

The Laughingstock of 2009

The Event

The 2009 Eukanuba AKC Agility Invitational was held December 11th through the 13th, in the vast parking lot of the Long Beach (Ca.) Convention Center, inside a spectacular looking tent erected for this occasion.

To officially attend the Invitational one must await an invite from the AKC; invites are extended to the top five dogs in each breed competing in the Excellent "B" classes, based on the following formula: $[SP + (QQ*10)]$; more simply put [speed points (whole seconds under course time) plus Double Q's (when a dog qualifies in both the standard and jumpers class on the same day) multiplied by 10.] Ex: $[(1QQ*10)+15 \text{ speed points}] = 25 \text{ points}$.



Points are accrued during a qualifying period, in this instance July 1st 2008 thru June 30th 2009. Invitations arrive in two waves and have a trickle down effect; if Fluffy, Muffy, Tuffy, Puffy and Scruffy are the top five basenjis and Puffy and Scruffy decline their invitations, said invitations trickle down to number six and seven in the second (and last) wave. Feigh, my 6-year-old basenji, starting a mere 11 months *after* the beginning of the qualifying period of July 1, 2008, was very lucky to finish in 7th place (out of 13 basenjis) having accrued a whopping (not!) 13 points in a little over a months time. Now we had to hope at least two of the top five declined, allowing an invitation to make its way down to her in that seventh spot. I had my doubts; ringside chatter often brought news of a common, albeit non-sporting practice; top competitors, with no intention of attending, entering for brag rights, catalog inclusion and exhibitor t-shirts, blocking other serious exhibitors, who want to compete and showcase their breeds, from attending.

Renee Meriaux, whose 9 year-old basenji Aspen ended the qualifying period in 2nd place, accepted her invitation and signed on as the events breed liaison. In her desire to encourage as many basenjis to attend, she asked anyone unable to make it to please decline so their invite might trickle down. Renee's hard work paid off when Debbie, owner of both Cody and Karly, the 1st and 3rd place basenjis, graciously declined her invites. Back in July, I promised Renee that if an invite should somehow trickle down to Feigh, I would ensure her attendance even though I felt she and I lacked serious teamwork and would be the laughingstock of 2009. Renee held me to my promise, sending an email early October entitled "Pack your bags!"



Long Beach – here we come!

But first I had a few things I needed to learn, namely the "weird" rules of Invitational agility; courses designed and scored differently than regular agility trials. Two key differences in the design were no pause tables and the inclusion of the Hybrid course, a combination of standard and jumpers using two pieces of contact equipment, in this case the teeter and the A-frame, intermixed amongst jumps, tunnels, and weave poles. Scoring differences were a bit confusing at first; normally errors result in an overall tally of N.Q. with no numeric score ever recorded; Invitational errors however are assigned a point value, which are cumulative against your starting score of 100.

In addition, at the Invitational you are encouraged to correct all errors and complete the course in numeric order to keep from getting a dreaded zero for "failure to perform." This

is in direct opposition of how I normally run Excellent where I feel correcting errors is pointless, as only a perfect run is qualifying, not to mention discouraging to a dog who **a)** does not like to have their momentum disrupted and **b)** thinks they ran it perfectly to begin with! Each errors point value: R (for refusals) and W (for wrong courses) are 5 points off for each and every offense, regardless if they occur before, after or miles away from the next correct obstacle (unlike regular agility). Bailing off the downside of a contact obstacle while not touching the required yellow contact, or knocking a bar, is worth 10 points each infraction. Every second over course time will also cost you 3 points per whole second, while not completing the course in numeric order costs you every point, assuming you have any left to begin with!

With this knowledge in hand, we (my husband Rand and I, Feigh, our three other basenjis and JB – our new (to us) RV) approached Long Beach on an overcast and drizzly Friday afternoon. Despite the melancholy feel to the weather, nothing could rain on my parade nor dampen my growing excitement, or was that nausea? We quickly parked, set up camp and headed over to the tent, which housed two of the biggest agility rings I have ever seen, complete with freshly plucked, supremely manicured and pristinely laid sod.

The hustle and bustle of people, the barking of excited dogs reverberated throughout the building as volunteers prepared for the onslaught of exhibitors and their supporters, who milled about, avoiding the wet weather, while awaiting further direction. Tables lined one wall; boxes filled with exhibitor goodie bags overflowed the tabletops while people began to impatiently line up like wildebeests awaiting their summer exodus through alligator infested waters. PA systems cackled and cawed in the background in preparation for announcements I never fully understood no matter how close, or far, I sat from the speakers. I lost sight of Rand, panicked briefly worried my hearing impairment would create serious problems through the din, but determined to hold my position at the front of an ever-expanding horizontal line. A tap on my shoulder, exaggerated hand and lip movements told me Rand would be behind me, waiting by the gates of ring one, assuming I survived the check-in crush; a quick thumbs up confirmed my comprehension before a wave of movement turned me away and back towards the wide-eyed stares of agility volunteers ready to start me on my first ever journey through one of the countries top agility events.

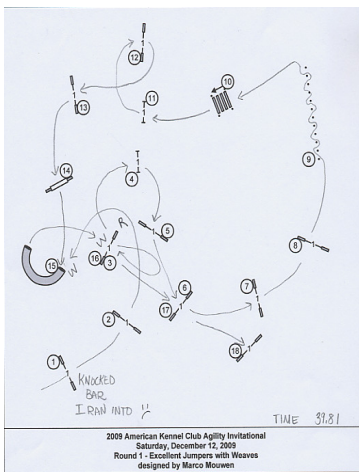


While the actual competition did not officially start until Saturday morning, Friday afternoon was set-aside as a warm up day for anyone wanting to acclimate his or her dog to the surface and/or arena. Identical FAST courses were offered simultaneously in both rings at a prepaid cost of \$4, you couldn't beat that! Even though I had no idea how to play the FAST game, having only entered it once or twice since its inception and discovering neither my dogs, nor I, run well three times in one day, I entered Feigh figuring "how hard can it be?" Wrong. I had no idea how to walk the course, its objective, what was allowed, not allowed, etc. I valiantly looked for a familiar face but found none. I went to the check in board, noticed Renee and Aspen had checked in, as had Belinda Kaufman and her 10-year-old basenji Kaper, who was 4th in the rankings, but I found neither on the course walking it. Eventually I struck up the nerve to ask someone only to find they were just as clueless, as were three other people I queried! Eventually a ring volunteer gave me a basic review but suggested I just practice anything I thought Feigh might have trouble with in such unfamiliar and chaotic surroundings since the course did not count towards anything. So that's what I did. I ran an abbreviated course, to include

all the contact obstacles, a few jumps and of course the weave poles; sure enough Feigh spooked at the weaves that first run but nailed them the rest of the weekend.

Enter the Laughingstock!

Saturday dawned overcast and rather damp from the nights rain. A slight drizzle would continue throughout the day interspersed with heavier downpours that unfortunately penetrated the tent boundaries several times. Sandbags were placed strategically to keep water away from the actual rings creating numerous puddles throughout the immediate area; mostly large puddles we had to navigate to get ringside, oftentimes necessitating I carry Feigh, lest she balk like a water phobic horse approaching a water jump for the first time. While Feigh might not have been too keen about those puddles, she and I were thankful we were not actually showing in the rain, as we are apt to do in Arizona and California where indoor shows are non-existent.



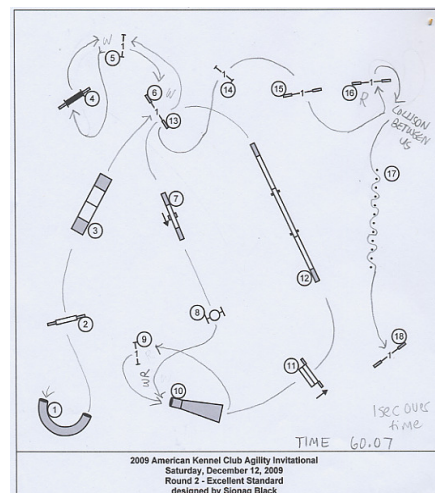
The first run of the day was a Jumpers With Weaves (JWW) course. Both Aspen and Kaper ran before Feigh and both set the bar rather high. Aspen had a perfect 100-point run with time to spare. Kaper too had a perfect 100-point run but was one second over time, costing them 3 points. Ok, maybe we can do this too. As Feigh and I approach the start line I find I am not the least bit nervous. Ha! I leave her on a sit stay – which is kind of a misnomer since sit and stay in agility are not in Feigh’s vocabulary; early in our career, too many times to count actually, I would tell Feigh to stay, turn away from her to take a few lead out steps only to find she had already left! One day, quite by accident really, I discovered that if I faced her as I walked away she would usually freeze and hold her position. This unconventional method has worked with nary a problem over the course of the year so here I was,

walking backwards, away from my dog that is chomping at the bit to get going when I feel myself brush against something; hmmm, that can’t be good. I look over my shoulder to discover that I have backed into the wing of the first jump and have <gasp> knocked the first bar. The good news is, Feigh held her stay perfectly! The bad news is, I just lost us 10 points and we hadn’t even officially started yet. I turn to where I know Renee is watching and give her an enthusiastic thumbs up, silently conveying, “See, I told you we would be the laughingstock of this event!”

There was a lot of confusion, as no one knew what to do, least of all me. Finally the judge told the pole setter to reset the jump and I was once again allowed to lead out – do I dare? I do, and did, while Feigh held her stay. Her eventual approach however was too fast, she was unable to collect herself for the third jump, which forced her around for a refusal; she then got sucked into the tunnel and came flying back over the jump for two wrong courses. Och! We’re only at the third obstacle and are already down 25 points! Amazingly, once we both collected ourselves, she finished the course perfectly and well under course time – despite doing several obstacles twice! I could not have been more proud.

Many hours later its time for the Standard run, once again Aspen and Kaper precede Feigh in the run order and once again they set some pretty high standards. Kaper has a perfect run for 100 points with 4 seconds to spare. Aspen accrued a 5-point fault when she balked at the second to last obstacles but was well under course time with 5 seconds to spare.

Awesome guys! Then its Feigh's turn – where would we have trouble this time? Sadly, where I least expected it. Normally Feigh takes the upside of the A-frame like a bat out of hell, only to stop at the very top to peruse the environment for a few precious seconds before slowly making her descent (slow in part to my making sure she touches the contact before she bails off). I did say that's what she normally does, right? Apparently normal things do not happen at the Invitational as Feigh took off like her usual speed demon self, approached the A-frame at a dead run, went up, over, and down the other side before I had a chance to even approach the A-frame. Sheesh-ka-bob!

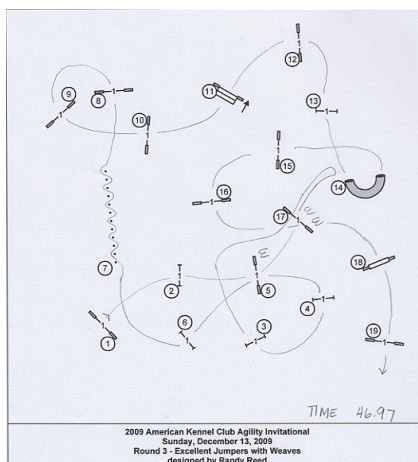


Her momentum took her over two (wrong) jumps for 10 points. She then settled down for the next five obstacles before deciding the chute was the most logical (to her) obstacle, blowing off a jump for another 10 points. Holy smokes, this is worse than the first run. We again get back on track but I end up not being in any position to give my fast, long striding dog a proper over signal so we collide in front of the jump. Ouch! Another 5 points but we finally finish the course, albeit 1 second over course time for an additional 3 points off.

Ugly? Yes, but we had a blast! The rings, so much larger than anything we normally trial in, allows Feigh to really stretch and reach her full stride; while it makes for mistake-laden courses and hard handling for me, she is fun to watch when in full motion – or so some spectators repeatedly told us. Despite having two very low scores our first day, I return to JB with a smile in my heart, just thankful to be experiencing it.

Is a perfect run in our future?

Sunday arrived with clear skies. Residual water slowly disappeared though puddles within the tent still remained. The air buzzed with tension as serious competitors geared up for their final two qualifying runs, knowing it is do or die time if they want to make it to the finals. My goal is much simpler; improve upon the day before.



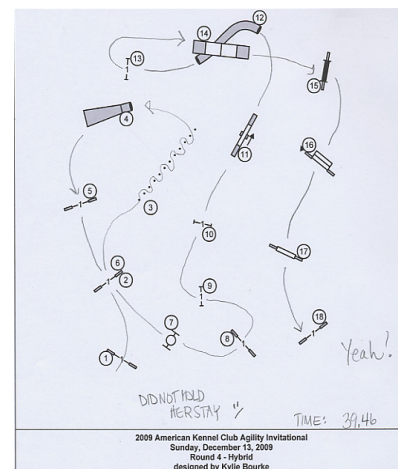
The first run of the day is a rather tight and tricky JWW course. I was told prior to attending that the courses are usually on an Open level, apparently having "easier" courses creates faster, more exciting runs for television coverage. True? False? I cannot say but I know the JWW course this day definitely felt more like an excellent course. Renee and Aspen are on a roll, garnering their second perfect 100 run. I'm jealous! Belinda and Kaper did not fare quite so well, accruing a 5-point refusal in addition to losing 6 points for being 2 measly seconds

over course time. Agility is not for sissies!

Feigh held her start stay but blatantly ignored my body block of the #5 jump once I called her over jumps 1 and 2. She purposefully skirted around behind me, took the #5 jump (5 points) plus #17 jump (5 points) as she made a beeline toward a favorite thing – a tunnel! Thankfully her auditory functions finally kicked in, she heard my valiant pleas of "Feigh COME!" slowly turned back my way, "You talking to ME?" without breaking the plane of the tunnel, back jumped #17 (5 points) and settled down to finish the course without further incident. Her course design cost us an additional 3 points for being one

second over course time but we did it! We had a (slightly) better score than the two previous. You gotta' love her energy.

The hybrid course was next, pretty straightforward with just a few iffy spots. This time Feigh ran first. Knowing we had an 8-hour drive home ahead of us, I apologized in advance to Renee and Belinda for not being able to stay to watch their runs. I would like to say that Feigh continued to hold her start stay but I can't; she blasted off the line, leaving me totally out of position and on the wrong side to get her into the 3rd obstacle, the weave poles. I quickly readjusted, crossing behind her in hopes she might notice my change of direction before she took the #5 jump that was fast approaching. Unbelievably it worked. Feigh ignored the most logical visual course and hit the weave poles like a seasoned pro. That's my girl. I then spent the next 15 obstacles somehow keeping her on track for our first perfect 100-point run at the Invitational, a mere 7



seconds under course time, I might add. Whoo hoo! I would be lying if I said the run felt perfect, effortless; it did not. While folk's ringside might be fooled into believing it was a designed course of action on my part, it did not go anywhere near as planned, with me having to think/readjust on the fly multiple times which is hard to do! Mission accomplished though, better scores, including a perfect score – can it get any better than this? Not this year.



Courtesy of Diane Chua

A Monday morning email from Renee informed me of her and Belinda's last runs. Aspen again ran a perfect 100 but she dallied a bit around obstacle 13 costing her 3 seconds or 9 points. That same obstacle ended up being Kaper's bane as he back jumped it for 5 points; otherwise he too had an amazing last run. Ultimately, out of ninety-one 16-inch dogs actually running, Aspen finished #38 and took home the award for top basenji, Kaper #52 and Feigh #65; well-done team basenji! Interestingly, Feigh ended up with

the fastest cumulative time of all the basenjjs, despite taking obstacles multiple times during her creative course designs.

While Feigh and I might have started our weekend as the laughingstocks of 2009 we ended with the best laugh of all, the last laugh of a job well done.

Players (in order of appearance):

Feigh - UCICB-BaCh. MBIF FC Eldorado's Y's African Sinbaje CD RE SC GRC FCh AX AXJ

Aspen - Jasiri-Sukari Rocky MTN Tri SC MX AXJ NF

Cody - Calypso Windsor Joslin JC MX MXJ NF

Karly - Calypso Absolut Angel MX AXJ NF

Kaper - DC Lacada's Con Man K's Kaper CD RAE5 MC MX MXJ NAP OJP OF

Special thanks to my husband Rand for all of his support as our Invitational "bucket boy"; every run, no matter the outcome he'd always say, "You guys just keep getting better and better." I'm beginning to think there's some truth in that; Katy Scott, Feigh's "auntie" who took time off work and spent her hard earned money traveling to Long Beach just to cheer us on; Alyce Sumita, her basenji Max, Connie Langford, her basenji Echo, both of whom took time out of their Meet The Breed schedule to cheer on team basenji. On another note, my heartfelt apologies to Belinda - every picture we took of you ended up seriously blurred or too dark to see.