



Kiwi Dog Agility

Sharky's Update

After writing about Sharky's training progress over the first 18 months of his life, there have been a number of people who have asked me what would I have done differently with his training.

As an update, Sharky is now 4 years old and has achieved titles in agility, flygility, and rallyo including Agility Champion. He is a very driven dog, and loves doing anything that involves time with me. He was named quite well as he is obsessed with anything to do with water, and loves spending time on his boogie board in the sea riding the waves.

I had a few things that I really wanted to focus on with Sharky as part of his training to ensure that he could be both a great agility dog, and a great pet. There are a couple of things that I am really pleased that I trained so well, and some things that I could have done differently for a better result.

Sharky has a great lead-out. He understands that when I ask him to "sit" or "down", that he should remain in that position until I release him using his release command "tack". I think the reason his understanding is so great is that I try to be very consistent with

this, and still reward him for holding the position. If someone else asks him to sit (which happens occasionally), I ask them to ensure they release him from that position. Sharky has done hundreds of agility runs in his career, once in a blue moon he will move a front foot when he is on the start line, and once in the first 2 months of competing he stood up when I left him on a very windy day. I did have an issue on the start line with the speed of his sit. I like to get myself into position, and then for him to sit on my left or right, he is happy to do this, but while getting into the sit, he is scanning the course to work out where he is going to go next, and hence sits slower than I would like. For a few runs I tried leaving him in a "stand" (because I was being a lazy handler and trying to work around the weakness rather than solving it).

This wasn't very successful as I had not done much work on a stand stay, so he would paddle his feet. I still not done much work on a stand stay as it is not a formal position that I have wanted to use with him, and I quickly returned to a sit at the start line. I have done some work on rewarding him for a quick sit, and this has improved though he still likes to scan where the course is going while he is getting into position.

I am absolutely stoked with Sharky's attention span. He just loves to do anything with me, loves toys and this makes it very easy to train him. He is a great companion, and has a number of amusing obsessive behaviours which he loves to display. He is a very driven dog with a lot of energy, and is pretty harmless with his obsessions so I let him amuse himself. He will spend many minutes wandering a small patch of ground at agility shows pushing his nose into the grass, snuffling and then moving on a couple of feet. I still haven't quite worked out what he is focussing on – maybe hearing worms under the surface? It provides a lot of laughs for me and others though, because he looks like a total nutbar.

I have taught Sharky a large number of different things. He has a high amount of trust in me ensuring that he is kept safe in what I ask him to do. For him to learn new things successfully, he has needed first to know that failure is ok. If he doesn't do something right the first time, he will keep trying to do it better. He



Sharky and da mama left and enjoying the view from the tractor below



has never shut down, or been scared to try another option. When I compete in agility, I like my dogs to be fast, and for them to be able to make split second decisions on what is the right thing to do based on the cues that I give them. Sometimes the cues aren't 100%, but Sharky will always try to work out what I was meaning, and to give something a try. If he was worried about my reaction when doing the wrong thing, then he wouldn't be as fast as he would be trying harder to make sure he did the right thing before moving on. I see a lot of dogs in the agility ring trying very hard to make sure they do the right thing, and their handlers wondering how they ended up with such a slow dog. If you think your dog is slower than you would like, have a think about what your reaction is when they do the wrong thing. If it is to scream and yell and blame the dog, then I would be pretty sure that your dog will try and do whatever it can to avoid that reaction from you in the future. It is much easier to do the right thing when running slower as there is more time to assess the situation and then react.

And because Sharky is so trusting, I can get him to pose for the camera in some pretty awesome places. Getting him to look attentive is pretty easy – command is “where’s the mama” – and that means his real mama, AgGrCh Relko Let it Rain who he still adores.

One of the things that does let us down is the speed of our contacts. I taught Sharky a 2o2o contact (two feet on the contact, two feet on the ground), and he has very good understanding of this criteria. But, he takes a lot of steps to get into that position particularly on the a-frame. His contacts are still a lot faster than many dogs, and are very consistent, but compared with his speed around the rest of the course, they are slow. In retrospect, I think I should have realised this quite early in his training, and could have incorporated some training to ensure that he ran to the end of the contact, rather than trotting down it. I have decided recently that I need to do some work to reward him in the correct position as I think he gets value from the release and sprinting off from the contact. Sharky loves to go fast, and getting a release command is very rewarding for him. I need to change it so he gets value for being in the position rather than being rewarded for leaving it.

The method I used to teach Sharky to weaves was the weave-a-matics. He is a very enthusiastic weaver, but is not the best at transferring his weight before entering the weave. So in his first few shows, he would miss the 2nd pole in the weaves, because he was going too fast. About a year ago I did some additional training using Susan Garrett's 2x2 weave method, and that improved Sharky's weaving considerably. I have used this method to train a dog I rehomed for a short period of time, and was very impressed with the result. I would certainly use 2x2 training for my next puppy.

So overall I am very happy with the training that I did with Sharky as a puppy. I would change the method of weaving that I taught him, and would be more observant about my contacts progress. I have learnt a lot after teaching Sharky his basic stationery behaviour which is the foundation of a good lead-out. I think the problem that most people have is that they do not reward often enough, and don't reward immediately when the dog has adopted the desired behaviour.

I am looking forward to more years of competing with Sharky as well as all the other fun stuff that we do together – walking, mountain biking, water sports. And maybe one year we will both get together on the bright pink longboard that I bought for us (while it is on the water rather than on the garage floor!)

Fiona Ferrar

With AgCh Rainstar Shark Attack ADXG JDX FDX RN



Sharky loves spending time on his boogie board, doing agility and posing for the camera

