

AT WHAT COST?

By Linda Daves Siekert, CVT

After eight years of lure coursing and three years of racing, my basenji Drew is afraid to course with strange dogs, lest he be molested yet again.

How can this be? Drew is an AKC Dual Champion – winning four majors towards his Lure Coursing title. He earned his ASFA Field Championship *after* he lost an eye to Valley Fever. In very limited coursing Drew has earned 14 Master Courser legs and is pointed towards his Lure Courser Excellent title; he is not some unsure, green-eyed novice dog, nor am I a novice owner unaware of what constitutes normal occurring contact in the field.

I have been coursing my basenjjs since Tre, the 1997 National Specialty ASFA Best of Breed winner over a record number of 59 basenji entries that year, was old enough to trial, roughly mid to late 1996. In the years since, I have traveled and coursed/ raced my basenjjs in various states and National Specialties against hundreds of different dogs. My dogs have earned multiple Best in Fields (all breeds) and/or High Point Basenji and I can proudly say that with one exception, no basenji I have heavily campaigned has ever been dismissed or disqualified even when jumped or rolled during BIF. The exception being Clay, a breeder return at the age of six, Clay was given the opportunity to start coursing several months after his return. His first AKC run he was excused for playful interference; during his second LGRA meet, at the 2008 National Specialty, he was DQ'd, again for interfering; I, not truly trusting his intentions – was he really only playing or was he showing aggressive tendencies – and not wanting to ruin another hound, pulled him from all future competition.

So what happened to Drew that has him so scared?

August 2009, Rand and I, and our four basenjjs traveled many hours to Northern California for some private obedience instruction. During that same week there were two-days of racing – one day of LGRA, another day of NOTRA; I had been planning this trip for months, as Feigh only needed 5 points for her Gazehound Racing Championship and there is no racing in Arizona. Drew, while not a fast dog, is a steady competitor who truly likes to chase the bunny. Unlike Feigh he has not mastered the starting box, oftentimes coming out backwards but once out – he makes a determined dash down the field; we enter to give him more box experience and to let him stretch his legs.

LGRA was first on Saturday, Drew found himself in a low point heat with a bitch we'll call Ginger. The box gate opened and Drew took off down the 200-yard stretch, albeit in last place but gaining ground on Ginger in third place. Just as he started to over take her, Ginger turned into a she-devil stopping Drew dead in his tracks. Not satisfied with his obvious deferment, she began to muzzle whip him as he tried to exit the course prematurely. Can you blame him? Ginger followed, continuing her onslaught using her muzzle as a weapon of mass destruction, until I ran in and rescued him. The next heat Drew was slow to exit the box, despite facing the right way. He refused to pass anyone, unmistakably putting on the brakes when he, or they, get too close.

Sunday was NOTRA. Drew was once again very slow out of the box despite facing the field, and once again he refused to pass, applying the brakes as necessary to keep him *behind* the competition. Lack of foul judges on Saturday meant Ginger was allowed to

continue racing and harassing as she saw fit. Unbeknownst to me – foul judges are *not* required to hold an official meet and apparently aggressive dogs are allowed and apparently encouraged to enter, since their entries continue to be accepted. Well gall darn it! Had I known this, I could have entered Clay, as he is quite fast and could easily finish with the top points. With no foul judges to catch him interfering there was no risk of being dismissed, much less disqualified. Since the host club did not care enough to ask an owner of a (quite obvious) aggressive dog to pull said dog – Clay could have run and molested, to his hearts content, but... that's not how I play the game.

Drew drew Ginger in the second heat, as did Feigh. Common sense, or more appropriately common courtesy would tell an owner whose dog acted with such aggressive vehemence as Ginger displayed towards Drew, to pull their dog from the weekends competition. Sadly both common sense and courtesy were greatly lacking; not willing to risk a second attack, when the first attack had so adversely affected him, I withdrew. Not worried about Feigh, due to her speed, I allowed her to run; I should have known better.

While Feigh blasted from the start box, easily 50 yards ahead of Ginger at the finish, Ginger wasted no time in blindsiding Feigh during **her Feigh's** frantic finish line search of the now missing bunny. Multiple times Ginger tried to intimidate Feigh by muzzle whipping her; when that had no affect ~~on the ever bunny-eating Feigh~~, Ginger opted for aggressive posturing over the back. The owner was ineffective at calling Ginger off and could not intervene in a timely manner. Understandably Feigh began to lose her patience; out of pure frustration of having two of my dogs brutally savaged by a bitch that **has** had no business running, I forcibly removed Ginger off the back of my dog and practically threw her at her owner, who proceeded to yell at her for all of her aggressive behavior, for not listening, for not coming when called (would you?), etc.; I think you get the picture.

My patience snapped in that moment; as I held Feigh out of reach of a *still loose* Ginger, I let forth a verbal tirade on Ginger's owner – letting her know in no uncertain terms what I thought about her yelling at her dog well after the fact, for continuing to allow her historically aggressive dog to run and ruin other dogs, etc. I am not proud of losing control, having only once before lost my temper when a basenji who, unbeknownst to us was recently DQ'd, was allowed to enter a meet and savagely attack another competitor's dog (not mine) while the owner of the aggressor nonchalantly tried to collect him; the victim stood with his head to one side, his tail unfurled in total deferment awaiting someone, anyone to remove the attacker from his back; all I can say is - thank goodness for muzzles! I would later learn I only said what many people have thought **about Ginger** but are unwilling to say – not just to Ginger's owner but to all owners of aggressive dogs to which they continue coursing, at the expense of our clean running hounds, not to mention our pocketbooks as we ultimately have to pull our dogs from competition in order to keep them safe.

With frustrated tears running down my cheeks I walked off with Feigh. I told her what a good girl she was but apologized that she would not be running again, despite the day being only half done. We then packed the dogs, the car, and headed the 12 hours back home all the while wondering if I would ever course or race my dogs again, particularly in California. Why?

In talking with other fanciers on Saturday, after the original attack on Drew, I was disturbed to find that allowing historically aggressive basenjis to compete, and ultimately ruin clean running hounds, is commonplace. As I stood around asking questions and mentally filing away the answers, I had much to learn about apathy, and sadly, learn I did. I learned Ginger had been DQ'd at least once before due to aggression but was reinstated after running clean with her kennelmates; showing the potential fallacy of reinstatement requirements by ~~both AKC, and ASFA.~~ **coursing and racing organizations.** I have since learned that close friends who are also fellow competitors have, time and again, talked to Ginger's owner about Ginger's aggressive tendencies, to no avail as she continues – even to this day, to run Ginger, though usually with dogs Ginger knows, accepts, and no longer tries to bully.

One person lamented with Drew's attack by telling me how they had to stop their basenjis coursing career for *five* years as they waited for an aggressive basenji to retire. Another mentioned how "miserable" her basenji's racing career was due to the bullies her dog encountered on the field and the **(apparent)** lack of sportsmanship displayed by the bullies owner(s) as they ruthlessly continued to campaign their dogs. Another person practically gloated about running their DQ'd basenji in the "other" venue since AKC and ASFA "don't communicate with each other and would never know." Excuse me? And yet another **said** implied they deal with "it" by working for the host clubs, thereby earning "favors" that are "paid out" by not pairing their basenjis with known aggressive dogs. While that might hint of cheating, who can blame them?

While owners bear ultimate responsibility to "do the right thing" and cease coursing their aggressive dogs, fellow competitors who suffer in silence yet continue to give these selfish owners competition in which to earn top ten points, or accumulate coveted titles bear responsibility as well. As a competitor I should not have to pull my dogs for "x number" of years waiting for a bully to retire, nor should I have to compromise my values to pad things in my favor with local clubs but most of all – my dog should *never* have to be subjected to a "miserable racing career" all because a title, or brag right, or top ten placement becomes more important than any dogs welfare.

To allow a basenji with a history of aggression on the field to race or course is a disservice to your fellow basenji competitors and to the breed. Such behavior, while perhaps not always corrected by the host club or the judges, is *never* lost on fellow competitors with other breeds or future fanciers scouting out the basenji breed. It was not long ago that basenjis had a terrible reputation for being, amongst other vile names, "nasty" and coursing enthusiasts steered well clear of them lest they attack unprovoked; even today there are judges who will DQ a basenji for minor infractions other coursing hounds are allowed to display. Do we really want to turn back the clocks?

So, at what cost do we keep aggressive basenjis racing and ruining the competition, if not the breed's reputation? For myself – it has cost me the naïve belief that my fellow competitors would *never purposefully and knowingly* put my dog at risk for an attack. For my dogs, present and future, it quite possibly has cost them the enjoyment of ever coursing or racing again. For Drew? Only time will tell what the ultimate cost is to him.