

# Agility

## Introducing Karapoti Heez Low Key (Loki)

by Fiona Ferrar

*It has been 10 years since I wrote Sharky's Diary, and I have been persuaded to do a similar thing for Loki.*

*Agility courses and handling have changed significantly over the last 10 years, but basic foundation is still basic foundation and I still do similar things to 10 years ago, but with a few refinements. And I would hope to think that I have become a better trainer over that time.*

*10 years ago my training goals from day one were:*

- *Be toy motivated.*
- *Be food motivated.*
- *Have control around doors/feeding times/in car etc.*
- *Be well socialised.*
- *Be happy to offer a variety of behaviours.*
- *Travel and sleep happily in a ute with my five other dogs.*

*The only thing that has really changed, I now need to be happy in a car with four other dogs, rather than a ute with five! I am also much more aware of the need for good balance between toy and food motivation – I want equal drive for these, and if one ever outweighs the other, then I train more with the least exciting one until the balance is good again.*

So about my wee Loki – cute little munchkin that he is! Loki's dad is Seaquest Hide'n Zeke – a stunningly beautiful double grand champion who is extremely good natured and cuddly owned by Rochelle Jagar. His mum is Fern who is equally as talented, good natured and cuddly owned by Donna Tofts. They are both amazing working dogs as well as lovely pets. It is very important to me to have nice natured dogs, and I consider myself very lucky to have a pup from this litter.

Loki is quite an independent boy, and to start with was not very food motivated. Restricting his food to either being at training times, or eating together with four other hungry dogs has helped with that. He was not particularly keen on sharing his toys with me to start with, and very happy to be off somewhere else playing by himself. His recalls have required a bit of work – particularly when he wants to play with my kitten, Bug, or is focussing on my other dogs.

Loki is four months old now, and has been with me for eight weeks. During that time we would have had at least one training session a day, and quite often three to four sessions, but with random short stints if something popped up. When not training, he spends most of the time in his crate, or puppy pen. So

that would add up to more than 200 sessions which may have just been a couple of minutes up to around 10 minutes, ie a huge amount of time to reinforce good choices. At times he has been restricted from playing with Bug, or Cuda and spent more time in his crate. That would be when he has chosen not to come when called, or even run in the opposite direction!

This might sound like a huge amount of time, but I do it because it makes later training and living with dogs just so much easier. I have four adult male dogs, and they all run and travel together quite peacefully. That is because they are always keen for my attention, and have a lot more focus on me than each other. I can play and work them all together and it is a lot of fun to do so. It also makes it much easier to take group photos which something I tend to do a lot!

There are a couple of words which I use when training which I think are very important. The first is the release word. This should be a word that is easy for you to say, and not something similar to what you would say in everyday life – "ok" is something that most people say all the time, and in my view is not a great release command. I find it helpful to have a different release for each dog, but you don't have to. I like to proof their release commands, and can do that if they are all sitting, and I use one word, and one dog should release. My current commands are "tack", "pie", "boo" and Loki's is "break".

The second is "ready". I tend to use this before many commands, and the result is that if I say "ready", Loki gets ready to do something. It can also be a great thing to use if you have problems with a recall. "Ready" should always be rewarded by food or a toy after doing

something, so your dog will have huge reinforcement value for that word. I don't like to call my dog's name if I don't think he will come, but can use "ready" instead and then reward him when he comes.

"Get it". I start using this by holding Loki between my legs so he is looking towards a toy. When he is focussed on it, I say "get it" and let him go. Ideally, he should run directly to the toy without looking around. Initially I did this from a short distance, and had a toy with a handle on it so I could grab it quickly without him running off and having a nice game by himself.

Because I am physically less able to sprint around courses like I was once able to, my focus with Loki is to teach him to do a lot of things from a distance. To be able to be further away from him on courses means that he needs to focus ahead without looking at me all the



time. The “get it” is the start of my focus forward work, and can be started from the day your pup comes home.

To date Loki has been at five agility shows. This is a brilliant opportunity to ensure that he can do all the training that we do at home in different locations and distractions. It also means he is used to lots of different noises – dogs barking, people yelling, clapping, megaphones etc. He also gets to meet a lot of people and dogs and has been brilliant in his interactions with others. We also are lucky to have the South Waikato Events centre here in Tokoroa, and there are events on every night with lots of people around. So Loki gets to train with different distractions, and meet other people there. It is great for him to have interactions with children while young, and Donna certainly ensured that he was exposed to a lot of children from very early.

So for interest, at the age of four months, here is a list of the training and skills that Loki has:

- A good wait whether from a position like sit or down, or in a crate or a basket.
- Great tug drive – at his last show I sort of forgot who he was after toileting him, and walked him back to the car just on the end of his tug toy instead of putting him on lead.
- Good food drive – no problems now about eating at any time, and will work for his normal kibble, though I generally use possum for training.
- Balance cushions and pods – learning to put front and back feet on things, and stay in that position until released.
- Cone work – I don't like the idea of lots of fast driving work for puppies around cones as I think this is a bit much for them. Loki is quite thoughtful about what he is doing, and not blasting around, so we have been doing some distance sends and multiple wraps.
- Find the toy – we often do this in a training session to teach him some independence, and using his brain. Now I can hide it behind things, and he will search it out.
- Circle work – both inside and outside circles. I like him to have a good understanding of reinforcement position by my side, and this helps achieve that.
- A good retrieve – this took a fair bit of work and patience! But it is sooo important that it was worth the time. My back is not brilliant, so I don't want my boys to drop toys at my feet, they must be delivered to my hand.
- Good release of the toy – I am using “ta” as a command. To start with I offer food each time I say “ta”, and this quickly translates into releasing the toy.
- Pretty good recall. I do test this often, and if Loki can recall from playing with Bug outside then we are making progress. But, we still have some issues recalling from freshly mown grass, and other exciting things out in the world so it will be a constant focus for quite a while. He does understand that he gets a reward when he comes, and I think it is hilarious that when I call him, he runs towards me licking his lips in anticipation of the treat!
- Pivots initially on a stool, and now just from me rotating on the spot – again, good finding of the reinforcement position.



- Beep beep – backing up. Once I taught this, it is now a default thing that he loves to do when a bit confused.
- Nose touches – I am not intending to teach a 2o2o on the contacts with Loki, but this is always a useful skill to learn, so easy to do it now.
- Moving laterally.
- Rolling over.
- Crawling under a table.

Hmmm, typing that out it seems like a huge list, and I may have forgotten a few things. But, most of these are really just to teach him something so that he enjoys training with me, will do so whenever I want, and learns through learning. That last

one is really important as dogs learn to fail through learning. So many times I see a dog having problems with the weaves or other equipment in the ring and I can see that the real issue is that the dog and handler are not on the same page. The dog may feel nervous about the surroundings, nervous about the handler's reaction, or has not been taught the obstacle fully. If your dog can't do an obstacle correctly at home, then it is unlikely that is going to magically happen when in the ring. And the reaction the dog gets for failing in the ring can then hamper progress at home. Teaching puppies all sorts of random things that they get to keep trying until they succeed is invaluable. It strengthens the bond that you have, and means they can learn to fail on things that don't matter. And it is just so much fun seeing them try to work it out!

All of the things I have said above apply to puppies as well as adult dogs. The older ones also love to learn more tricks and be involved in training sessions, and it is important to do this to keep them engaged and their brains active.

So your challenge for today is to choose one of your dogs and teach it a new trick!

Have fun...

