

# Off Course

with Jo Sermon

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By Kip Kirby

There's nothing worse in agility training than running up against a dog that just doesn't get it. You examine your repertoire, sort through your bag of tricks, trot out your tried-and-true techniques-and then stand back in dumbfounded disbelief when the dog shows not one tiny iota of improvement. Challenging at first, increasingly stressful as weeks stretch into months, the situation breeds frustration, discouragement, even anger.

A trainer's worst nightmare? You betcha. Just ask Jo Sermon. She suffered through it in spades with a puppy named Yogi.

Tall, blonde, with a model's good looks and a stride long enough to match even the most hyperactive Border Collie, Jo looks like Madison Avenue's idea of a poster-perfect agility athlete. In a country dominated by BC's in agility, she runs Bearded Collies, dogs that require patience, persistence, and oftentimes a lively sense of humor to get on their wavelength. Jo is a high-drive, highly competitive handler. She enjoys running "pedal to the metal," and her track record speaks volumes. She's fast, focused, funny, and forceful.

So, by anyone's yardstick, Yogi was positively the last puppy Jo should have considered for agility. She was searching for a dog that would maximize her chances at the finish line. But at seven weeks of age, Yogi was in such pathetic physical condition it seemed unlikely he would even make it to the start line. The litter, sired by a much-admired Bearded Collie named Bredon Dan, had been rescued from its breeder due to suspected mistreatment. Yogi was less than a third his proper body weight, crawling with lice and so full of worms that his belly was distended. He'd had absolutely no socialization and was terrified of life.

But how do you argue with love at first sight? You don't. "Something happened between us that has not happened before or again," Jo says simply, recalling that day. "He was mine from the moment I saw him. It was mutual. Geoff [Jo's husband] later told me that all the time I was looking at the pups in the litter, Yogi was next to me or by me, and when I sat down to have a cup of tea, Yogi was right by my feet, where he has remained ever since."

The lack of socialization kicked in immediately. By the time Jo took Yogi home, the puppy's fears had escalated. He was now afraid of everything: sights, sounds, and strangers. The window of socialization opportunity was narrowing fast for Yogi. Jo knew desperate measures were required.

"He had no experience of people, of being handled, of being with other dogs," says Jo. "He was born on a remote Welsh farm and kept in a box. He had no dog body language to learn from. When I got him, he promptly caught kennel cough and nearly died. At the age of 11 weeks, all that we had was the bond between us." And that was to be stretched tenuously thin over the following year.

Jo immediately embarked on what might be called an immersion program of socialization with her new puppy. At first, things seemed to be going well. At home, in the privacy of his own secure environment, Yogi was fine. But the moment Jo ventured out into public with him, he shut down, closed off in his own remote world. Sometimes he would shut down to such an extreme that he displayed no recognition at all when Jo called his name.

"I concentrated on all the usual bits and pieces, including the attention, *Watch Me* exercise," she recounts. "In the house, he was perfect. In the garden, he was perfect. But, in the corner of Safeway's supermarket-nothing. Nothing at all! I had two children, ages two and four, and the logistics of trying to do this type of training was a nightmare:"

People around her told Jo that Yogi was blowing her off and that she should "get hold of him and teach him a lesson:" That strategy became increasingly tempting, she admits. "Standing there with two children in the background bickering and a dog on a lead who wouldn't even recognize his own name... it was so tempting. He was totally fixated on people off in the distance and I wanted to brain him! Of course that would have done absolutely nothing at all to increase his confidence, but it would have made me feel so much better!"

Jo's socialization efforts with Yogi and her attempt to win his attention became a daily struggle. She wanted to give up more times than she could count. She questioned the wisdom of continuing with a dog that so clearly wasn't having fun. If she kept Yogi at home and didn't expose him to the rest of the world-let alone to an agility course-his problems would be minimized and life could go on.



*Yogi takes the first jump in front of 8,000 spectators.*

Making it worse were the inevitable comparisons to other dogs. At the obedience club where she trained, eight-week-old puppies that were already paying rapt attention to their handlers surrounded Jo. Yogi, on the other hand, "looked like he'd been whipped."

Says Jo now, "I have no idea what kept me going. I remember the frustration so clearly. My youngest daughter learnt all sorts of extremely interesting phrases out of me during that time period!" But still she kept trying, resolutely rewarding any fragment of attention Yogi gave her, any slight flicker of public acknowledgment that she existed.

Nine weeks passed. Nine long weeks of futile daily attempts, of piling her girls into the car and driving to public places, of getting Yogi out of the car and praying that he would look at her even just once. Hiding her tension was crucial. Sensing Jo's irritation would only have compounded Yogi's distress. By the end of the ninth week, her efforts began to pay off. Before long, miraculously, Jo could walk Yogi past the supermarket and keep his attention fully on her. They had turned a huge corner together. She measured their success in fractional increments and was grateful for each and every one.

"I was learning at a frenetic rate," Jo says. "Although I'd faced difficult dogs before, I'd *never* had this particular type of problem. At a year of age, Yogi and I began his agility training. The class was more than an hour's drive away, and my dog spent most of his time in the car park [parking lot]. Yogi's default behavior was to bolt. See something outside his experience? Bolt! Someone with a hat? Bolt! A strange man? Bolt! It gave me a real insight into how dogs see things. In retrospect, it was good that the class was so far away and I had so much invested in attending."

Jo says she doesn't remember the exact moment when Yogi suddenly began to find agility more fun than whatever else he was frightened of. Like most problems, you turn around and they've disappeared-or at least faded. But she knows Yogi's phobias and fears forced her to become a much more sympathetic handler. She learned to understand her dog's intense dependence on her emotionally and physically. To this day, she compensates for it at all times. For instance, "I don't leave Yogi on the start line or he'll think someone might come and get him," Jo explains. "I don't fiddle around whilst he is in tunnels-he might panic when he can't find me."

Adjusting her own style to that of her dog's was a major breakthrough in Jo's success with Yogi-and a key to his ultimate success in agility. "Yogi matured me as a handler," Jo reflects. "He won me into the top levels of agility in this country [the U.K.], but more importantly, he not only taught me to accept responsibility for my dog's training, he also taught me not to worry about what other people were thinking. They don't have my dog. They have no idea what I've done to get him to where he is, and they are probably not interested! It does nobody good to stand on the start line loudly excusing what your dog is likely to do. Then you are thinking about your *audience*, not your dog."

The most difficult hurdle Jo cleared in her "off-course" experience with Yogi was to stop blaming everyone else for her problems. "The handler that shouts at her dog is entitled to do so," she shrugs. "The fact that it drove my dog out into the car park was my problem to deal with, not *hers*."

Jo also believes that this realization became her strongest ally in overcoming Yogi's issues. "I simply took responsibility for training my dog. He couldn't cope with someone shouting? I set that up and taught him how to cope. Don't blame the person wearing the hat or who's shouting or running past. If you know your dog is likely to bolt out of the ring when it's raining and the judge is wearing a hat, don't blame the judge, who after all has a right to a dry head. The answer is to go home and train your dog to accept rain and hats! Fix the lack in your own training."



*Jo and Yogi after their 1997 win at Olympia.*

Jo admits she can still get discouraged from time to time in her training. "It's a given that my both of my Beardies work as hard as they possibly can for me. If they are getting it wrong, it's my fault. I either haven't trained what I thought I had, or I'm not giving the right cues. Unfortunately, sometimes when well-intentioned people are standing around telling you that your dog is being 'difficult,' it can be very hard to think your way through a problem. Occasionally I think my way into a box and just can't see out."

When that happens, Jo slams on the brakes. Hard. "I stop training, put on my hiking boots, and go remind myself just why I have dogs in the first place. If the suggested answer to a problem is going to upset my dog, it's quite simply not worth the price he'd have to pay."

There is a "fairytale" ending to this story, of course. In 1997, in front of a cheering crowd of 8,000 spectators, all shouting and drumming their feet on the metal staging, Yogi, the Bearded Collie, won his class at the enormous Olympia arena. At that moment, in the midst of bedlam, Jo's victory was complete.

"When we walked through the entrance tunnel out into the arena, the noise was like walking into a wall," says Jo, reliving the memory. "Yogi's tail was down, his ears were flat back against his head, and I wondered if I was letting ambition override good judgment for my dog. As we entered the arena, the roar got louder, and the noise got worse. But then Yogi saw the equipment and knew what he was there for. He went flat out around the course, nailed every turn, and never put a paw wrong. It was wonderful. The picture that stays with me and comes to mind when I think of that night is Yogi and his good friend, Star, who came in third, playing tug the whole length of the arena together right afterward. The spotlight was on them and the audience was clapping every step of the way. I will never forget the sight of my dog playing in front of an audience of that size. It was truly unreal:" 🐾