

The Versatile Stafford



Staffords are not normally associated with Obedience or any of the other dog/owner related disciplines but there are many Staffords competing in these sports, successfully throughout the world.

Whilst expecting that not every Stafford should or would be suitable to compete competitively, early socialisation is very important to teach an acceptable interaction with other dogs and this with basic obedience skills is the way forward for our breed in today's dog intolerant society.

My first Stafford, Marvin (Dens Duke of Eirl) is now 8 years old, unfortunately has arthritis in both elbows and no longer trains, but despite this he dearly loves to take part in any Agility displays at the East Anglian and East Midlands Staffordshire Bull Terrier Clubs. I find Marvin very easy to teach, he normally only has to be shown once, and then many weeks later he will remember what he was taught. At the last limited obedience show held by the Western SBT Society he won the pre-beginners class with no training beforehand whatsoever this coupled with the fact that he is very 'sparky' is quiet an achievement!

My main competitive dog is Tammy (Araidh Sweetest Taboo) and it is with her that we compete in Obedience and Working Trials but it is at Agility that she excels, such is her passion for the sport. We started training for Agility when Tammy was 17 months old, quite by accident as we were attending an obedience course and on the last day we were introduced to the sport when we were taken to have a go. As other dogs had to coaxed over the equipment, Tammy just took to it, the only problem was stopping her she would happily just keep jumping if left to her own devices.

Agility training should not begin in earnest until a minimum of 12 months, I would recommend that due to the Staffords construction maybe 18 months would be better. Many agility people start training puppies over poles on the ground and other such exercises to give the dogs a feel for it but in my own opinion this is un-necessary and I fee the intervening time can be much better spent socialising your dog and teaching basic obedience skills.

My newest recruit is Katie (Araidh Kiss of Life) who at 2 years is coming along nicely. Although she has been somewhat of a challenge (at one of her classes she would happily heel around the hall anti-clockwise but will not walk a single step in the other direction!) as she is more headstrong than my others, this has been my own fault to a degree as she has been spoilt rotten, although she has gained the socialization, interaction and obedience skills that she needs for Agility and then at a later date Working Trials.

There is nothing that cannot be trained with a little thought and patience, you

need to think like your dog, know what you are going to teach in advance and make sure you get the result. By this I mean set up situations where you are in control and your dog cannot fail. Such as a 'Stay' exercise – if your dog won't stay then, if you can only step away a few inches and literally hold him in place whilst reinforcing the command 'Stay'. You are achieving much more by doing this than trying to do to much and him breaking the exercise, you are actually teaching him what the word 'Stay' means, you can then gradually work on this, never being afraid to take a step back to get the result.

We are now training for Working Trials which includes; control, agility, nosework and stays – the agility section includes a 2' high jump, 4' scale and a 6' long jump, all are rather punishing but with careful, controlled training are totally possible. The stay exercises are rather impressive with all dogs left in a 2 minute sit stay and then 10 minute down stay, both exercises being out of sight. The nosework section is rather fun with a 15-25 yard square set out with a specified number of hidden items, your dog is then sent into the area to find and return the items.

I was once told by an old school, working trials enthusiast that you wouldn't enter a donkey in the Grand National, but if she had a Collie which as much enthusiasm as Tammy she would be very happy. I took it as a compliment!

Continued

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Over the last 3 years we have been members of various training clubs, some of which it has to be said were a little apprehensive at having an off lead Stafford in the vicinity. However without exception they have won over everyone and are regularly picked to take part in various displays, which is excellent for the breed. People normally associate collies with Agility but when Tammy's turn comes and she is often faster than a Border collie and has quite a following of fans.

I have found that my dogs dearly love to please and enjoy training especially the nosework. Try hiding a favorite toy very easily at first, let your dog watch and then use a command such as 'Find it' gradually when your dog understands what is expected of him, make the game a little harder. Eventually you will see him come 'alive' to this training and will be able to hide it all over the house or garden. I suggest using a toy which is only used for this purpose as if it is left out for him at all times it will lose its effectiveness, also ensure it has been well handled by yourself before being hidden. Initially give your dog lots of praise and enthusiasm to

help him find the article but as he gets the idea of what is expected, stay quiet and let him work, only speaking to encourage when needed.

Working with a Stafford is different, their stubbornness at times can have you pulling your hair out and you generally stand out in all the disciplines as having a minority breed, which makes blending in to the background impossible.

The Kennel Club Good Citizen Scheme is a national scheme aimed at promoting responsible dogs and owners, I believe the scheme is a wonderful idea, with owners and dogs able to take any of the 3 levels in order, beginning with Bronze, then Silver and finally the Gold award. The Bronze award is very basic and all the exercises are based on situations you would encounter in your normal daily routine, such as;

- A dog with food manners
- A dog that will walk without any undue pulling
- A dog that will stay for 1 minute
- A dog that has a correct collar and lead on for the breed and an ID tag

•A dog that will accept grooming

•A dog that will accept being handled by another person

As you can see the Bronze exercises are quite basic, but this is a national scheme and something to be proud of, the tests are held at many training clubs, Championship shows and the EASBTC hold sessions regularly at their Open shows so next time you see the scheme advertised – have a go!

Who would of thought that at Crufts 2002 there would have been a team of Staffordshire Bull Terriers giving 4 displays of Obedience exercises in the Good Citizen Ring next to the Kennel Club stand, but there was and a wonderful job the team did. Lets show everyone what we already know about our wonderful breed that they are wonderful companions and Good Citizens!

Above all keep your training fun and enjoy your Stafford!

Wendy Clewley

Article originally submitted for Alan Raymond 11/11/00



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