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## Learning to Fly

*An original Sheltie Story by Marisa Copping,  
as published in Dog and Handler*

We were all a bit stunned when we heard the news. Two members of our flyball team, both with Jack Russell Terriers, were leaving the team and leaving flyball. We had lost more than teammates and friends, we had also lost the most critical part of a team: height dogs.

With only one height dog still on the team and multiple lineups of dogs ready and able to run, we were in trouble. One solution was to acquire a brand new dog, and that is exactly what one team member decided to do, adding a pup to her pack. But that is the long route, of course. It takes a minimum of a year to raise and train a flyball dog and we had tournaments coming up in just weeks. We needed a dog now.

I read the email again and looked around at my Shelties. There was Brinks, my faithful flyball boy. He would do for the young dogs, setting the jumps at eleven inches, but we had older dogs that could not jump that high for an entire weekend of racing. There was Dickens, learning the game and coming along nicely, but slightly taller than Brinks, he, too, would set the jumps at eleven, or possibly even higher. There was Shen. A wee thirteen and a half inches tall at the shoulder, she would set the jumps at an ideal nine inches. But Shen was already eight years old and had never retrieved anything but her obedience dumbbell, and that had been clicker trained.

I watched Shen sashay past me on her way to the kitchen. It was a shame I had not thought of her earlier. Well put together, easy to train, she would have been a nice flyball dog. It was too late for that now though... or was it?

"Shen, old girl," I said, "Would you like to learn flyball?" She heard her name and looked at me quizzically, no doubt wondering if "flyball" were something she could eat.

"This is nuts," I thought. Nobody trains up an eight year old dog in less than a month. Now I know it is quite possible to teach old dogs new tricks... but a new sport?

Certainly, with Shenny, anything was possible. Shenny was the dog who launched me into dog world. Smart and sassy, she needed jobs and I tried them all with her. I still have her graduation certificate from puppy kindergarten. It was the beginning of adventure with Shen that would span years. With her by my side, I tackled conformation, obedience, agility, and herding. No matter how much I fumbled through early attempts, Shen always compensated for me and we sailed along, partners, from venue to venue.

Maybe you have a dog like Shenny and maybe, like my dog, it is the first dog you learned dog sports with. If so, you probably made a lot of mistakes and when you were done teaching that dog something new, you knew exactly how you would train the next one. Maybe, too, that next one came along and you did train it exactly the way you wanted to, and it became your shining star. Of course, your first dog was ever your faithful teacher and partner, and oh, if only you had known then what you know now, but you didn't. And so you never did actualize that dog's full potential. Still, you and that dog can "dance" together and you know there's nothing you can't do if only you try. All you have to do is set the new steps to the old music.

Maybe, just maybe, Shen and I could dance again and I could teach her this game called flyball. With my team captain's blessing, I set about doing just that.

If I had had the luxury of time, I would have trained Shenny the way I was training my young dogs, by building tug and ball drive, teaching a snap turn on and off the box, and instilling a fast, single stride down the lane and back. With Shen, however, I would have to forget about the bells and whistles and concentrate on teaching this dog the basics: go, get the ball, come back.

This meant, of course, that Shen would first have to know what a tennis ball was all about. A fairly accomplished, high scoring obedience dog, Shen had retrieved many dumbbells but never shown interest in tennis balls, and because I had trained her in the days "before I knew better" I had never thought to encourage her.

I decided to build on what she already knew and set her up as for an obedience retrieve on the flat, substituting the ball for the dumbbell. With her sitting neatly by my side in heel position, I tossed the ball and released her with a "Get it!" She paused, briefly, then trotted to the ball. When she arrived at it, she stopped, looked back at me and barked a frustrated "Hey, that's the wrong thing!" I let her think about it. She looked all around but there was no dumbbell in sight. She looked back at the ball.

"Good, Shen," I told her. "You're right, take it."

Now, if you are lucky enough to have ever had a dog like my Shen, then you know that some dogs will jump over the moon for a bit of praise (and a cookie). When Shen heard the word "good," she knew I was marking a new behavior and she knew there would be a big pay off for her for figuring out the next step. She considered her options then picked up the tennis ball. When she heard another "good" utter forth from me, she trotted promptly

back, tennis ball planted between her teeth, and landed a perfectly square obedience sit before me. I smiled as I reached out my hand for a trade. Shen spat out the ball and I gave her what she was waiting for, making sure to dole her several bonuses as well. I tossed the ball again, sent Shen again, and she went out, picked the ball up, and brought it back as though she had been doing this all her life.

For a couple of sessions, all we did was play ball. Shen's ball drive kept increasing and I was able to learn which way she turned naturally, and what kind of ball she preferred. I soon discovered she would play only with regular tennis balls, even though she could barely fit them in her mouth. Maybe she had paid more attention to flyball than I had thought. Maybe she had watched me work with the other dogs and knew the big tennis balls were the "right" ones. She did not seem to mind when the ball would become wedged firmly in her small muzzle and she would need her paw or my fingers to extract it. I respected her choice.

The jumps came next. Agility and obedience training had long ago taught Shen to take whatever comes between a set of stanchions. My job would be to teach her to take four of them in a row. I decided back chaining was the best way to go and started by holding her directly behind one jump, on the other side of which was a target plate and a piece of cheese. When I let go of her collar, over the jump she went, and as she grabbed her treat, I called her name and told her to "Come, over." Next I tried sending her from some distance over the jump and back and even tried some angled approaches. When we had one jump down, we added the others, one by one, until I could send her down all four jumps and call her back over them. It took all of an afternoon.

The next day Shen repeated the full sequence so we moved right along. I added a training Shoot, a ramp-like piece of equipment from which the dog plucks a ball off of a strip of velcro. I had never used a Shoot before but it was all I had and Shen and I have had a long history of learning things together. Surely we could figure this one out, too. I attached the ball to the velcro, pointed it out to Shen from a few feet away, and told her to get her ball. Up the ramp she went, turning, and when she faced me, I saw she indeed had the ball. I tried sending her from behind one jump and again she was successful, so I back chained the jumps, one by one, to the Shoot, and then tried a full run. In one day, she had learned to run down the lane of jumps, take her ball from the Shoot, and return to me to place the ball smartly in my hand. My email to the team that night read something like this: "I can't believe it, but I think she's getting the idea. Maybe this will work after all."

Of course, taking a ball from a Shoot is a little different from taking a ball from a box. The box makes a loud sound and shoots the ball out and the dog has to catch it. The team gathered one sunny afternoon for an impromptu session with the new height dog and the flyball box. Shen and I showed what she could do and though she wasn't as polished with her routine on the road as she had been at home, she completed several runs, to the chant of "Shenny, get the ball, get the ball, get the ball." We agreed she was ready for the box. I pasted a target fashioned from duct tape firmly to the pedal and showed it to her. Armed and ready, with my clicker and a can of squeeze cheese, I told her to hit it. I tend to teach my dogs a foot touch to a target, but I could not remember if I had ever done so with Shen. Apparently I had. Shen touched the target with both paws, quickly returning to me to look eagerly up for her reward.

The sound of the trigger did not faze her so after a few more "hit its" we added the ball.

This time when she hit the box, a ball fired out and hit her in the head. Shenny no longer thought the game was fun and she quit playing. We had our first training issue.

I took the box home so we would continue working on Shen's box skills. Amazingly, one more afternoon of clicker work was all that was needed to convince Shen that the box was not a loaded gun, but indeed merely one more way for her to get cookies. Initially, she dealt with her fear of getting whacked by a ball by pouncing on the pedal with her front paws then springing backward, out of harm's reach. Once a ball exited the box, rolled to the ground and came to standstill, she would scurry after it. This was not the box turn of my dreams, of course, but it would have to do. Fortunately, the next time we trained, Shen had already forgotten her worries and was doing her best to catch the ball.

Our first, and so far only, glitch was behind us and I had a new flyball dog. In just weeks, days really, if you count actual time spent training, Shen had learned a full flyball run. What can take years had taken her no time at all. Was she breathtakingly fast? No. Would she do the trick as an emergency height dog? Heck, yeah.

I got together with my team captain one afternoon for a final polishing session, practicing passes with her dogs. By the end of the day, Shen seemed not only to have the idea down but also to actually like this game. Flyball lacked the manners and control she had practiced for years in obedience, but I could see her loosening up and playing with more abandon. What she lacked in style, she made up for in happy enthusiasm. She was ready to play.

And so we did the unthinkable.

We entered two lineups of dogs in the next tournament, one that we happened to be hosting. One lineup included a standard issue height dog, a seasoned and reliable player, and the other included Shen. Not everybody on Shen's team was happy about running with a green eight year old dog who had learned the sport in a matter of weeks, but the dogs on the team did not care. They just wanted to play ball, and Shen provided them with that opportunity. The other option would have been for them to lie in crates much of the day while their people hosted a tournament and dogs from other teams ran and enjoyed themselves.

That was even more unthinkable.

Race day arrived quickly, and before I knew it, there I was in the lane, holding Shen, about to run her for the very first time. The other dogs on Shen's team were Border Collies. They were arranged alongside the lane behind us, their handlers crouched beside them waiting for the exact second to release. All three black and white dogs were braced and ready to run, their muscles taut and eyes locked, staring straight down the flyball lane in front of them. One by one they thundered over the jumps, sprang on and off the box, and flew back to latch firmly onto frisbees or swing by their teeth from tugs.

Then it was Shen's turn.

"Ready, ready, ready!" I said, but she seemed anything but. We stood, right up by the start line, until the third Border Collie had flashed past. Shen did not tug against her collar and to be honest, I was not even sure she would leave me to go down the lane. I have her a little nudge as I slid my hand from her collar and told her, "Get your ball, Shen." Releasing her was less like unleashing a powerful force than it was like bowling.

Once in motion, Shen remembered what to do and she ran down the lane to the box, got her ball and came back. She looked surprised to see me jumping up and down in an

aerobic frenzy, but she seemed to know that she had done something spectacular and so she joined me in celebration, barking at the wonder of it all, barking like the flyball dog that she was.

I would like to end this piece by telling you what a success my dog was, how everyone ooh'ed and ahh'ed over her effortless swimmer's turns, heart stopping passes, and record breaking times. I have a feeling you know I would be lying though and so I will tell you how it really was. After a number of serviceable under 24 second runs, Shenny began crossing over. We forfeited several heats while I scrambled after my thirteen and a half inch tall ball of fur that was zooming after someone else's dog at uncatchable speeds -- it was amazing how fast she ran when chasing other dogs. I had to hold her pass after that, not releasing her until the last dog on the other team had crossed the finish line. Of course this meant all of our runs after that took much longer than 24 seconds and we didn't get many, if any, points for them.

Then, too, there was the ball that bounced from the mouth of a speeding Border Collie and hit Shen in the head as she was preparing to run down the lane -- her worst nightmare come true. She tried to avoid that spot after that, once even leaving the lane to hide under the scoring table and other times slowing down and thinking about what to do and whether she should find another way back to me. There was no time to reassure her, no time to retrain. I could only hope she understood it was an accident and would not likely happen again.

We ran several discouraging aces this way, and then something extraordinary happened. I simply stopped caring. I stopped counting lost points and I stopped worrying about times. All that mattered was Shen, who was doing just what I had asked her to do, getting her ball and bringing it to me, and being brave in spite of her affirmed belief that tennis balls beat up small dogs. Shen did not mind that we were losing heats and hundreds of points. There she was, carrying back ball after ball, her expression seeming to say "Look at me! I can do it!"

So what if she wasn't perfect? She was perfectly Shen.

It was about that time that I noticed something happening on my team and in the audience, as well. There was Shenny at the box, hunting for her ball, which had rolled away. She found it, then began back over the jumps, struggling to get her momentum back. It seemed like forever and I wondered what everyone was thinking. Were they all annoyed by having to wait for her? Were my teammates disappointed about not getting points again? Should I just pull her and forget I had ever thought about running her in the first place? And then I heard it: Shenny's name. Again and again, I heard it. In the crowd, and behind me, on my team and on the team we were racing, people were all cheering for Shen. Friends and total strangers alike were cheering, "Come on Shen, you can do it! Come on, Shen!"

And when she did do it, when she did bring that ball back to me, I could hear the clapping and whooping and I knew she could hear it too, too. She was not a fast dog. She was not even a reliable dog. She was just a little dog who had helped out a team in a pinch and her world had just erupted to tell her "Thank you."

We finished the tournament with 314 points and two new titles. Shen had completed enough runs successfully to bring home her Flyball Dog and Flyball Dog Excellent titles and had earned more points, incidentally, than my "real" flyball dog, her son Brinks, had at

his first tourney. You might think of this as an indication of success, assurance that I had done, after all, what I had set out to do. My goal had been to teach my old dog a new sport in a matter of weeks and she had indeed done her job well enough to net points for a team of dogs and earn two titles for herself.

But that is not at all what happened. You see, ultimately, I never taught that dog anything. Oh sure, I thought that I was teaching her the sport of flyball, but once again, she was the one teaching me, and I was nothing more than her humble student. This time though, I think I may just have learned the lesson she has been trying to teach me all along: to forget about dancing, and to learn how to fly.

The heart of flyball is not about points, titles, ribbons, or even world records. It is not about breeding or training for success and it is not about playing to win. It is not about form, or method, or speed. The heart of flyball is about an entire crowd of people stopping what they are doing to cheer a dog on. It is about a little dog who does her very best to get a ball and bring it back to her person because for some odd reason that makes her person happy. It is about stopping on the way home to share a scoop of vanilla, because, win or lose, you both did your best and you both deserve it. It is about getting to spend one more day in this short lifetime with a dog who makes your world complete.

The word "flyball" is made up of two little words, "fly" and "ball." If you can remember why you decided to play the game in the first place, then you already know what it means to fly. The rest is easy.

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