standards. Rather, agility events are geared towards promoting inclusive, competitive agility at a local, regional, national, and international level wherein all dogs are welcome to participate regardless of pedigree.

Agility competitions require dogs to follow a course of several obstacles, including a mix of hurdles, tunnels, weave poles, A-frames, teeter-totters and dog walks. Dogs earn points for each obstacle completed correctly, but face penalties if they miss a pole or fail to step on a contact point, have a paw out of place or go too slow.

While there is no qualifying requirement to participate at a regional event, dogs must be registered as an AAC member and earn 350 points or more at the regional level before moving on to compete at the National events.

Leading the Pack

Winning top of her division for height, the 18" tall, 38 pound Australian Shepherd is no stranger to the ring, having been competing since she was [insert] months old. In 2011 and 2016, Raven won the Canadian National Australian Shepherd Agility Award and placed eighth overall at last year's AAC National Agility Championships which was open to all breeds of dogs.

Raven's handler, Bev Hurst, is well known in the dog agility world. A pro competitor with more than 50 obedience titles under her belt, Ms. Hurst is also an accomplished and dedicated breeder, trainer and dog behavior specialist. In addition, Ms. Hurst is one of the founding members and current President of Hilltop K-9 Agility.

Established in the winter of 1990, Hilltop's club and training centre was the second of its kind in Canada. Located off Beaverbrook Rd. in Martintown, the club is dedicated to providing local members and their dogs with safe, fun, and professional level agility training.

"At the Hilltop club, we have people who are just getting started, they are building a bond and you can see the excitement grow as the dog starts to understand what you want him to do and once they start comprehending what you want the dogs go faster and faster," said Ms. Hurst.

“It’s an addictive sport,” said Ms. Hurst who enjoys the thrill of competing. “It takes a lot of training and a lot of people aspire to greater heights where it becomes more competitive,” she explained, “but it’s all about the relationship between dog and handler. You’re working with the intelligence in the dog and creating a special bond because when you do agility with a dog, it’s just you and the dog.”

Ms. Hurst started training Raven when she was just four months old. Since then, Raven’s been training about an hour and a half each week with 15 to 20 minute spurts every second day. “The training is there now,” said Ms. Hurst. “It’s just a matter of keeping it polished.”

“You never train more than 15 minutes at a time per dog because they get tired,” explained the pro handler and trainer. “You want to keep the focus, so it has to stay fun for them or else they get bored and lose the speed,” Ms. Hurst continued. “This is especially important with an Aussie they don’t like to repeat things too often because they might get bored or think they might be doing something wrong so they offer you some other behavior.”

“She’s a little bit crazy, just like me”

As a breeder, Ms. Hurst focuses on ensuring that her dogs are easy to get along with and like to please rather than focusing solely on breed conformity. “You want a dog that’s biddable, easy to train, and a good family dog,” she explained. “You want them to want to train and work for you.”

“Raven is a super-sweet dog. She’s very bonded to me and follows me everywhere,” said Ms. Hurst “but she’s got a crazy side which is okay because it suits my personality.”

“When we first started competing with her she was a half crazy and a little bit cockeyed,” the handler recounted. “She would get into the ring, do four or five jumps and then just take off and start doing whatever she wanted. I’d eventually have to stop her and lay her down on the field to have a chat. I’d tell her, ‘You need to get it together girl and get things done!’ Then she would finish the course like a little remote dog. People would laugh at me because they would see in the first year she was competing that she would do this to me every once in awhile, then she’d go on to complete the trials like she’d been doing it all her life.”

Every dog has its day

Although Raven will not be attending this year’s AAC National Championships held in Innisfil, Ontario over the August 15 – 18 weekend, Ms. Hurst says they are working towards their Lifetime Achievement Award of Excellence. “But at 10 years old, she gets to choose,” said Ms. Hurst. “Raven’s favourite things are the games – jumpers, snookers, gamblers and steeplechase.”

Are you interested in learning more about dog agility? The next Hilltop agility trials take place at the Williamstown Fairgrounds on August 3rd and 4th. The event will also feature Zakaly with Lure Coursing and ‘OUT’ – an over, under, through obstacle course that will be open to the public and their dogs. Proceeds from the event will go towards the Hilltop club and Ron and Cher’s cat rescue in Bainsville.

Hilltop will also be performing a demonstration at the Williamstown Fair on Saturday at 11 am and another at 2 pm behind the cattle barns.