

Over the top

By [Katie Scarvey](#)

Salisbury Post

STATESVILLE — It's Wednesday evening at DogLogic on Sunflower Road. Six women and their dogs — whose furry bodies are fairly pulsing with pent-up energy — are waiting for class to begin.

The women are here to train their dogs, but it's not basic obedience the canines are learning.

No, it's a bit more jaw-dropping than "sit" and "stay."

You might have seen it on Animal Planet: off-leash dogs flying around an obstacle course at warp speed, hurdling jumps, climbing A-frames, slowing down to tackle various obstacles, including weave poles and see-saws.

The sport is called dog agility, and it's a chance for dogs to unleash their inner athletes. The dog runs through a timed obstacle course with its handler, who guides the animal by using spoken commands and gestures. Scores are negatively affected by faults, such as going off course or knocking over a bar on a jump.

Dog agility could be the only sport out there that would prompt someone to go to a hardware store and buy six toilet plungers — as competitor Lynn Berry did — in order to set up "weave poles" for a dog to zig-zag through.

With its roots in England, the sport saw its beginnings in the United States in the early 1980s and has been steadily gaining in popularity throughout the country.

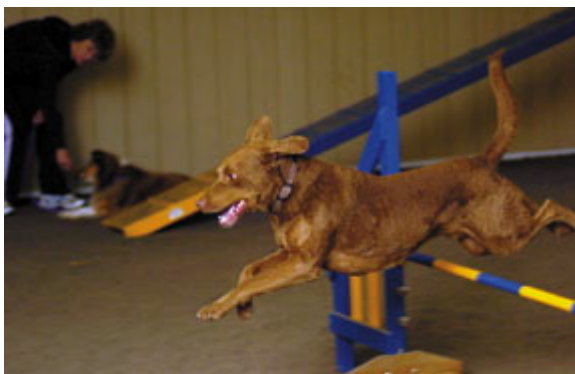
Pam Montedomico of China Grove started going to agility trials in 1991 and says the sport has grown a great deal in the past 15 years, with many more venues now than before. Competitions have sprung up all over the state, including Raleigh, Durham, Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Fayetteville and Asheville.

Different groups run agility trials, including the American Kennel Club, the North American Dog Agility Council and the United States Dog Agility Association, which has more than 25,000 registered competitors and more than 200 different breeds of dogs, including mix breeds.

Montedomico's border collie Hope is the fastest dog of the four she's competed with over the years.



This way, please: Lynn Berry works with Deacon the Maltese in agility class at DogLogic in Statesville. Photo By [Jon C. Lakey](#), Salisbury Post.



Chesapeake bay Retriever "Kimo" owned by Mary Kearns makes the final jump in his exercise in Agility class. Photo by [Jon C. Lakey](#), Salisbury Post.

But speed is only part of the equation, says Lynne Stephens of DogLogic, who is not only an instructor but a top-level competitor on the dog agility circuit. She and her husband, Pete, also a trainer and competitor, moved to Statesville in 2004 from England, joining Lynne's sister and brother-in-law Karen and Kevin Mielke, who have been living in North Carolina for many years.



"Hope" a Smooth Border Collie owned by Pam Montedomico of China Grove jumps the final hurdle in Agility class. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

Having a fast dog is great, but control is key, Stephens says.

Hope tears around the course like she's after a squirrel dipped in gravy, but somehow, she's still aware of Montedomico and happy to do her bidding.

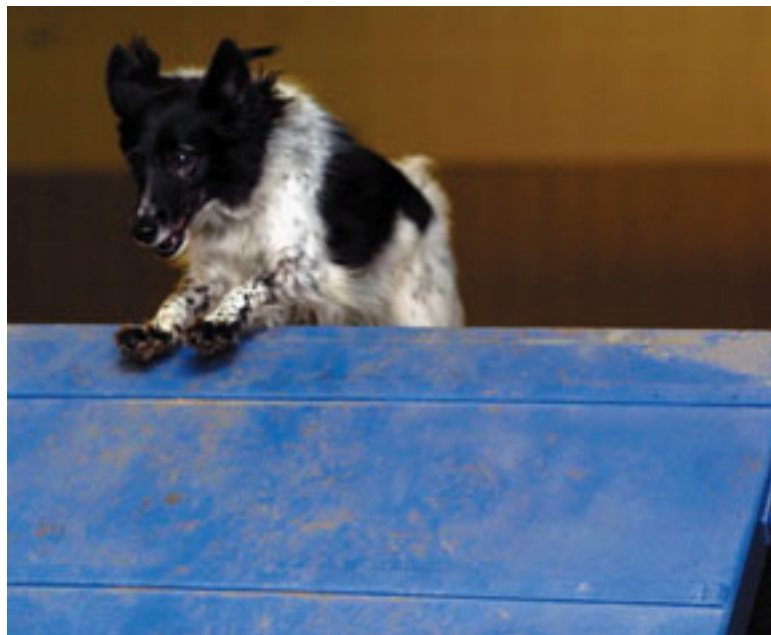
All the dogs assembled Wednesday evening in DogLogic's metal training barn are getting great practice, but it's the handlers who benefit most from the instruction.

In this advanced agility class, everyone has competition experience.

Sarah Fix of Lewisville, working with Fire, her red and white border collie, not only competes but sometimes serves as a judge at agility trials.

"We all go to trials lots of weekends," says Mary Kearns of Winston-Salem, who competes with her Chesapeake Bay retriever, Kimo.

During Wednesday's training session, Kimo jumps the gun at the start line, starting without Kearns, who scolds him briefly.



"Bad start line!"

When Kimo does something praiseworthy, Kearns drops little bits of string cheese out of her

Up & over: Tag the border collie leaps over the A-frame in agility class at DogLogic in Statesville. Photo By Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

mouth for him to catch. Stephens often reminds handlers to treat good behavior by offering a favorite goodie: reinforcement is key.

The handlers are here to learn how to channel their dogs' energy, how to guide them through runs (which are always changing) using their voices and body language.

Stephens shows the handlers how to hold themselves and move so as not to confuse their animals. Consistency is a focus.

To motivate dogs to continue moving through a course, owners will throw a favorite toy ahead of the dog as an incentive.

"You have to make sure the toy is there when you say, 'Go on,'" she tells the class. "He needs to know 'there's something there for me if I go on.' "

Karen Mielke, Stephens' sister and co-owner of DogLogic, is in the class with her border collie, Tag. Tag rockets through the course like he's turbo-charged.

"That was smashing," Stephens says.

The class is heavy with border collies, who tend to dominate agility competitions, so much so that in England, some trials exclude them in order to give other breeds a chance to shine.

But never fear, Stephens says. Genetics is not necessarily destiny, and most dogs can be trained for agility — although some have more aptitude than others. Dogs that are "keen to play" are good candidates, she says.



Watching the dogs in this masters class, it's pretty clear that these dogs are keen to play.

One of Stephens' own dogs, Quiz, is an example of how dogs considered to be lap dogs can make excellent competitors. A Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Quiz made the world team two years in a row when Lynne and Pete Stephens were living in England. Quiz has also competed in the U.S. Dog Agility Association national championships.

Of course smaller dogs like Lynn Berry's Maltese, Deacon, won't be as fast as the larger dogs, but they compete against each other, not against larger dogs.

Small dogs often provoke a bit of merriment as they run the course, little legs pumping furiously.

During one of Deacon's runs, Stephens gives Berry a tip to take to competition: "Don't giggle if he's in the tunnel." It's OK, however, if the audience sees fit to giggle, she adds.

Stephens, Berry says, is "real good at watching what you do as a handler and 'fixing' you....and she's real good at reading dogs and seeing what they're seeing."

"I think she's very insightful," says Montedomico. "She has a very good eye for what you and your dog need to work on."



Coursework: Kimo, a Chesapeake bay retriever owned by Mary Kearns, left, runs through the 'weave' part of the course. Photo by [Jon C. Lakey](#), Salisbury Post.

Because Hope is such a fast dog, cueing her is difficult. As a handler, Montedomico has learned from Stephens to think several obstacles ahead.

Montedomico first became aware of Stephens after seeing her compete with Quiz at an agility trial in Charlotte. "I really liked the way she ran her Cavaliers," she says.

Because she understands how dogs think—which probably explains the business name, DogLogic—Stephens is able to help handlers guide them through a course more efficiently.

While some instructors tend to assume that every dog will behave the same way, Stephens tailors her instruction based on what she observes as a team runs the course.

"Everybody used to say that I 'floated' around the course," says Berry, who has been competing since 2002. Stephens, she says, has helped her move more smoothly so that her intentions are clear to Deacon.



Getting ready: Dog owners walk the course, familiarizing themselves with the turns. Photo by [Jon C. Lakey](#); Salisbury Post.

Passionate about dogs from when she was a child, Stephens got started in pet obedience many years ago in her native England and gradually got into dog agility with her husband Pete. They were both members of Great Britain's Agility World Championship team that competed in France in 2003. Lynne Stephens was also part of the British team that went to Italy in 2004.

Since moving to Statesville, they have already made waves in U.S. dog agility. The couple had three dogs that qualified and competed in the 2005 U.S. Dog Agility Association World Championships held in Scottsdale, Ariz.

While their home is under construction, the Stephenses are living with Karen and Kevin Mielke, the other half of the DogLogic team.

Stephens is a contributor for "Clear Run," a dog agility magazine, and gives seminars as well as private lessons. She sometimes goes into the homes of busy professionals to help them train their puppies.

She's happy to finally be in the United States, after dreaming about it for so many years. Business is going well, she says, and her goal now is to "build up the puppy side of things."

Stephens loves the sport of dog agility and enjoys sharing it with others. "I encourage students to aim high, reach for the stars, and most importantly, enjoy the journey."

For more information about instruction offered at DogLogic, go to www.doglogictraining.com or call 704-402-5442.

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