

Staying in the Game

The first time I watched handlers walking a Rally course, talking and giving hand signals, pretending their absent dogs were performing the exercises, I thought Boy, this is dumb. On that day, my Staffie Ace and I were entered in the obedience Open A Class. As it turned out, he never earned his CDX, (Companion Dog Excellent title.)

There we were. Ace had his championship and Companion Dog titles. I wasn't going to continue in regular obedience. What to do next? Hey, why not give Rally a try--see what it was really like. With a little additional training Ace scored well in Rally Novice, earning his RN title in the required three trials. Then we prepared for Rally Advanced. This time all exercises were done off lead, but I could still talk to my dog throughout the test, unlike formal obedience. In three trials we had another title.

The highest level of AKC Rally is Excellent. One exercise requires a dog to stay in heel position while his handler backs up three paces. I considered that to be the stumbling block to a RE title. "Okay," I said, "now's the time

to retire. Ace, I don't think you're going to be able to do this." With that mind set, I didn't even attempt to make him back up. Then, two summers later, I decided to give it a try. By then I was working with a ten-year old dog. Yes, they can learn new tricks.

We practiced backing up alongside walls and fence. By November, I felt ready to enter him at a nearby trial. He easily passed. One trial, one leg—two to go. Wanting to avoid the heavy fog and icy roads winter can bring, I decided to wait until spring before entering again.

In May we showed on the last day of a four-day show weekend where Ace placed fourth with a score of 96 out of 100, and earned another leg. I was mighty proud to see my now eleven-year old Stafford amongst Australian shepherds and a Belgian Malinois when awards were handed out. We showed again the next weekend where Ace scored 195, placed second, earned his third leg and Rally Excellent title.

Ace and I are retired from competition again, and this time for good. In dog

years, my four-legged pal and I are about the same age. And since I'll never see seventy again, you could safely say we're seniors. One nice thing for older dogs is that jump heights are lower than those for regular obedience. Rally's a great way to keep a senior dog active, as well as his handler.

Although Ace is retired from AKC competition, we're both still busy with therapy dog visits and participating in AKC's Canine Ambassador programs. We have been, and are still are, averaging some forty visits a year.

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