

A Report From The First Annual Clicker Challenge - UK

by: Kay Laurence

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The First National Clicker Challenge - The Results

50 confident and courageous clicker trainers with an assortment of dogs bravely entered the first National Clicker Challenge sponsored by Learning About Dogs. This was open to anyone who clicker trains and has faith in their abilities to meet the range of challenges my wicked mind could devise. They came from all branches of the dog world, from pet trainers, agility competitors, obedience fanatics, ring crafters, musical freestylers all devoted to the ethics of teaching their dogs by clicker training.



The Judges - Attila Szkukalek, Mary Ray, Karen Pryor and Kay Laurence in charge of microphone duties.

This was a challenge to the trainers - the dogs just came along for the day out and some social exchanges. We take a different road from traditional training by teaching our dogs to become their own teachers and learn from themselves. This gives you a "super-learner" able to transfer their previous skills and behaviours to new situations with ease and confidence. We just use the clicker to explain to them what we want, how it is done, where and in what style. The dogs just fill in the dots.



Diane Dickens teaching the over.

The teams, consisting of four handlers and up to eight dogs, arrived at 9.30 to be presented with their challenges. These challenges were all designed to test the specific skills of the trainers NOT to test the dogs. One challenge was the “collection and delivery” service. One dog was required to leave their handler about 12 feet taking an object and placing it in a specified area. A second team dog was to collect this and return it to their handler at a different point. The results were awesome, the dogs looked like they had spend a lifetime working for Parcel Force, in particular Hector and Pocket - two Beagles with their teachers Alex Johnson, so competent and all the more astounding when we learned that Hector is an ex-laboratory Beagle.



Alex Johnson with Hector & Pocket receiving their Special Award from Karen

The creative capacities of the Teams was sorely tested on the “here be Crocodiles” challenge. How would you begin to find a solution?

“The floor will be covered in blue sheets under which are hiding dog eating crocodiles. You must travel a dog across a bridge of people without holding the dog. The “bridge” cannot use their hands to help or move the dog. The crocodiles will not eat trainers, only dogs - they are especially fond of paws.”



We saw a great variety of solutions - from the corduroy bridge to the floating ferry to a swing bridge, and the dogs gamely stood up to the plate and walked across. I have no doubt that none of the dogs would have pre-trained for this or anything similar. But with a clicker and a pocket of treats these dogs were taught to trust and enjoy their learning -- certainly that challenge was a feature for the spectators!



Crossing the bridge

We tested the mathematical skills of the dogs, “how many nails have you got?”, we tested their memory skills - “show me which is Tea, Coffee and Chocolate. We tested their scenting skills - “find a Royal card from this suit of 13 cards”. We tested their flexibility in “weaving the withy”, which is a very canine kind of dance only a dog could enjoy - but we saw some of the trainers finding this particularly “uplifting”. The group challenge invited the Teams to display their unique skills to “make like Sunday morning”, which varied from Bellringing, Rolling Home drunk, lying in bed to reading the paper. Such a depth of pointless tasks the competitors and dogs could enjoy but what else is Sunday morning for?

Our judges were Mary Ray - a champion of clicker training in obedience, agility and heelwork to music, Attila Szkukalek who pushes forward the training boundaries by forces us to questions “how did he teach Fly to do that?” and we were all particularly thrilled that Karen Pryor, pioneer of clicker training, flew over from Boston especially to see the challenge, meet the teams and judge for us. There were rosettes for all the entrants, with winners rosettes for the highest points in each challenge, rosettes for the winning, second place and third place teams and special awards from Karen for creativity and excellence. The day was exciting, filled with laughter, lots of sparking of new ideas, new friends ships and the dogs had a great day out. People who have never seen clicker training were remarking that: “I can't believe it, when

they're training, none of the dogs are wearing leashes! And yet they stay with the trainer!"

"Look at the tails wagging, whenever they're working all the dogs' tails are wagging!"

"I'm amazed there are so many different breeds!"

"Why do the dogs all look so happy?"

It was a great pleasure to share in the challenge, understand the enjoyment of the people and dogs and be part of the inauguration of a new activity we can enjoy with our dogs and dog friends. The day of challenging and puzzle solving was rewarding for all of us but none quite so much as the opportunity to see Attila and Fly perform their breathtaking routine to gladiator.

It makes us proud to call ourselves Clicker Trainers we met the challenge!



The winning team - the Penylan Girls