

The Blank Slate

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marci Mantell Photography

As I stare at the blank screen of my laptop trying to form the words to start at least a year's worth of articles focused on training an agility dog from puppyhood, I find a lot of similarity with this empty screen and the new Border Collie puppy my husband and I will choose in the coming weeks. Today our pups are just 24 days old. Their eyes are open, and they are beginning to hear my voice. They are changing not just every day, but in short moments of time as brief as one hour. I was there with them when they slipped from the womb, and I was there when the first pups climbed out of the whelping box when they were just two weeks old. I noticed the difference from one hour to the next when they could hear me enter the room and call out the traditional



“puppy, puppy, puppy” instead of just lying quietly in their nest. One moment they were just little black and white nursing machines, and now they play and interact with each other and their environment—all in the space of just 24 days. What will they become? Their genetics predisposes much of what they will be, and the rest will be created by our training and care of this dog. My computer screen was blank moments ago, but already I have 200 words on this page. Our puppy is growing and changing just as fast.

I haven't been alone with these pups; my husband has spent as many hours caring for them as I have, and the pup we choose will be his next Agility Dog, not mine. We whelped five male pups from a lovely, athletic, and sweet Border Collie bitch named Wyn. They are fat and healthy and handsomely marked with white in all the right (and none of the wrong) places. We won't have to make the choice between girls or boys in this litter, since that was decided for us. We will base our opinions and selection on structure and character instead of sex or color.

We love Jim's seven-year-old dog Spy who fathered this litter. If this litter is reasonably equal in structure, movement, and personality then we will probably lean toward taking a pup that favors the look of the father, hoping that the genetics that are visible to us through body coloring and structure will also follow the genetics that are inside. We hope those tendencies will give Jim a dog that has a lot of similarity to Spy.

We want the same characteristics in this dog that you probably want in *your* next puppy. No one we know ever looks for an ill-tempered or poorly built puppy. Prospective BC owners talk about wanting a dog that has drive but with an off switch, and many other specifics, too. We want



what you want, an absolutely perfect dog that loves us and is completely sound of mind and body!

Right now the pups are just beginning to show their personalities. One of them is vocal, another is a cuddler, and the big one seems pushier than the rest. We will do what all prospective owners do. We will watch them for hours and days and weeks, hoping that we can identify specific puppy-hood traits that will carry on to adulthood and also give us an insight into the adult dogs these puppies will become.

In our preparation for the litter's arrival we did research on what kinds of advances breeders are making in helping create a healthy environment for puppies to develop. We know about the principal stages in neurologic and behavioral development, and we have read about what our job is in preparing these pups for a balanced development in this juvenile stage of their life. We decided to follow a process called “early neurological stimulation” that we read about in an article by Carmen L. Battaglia titled “Developing High Achievers” (www.breedingbetterdogs.com/achiever.html).

The theories were based on studies done by the U.S. military in an attempt to improve their working dogs. The program was



Guess which pup
will be ours?

known as “Bio Sensor,” but you may have heard it referred to as the “Super Dog” program. It uses daily stimulation exercises to improve the puppies’ neurological system.

We followed the program as suggested from day 3 to day 16 after whelping by using five simple exercises, which include holding the puppy in a variety of positions, stimulating them with slight temperature changes, and even tickling their feet for just a few seconds. The exercises are simple and take less than a minute a day for each pup. This handling does not seem to be overly stressful to the pups and is designed to stimulate the dog to have more tolerance to stress later in life, as well as purported disease resistance and other physiological benefits. This theory is new for us. While we’re slightly skeptical of the benefits, there seems to be no risk at all to the puppy, and the possible good side effects from these stimulation drills are certainly desirable.

You can read about these early neurological stimulation tests at the following website: www.breedingbetterdogs.com/achiever.html or use Google or another search engine with the phrase “bio-sensor stimulation for canines.”

We have also begun exposing our puppies to a variety of sounds and different kinds of footing in their whelping box where they still spend 80% of their day. We have placed a large piece of ceramic floor tile on the whelping box floor. We covered an area with newspaper (where we hope they eliminate) and we also created an area of warm, cozy blankets. They can move from the comfortable bedding to the colder tile or to the newspaper area at will. The rough wool blankets we originally used as bedding had good traction so that they would not

slip as they used their rear ends to push into their mother to nurse. These blankets also encourage mobility as their bodies strengthened and they learned to waddle and eventually walk around the box. They spend a few hours each day outdoors in a grass pen as our weather is still warm and comfortable in California. We handle every puppy individually each day and have already started to cut their tiny sharp toe nails with a small battery-operated Dremel tool.

In the coming weeks they’ll move to a larger puppy pen during the day where they can run and play and see more of the outside world. They will not be introduced to any real or even miniature agility equipment, but they will be presented with wood, cement, and linoleum as surfaces to walk and play on, as well as materials to crawl over, under, and through. We will provide them with extremely low balance toys starting around four to five weeks of age in their outdoor pen.

Since I started working on this article 24 hours ago, these handsome boy puppies have had their very first meal in a bowl instead of from a teat. Within a few days Jim and I will start loading up a clicker since they now will be able to chew a piece of food we offer as way to link the sounds of the clicker with the taste of their favorite foods. Today they chomped on toys and plastic water bottles, and one of them fell asleep with a ball seemingly attached to his mouth. They met all the students from our Tuesday night agility class, and I expect it won’t be that many days before our puppies will be visiting the class, rather than being doted upon from the side of a whelping box.

We have a lot of work to do this month to prepare for our stewardship of Jim’s new



dog as well as the other four pups which will all go to local agility homes. There will be car rides, eye tests, and wormings. Those projects will transition to socializing, collar and leash training, and lots of fun-filled play sessions. My focus in this project will be helping Jim plan his training and play sessions and set monthly goals so that I can record much of it for you, and share our experiences in raising this now 25-day-old puppy until he is ready for his first agility ring experiences. I plan on sharing all my ideas on play, obedience, groundwork, contact training, and eventually handling and jump drills. The equipment work will not begin for many months, but our initial steps to develop a responsive dog that likes to learn and play have already begun.

I hope you will be able to use the ideas to help train your own young Agility Dog, and follow our progress as Jim trains this new puppy that we hope will follow successfully in the footsteps of all the wonderful dogs we have had the privilege of partnering since 1991 when we both first got involved with agility. Dogs like Scud, Mick, Riot, Swift, Wicked, and Spy, as well as our youngest family dogs, Mace and Jack. 🐾

Nancy Gyes and her husband Jim Basic run Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California. She is the AKC World Team Coach for 2006 and has been on the AKC World Team seven times, four years with Scud and three with Riot. Nancy and Riot finished 1st in 2002 and 2nd in 2001 in Individual Agility classes at Worlds. Nancy also won the USDAA Nationals four years in a row, 1998 to 2001, with three different dogs, Scud, Riot, and Wicked. In 2001 and 2002, Nancy and Riot were the 24" jump height AKC National Champions. Scud retired in 2001 after winning the USDAA Veterans Championship. Contact Nancy at www.powerpawsagility.com, where you can also view other articles and videos.