

Spectators Marvel at Cats Running Feline Agility Competition

by BJ Bangs
(Special to Cat Talk)

Cats can do tricks? Really. Spectators seemed amazed, befuddled, and somewhat shocked to find that cats indeed can be trained to maneuver an obstacle course, complete with jumps, stairs, tunnels, and weave poles.

"I thought only dogs could do that," exclaimed Phil Salvatoriello who runs B+B=Best Buddy Animal Care Service in Hanover, NH. "I'd never seen anything like this till last year. I never would have dreamed cats could do this," he said.

Lots of oohs and ahs could be heard time and time again as spectators gathered around the ring each time a cat was running the feline agility competition, whether it was a cat actually competing, or a spectator leaning how it was done.

Jill Archibald's Feline Agility Competition at the annual Seacoast Cat Club's Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) Cat Show in Concord, NH, May 2-3, stopped passers-by in their tracks. They'd point at the cats, and ask their significant others, kids, or friends, if they thought one of their cats would do this.

Joanne Chouimard of Bedford, NH, commented, "I don't think so. He's too fat, and too lazy. Maybe when he was younger." She and her friend Brooks Foster rescued their Bengal, Danny Boy, whom they've had for 11 years in Florida.

"I'm fascinated by cats. It's like you can read their mind by looking into their eyes, and looking at their facial expression," she added.

There's something about cats that make people want to talk about their cats. Chouimard recounts how she had lots of cats growing up on a farm. There was quite an age difference between her and her siblings, so she'd play with the cats. She told how the cats would greet her when she got off the bus. "They'd get so excited."

It was a girls' weekend out that brought Mei Leung, of Clinton, MA, and her New Yorker friends, Judy Shartier of Bloomington, Barbara Ryan of Lake Placid, and Nora Hewall of Paul Smith, to the cat show.

They came just for the cat show. On the way they stopped to visit two New Hampshire cat breeders from which Hewall had adopted a couple of kitties.

When Ryan found out she could get in the ring with one of Archibald's three cats, she jumped at the chance. As a trainer, Archibald does not enter her cats: Timothy, a 5-month-old Japanese Bobtail and her two Silver Egyptian Maus, Muffin Man and Ice Cube, in the competition. "While there aren't any rules against it, I don't think it would be fair," she said.

Archibald lets spectators try the course with her cats, giving them five minutes of get-to-know and trust-you time with this unfamiliar human. Ryan learned fast and went a few rounds with Muffin Man. She exclaimed, "It was fun."

As Leung watched her friend maneuver the course, she pointed out, "I didn't even know there was such a thing. It's pretty cool." For her, this was not only a first at seeing the feline agility competition, but her first cat show as well.

She added, "I don't get the ring thing, though. It's kind of like a boxing ring. It's a competition, but not a ring where they are boxing it out.... I visit friends and play with their cats, and we can't get them to do anything like this."

Of the group, Leung, who just loves Maine Coon cats, is the only one without a cat. Her husband is allergic to them. Her friends keep telling her there are certain cats that won't make the allergies flare up. "We'll convert her to a cat owner yet," said Ryan.

Ryana Ruest and Athanasia Ruest of Londonderry, NH, both say, "I love the agility course. I can't wait to see the Siamese compete."

Spectators, ranging from toddlers to 90-year-olds, seemed a bit entranced by the cats' abilities.



Spectators were entranced by the cats and the cats running Agility.



Austin loved running the Agility course with the Egyptian Mau. (above) And his mom had fun at the show as well. (right)





Jill Archibald (on right) helps a cat to learn the Agility course.

Ellen Alexander of Stratham, NH, exclaimed, "Maybe I could get my Abyssinian, Suki, a feather, and see if she'd keep going."

Archibald has been competing since 1996. As the CFA Agility Course Coordinator, she points out she can tell how well a cat will do by reading their body language. She finds spectators are fascinated by the fact that you can train cats.

The felines won't interact if they don't feel safe. That's why she has spectator competitors spend about five minutes socializing with one of her cats first. "You have to be patient and wait for the cat to respond to you," she said, adding that she often uses feathers or fishing lures on the end of poles to entice the cats to perform.

Eight-year-old Austin Stammersky and his mom, Melissa, who had just moved back to Concord, NH, from Michigan, found out there was a cat show when they drove by the Everett Arena the day before. It was after hours, and they promised to come back and check it out.

Austin was enamored by the silver Egyptian Maus, and he patiently waited for a real competitor to wrap up so he could try his luck in the ring. Melissa pointed out they come from an animal family, and Austin has been helping train the English and Irish Setters with Grandma, Donna Rae Morgan, of Concord, NH. "He is pretty excited about working with cats," she said.

"He just loves animals," she adds. "Last week he said he wanted to be a dental veterinarian. Today, he says, 'I want to sell cats,' which

could go hand in hand with becoming a future breeder of pedigreed felines."

When she was a kid, Melissa's family raised Keeshonds, but now all their animals come from the shelter. Both Austin and Melissa were quite pleased at his performance with Muffin Man.

Jen Burton of Nottingham, NH, went to her first cat show in Dover, NH, some 15 years ago. "It's amazing to see the cats perform in person, rather than see it in a book or on the internet ... They say it's all about having the right toy, but my cat certainly wouldn't go through that hoop."

This writer agreed, and just had to try participating in the Feline Agility Competition, selecting the youngster, Timmy, who knew the course quite well. Even so, Archibald said without the proper handling, he would not cooperate. She explained how to position to feather, drag it, and entice the cat into action. After a couple of practice runs, Timmy was off and running. She explained kittens can't weave, so they must be enticed to cross the weave line at a diagonal angle, cross back, and so forth. She also pointed out to never bang the wand, but always move it back and forth. All this coaching paid off, as the finish time was 00:36:99.

(About the author: BJ Bangs is an award-winning journalist/blogger/freelance writer and photographer, who absolutely loves cats. Residing in rural New England with her five felines, she blogs at www.bjbangs.net (Paws for Reflection) and contributes to a number of regional and national publications. When she isn't writing about cats, she's writing about other things.)

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