

Editorializing...

Save the Best till Last?

By Lynne Stephens



Have you ever listened to this all too common piece of advice—only to discover the flaw in the logic when it was too late?

I can think of many instances when this would be true of my own life experiences. For example, how many times have I eaten my way through large, admittedly tasty meals, secretly waiting for the magic moment that I could really savor—the dessert! That mouthwateringly delicious piece of Key Lime Pie or Mississippi Mud Pie. Admit it—we all (well most of us) have a sneaky look at the dessert menu before even glancing at the appetizers and main courses. Finally, the moment arrives. The dessert menu is legitimately on the table in front of you. And then you discover the awful truth. You have not left enough space. You don't have any more room. You just cannot eat another mouthful.

Or, maybe you are with a group of friends and, when the dessert option is mentioned, no one else has room. How many times in this situation have you declined dessert when you really would have enjoyed at least one little taste?

Or, perhaps you valiantly plow on, having promised yourself this delectable treat. Of course you deserve it. This is a special occasion. You have been working very hard lately. The Chocolate Dream arrives. You sink your teeth into its creamy, dreamy slickness. It was worth waiting for after all. Then, suddenly you realize, (yes it does happen suddenly) that you have eaten one spoonful too many. You really are uncomfortably full and have ended this truly special meal feeling rather ill.

This is not the only instance where the “save the best till last” philosophy can let us down. As a teacher and principal of a school in England for the last 26 years I have also seen this philosophy cause problems in schools. Of course it is true that the eleven-year-olds need exciting and stimulating lessons. No less true, however, is the fact that our five- and six-year-olds and pre-schoolers also need to be taught foundation skills in a way that will excite them about education for the rest of their lives. How sad it would be then for a truly inspirational teacher of sixth graders to discover that her students were missing some of the vital building blocks and enthusiasm for learning necessary to let them fly. How sad for the pupil to discover that, if only he knew his multiplication tables, a whole new exciting world of opportunity might open up.

You may by now be wondering what relevance all this has to an article in *Clean Run*. (You may also be tucking into a giant slab of chocolate cake! In which case, I apologize for ruining your diet.)

Perhaps you are an instructor at an agility school. Maybe you are skilled enough at running your dogs to compete well at the top

levels. And quite possibly, because of these skills, have been asked to teach the advanced class at your facility. This is undoubtedly an honor and a wonderful opportunity for your students to learn from your excellent handling skills. No one would deny that this was a good move for all concerned.

Maybe you are a student, who has just qualified for the Masters- or Excellent-level class and are really excited to be moving on in the sport of your choice. You have been looking forward to the day that you are eligible to work with a handler you have long admired.

How frustrating for both then, to discover that vital building blocks are missing. Why were the weaves not taught on both the right and left from the very start? Why wasn't I told about the importance of keeping the dog enthusiastic, having accurate contacts, a good start-line stay, recall, and so on? Why didn't someone tell me this before?

In many, maybe most, cases I realize that clubs and schools are run by willing volunteers who do their best to help to keep classes running. The situation is the same the world over. Students are asked to teach classes just as soon as they have acquired some skills of their own and feel confident, only to teach those whom they consider know a little less than themselves. Once again, this may be unavoidable and I am sure everyone applauds those willing volunteers for all that they are doing to help the advancement of our sport. In fact, I am sure that many of today's top-level competitors and instructors started their careers in just that way themselves.

This may be an impossible situation for you to change if you want to keep your school going. If this is the case, please carry on your excellent and valued work. Every lesson you take, every dog you observe, will add to your skills both as a handler and an instructor and will be of value to those you instruct.

Yet, all I am suggesting is that, where there are other options, schools may need to ask themselves, “Who have we chosen to teach the fundamentals of our sport to the newcomers? Who has been charged with the awesome responsibility of ensuring all the building blocks are in place for both dog and handler? Who is the one with the job of inspiring new teams, helping them through the rough times, the hard work, without dampening their enthusiasm?”

Just a thought... Maybe this is another case where it's not always wise to save the best till last?

Lynne Stephens

Lynne Stephens was a member of the British Agility World Cup team in 2003/2004. She currently competes and has great fun with her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Quiz, and Border Collie, Chess, both of whom have competed at most major U.K. finals, including Crufts and Olympia. Lynne and husband, Pete, are presently setting up an agility and dog training facility (DogLogic Training) in Statesville, North Carolina. They can be contacted at info@doglogictraining.com.