

Simply Silvia

Written by Celeste Pongrácz

What do you get when you bring together friends, fun and fast times? A Silvia Trkman seminar! For those of you unfamiliar with Silvia, she is one of the leading competitors and trainers in agility circles today. Quiet and unassuming, she was not exactly what I expected, but I was certainly not disappointed. Her youthful and carefree exterior does not betray her 28 years on the planet, half of which have been spent doing agility.

When I was offered the opportunity to attend the seminar, presented in the Czech Republic during the first days of 2008 by Barbara Sajdokova, one of the top agility competitors in the Czech Republic and Milan Raschka, her non-agility significant other, I was thinking the time spent with friends would perhaps be the perfect way to celebrate the arrival of the New Year. Then I realized it was the ideal chance to learn some valuable training tips in a warm and welcoming atmosphere, what more could I have asked for during the icy chill of January?

After I really started to turn this event over in my head, I thought it would be a great opportunity to speak with Silvia about her thoughts and experiences, not so much with agility training and competition, but about the world of agility and dogs in general. I decided to do an unusual interview and give people a chance to see another side of her that they may not otherwise glimpse.

Silvia lives, trains and teaches agility in Slovenia. She resides in a small apartment with her non-agility competitor-significant other and 3 dogs, Lo and La the Pyrenean Shepherds and Bu the Border Collie. She went to college for philosophy and journalism, taking puppy La with her to classes and probably never realized at the time she would not make her living through writing, but by giving agility seminars around the world.

My curiosity got the best of me right from the start and I just had to ask her why she chose such simple names for her dogs, her answer was just as short and

simple “so I can call them a lot when I am on the course”. We had a good laugh over the list of her future dog names and this was probably the moment I realized what was the secret of Silvia and her success, simple, easy and fun.

She started training dogs for agility around 1993, at the age of 14. Her first dog of choice was not among the most popular breeds in agility today, but was a valuable one as through that dog she learned training skills that have taken her to where she is now, as she credits her Samoyed with her success as a trainer and competitor. She believed that if her methods could work with him, they could work with any dog. Apparently she was not far from her thoughts as she has been to the FCI World Championships every year since 1997 and has won the individual medium class twice with La.

I asked her if her plans included quitting or becoming a judge and as expected she said no to both. Most people don't quit while at the top of their game and leaving the game to officiate it is rarely done by any top level competitor in sports, even dog sports. But for Silvia, helping people to become better trainers and competitors can only be done by teaching them, not faulting them in competitions. She assured me that she would never become a judge as there is no satisfaction in it for her. Now I can only wonder what judges get out of such seemingly thankless positions.

While agility is her main focus and the only sport she competes in, she has also done some training with her dogs in flyball, Frisbee and obedience. Besides their fame in agility, her dogs are also very well known for their flair for tricks. Thus she is a firm believer in cross training and its' benefits which not only include improved mental and physical fitness, but also easier and faster learning capability, as well as the ever important enhanced personal relationship you have with your dog.

One sport she has not participated in is conformation shows. Somehow I expected this. I asked her what she thought about the current breed trends in regard to appearance, temperament and health and if she felt they were moving towards a better or worse direction. Without hesitation she answered worse, again not a surprise. I then ventured further and asked her if she thought this was

the fault of everyone or one thing in particular. For someone that is not involved in dog shows, she gave the same opinion that many people involved in the sport of conformation give, "I think it is all together, but in general it is the judges, it is what the judges put up and that is what the breeders will be breeding for". It seems judges have a very difficult post in the dog sports world.

I decided to continue this train of thought along a somewhat different track and ask her about the importance of breed selection and structure in an agility dog. First I asked if there were some breeds better suited to agility and as common sense dictates, her answer was yes. She felt the herding breeds and hunting breeds are perhaps more suitable with the heavy breeds being quite out of the question. While special classes have been created for the heavy breeds in France, she went on to tell me that the dogs are just not so happy to be there, I can only imagine. From her vantage point, obtaining a breed that is more suited to being agile would be better for the enjoyment of the dog and handler, it is hard to disagree once I clear the images from my mind. I dove a bit deeper and asked her if she thought the breeds with extreme structure were suitable. She told me "that for those really heavy or structurally limited dogs it does not make any sense. If a dog would be enjoying it, then let it do it, but most dogs that have those limitations don't enjoy it because it is hard for them. It is hard for them to jump, it is hard for them to go on a narrow plank, it is hard for them to duck into the tunnel and they just don't like it." Again the images are not pleasant.

I then asked her if she thought correct structure or conformation was important for an agility competitor. I was a little surprised when she answered me that she does not know so much about proper conformation as she is not involved in that area and does not see angles and such on a dog. She informed me that La is totally east-west in the front and Bu is quite straight in the back. She did not hesitate to add that they have done pretty well in spite of this, I think no one would disagree on that point. She felt that perhaps some big structural fault may make a career a little bit shorter but as long as the dog is having fun she would still do agility with it. She does not look at structure of a dog at all since she does not know how too. She also did not think that a perfectly constructed dog was necessary to be seriously active or would influence overall career span. Her

candor was admirable as not many people will admit they don't know or concern themselves with something that is considered by others to be so important. I have to think that she has seen more continually active dogs of more breeds in her 14 years time than most people and if structure was as important as it is told to be, she would have learned something about the cause and effects of it by now, whether detrimental or beneficial.

One structural area that she did expound upon was the length of back and leg. Her preference was for a dog with a shorter back, as this facilitates tighter turning and is less prone to back problems, but not for a dog that is completely square as this can create stiff backs and jumping problems. The build of most herding breeds fit nicely to the sport, with proportion being quite important to her. When she began to search for her Border Collie, she specifically looked for a line that offered a shorter back as many today have exaggerated proportions created for the conformation ring. Her next comments on the subject came as a bit of a surprise from such a serious competitor. Silvia believes "that as long as the dog is fit and well muscled, agility is really not such a huge stress for a dog body as some people think, they think that their dogs are really athletes and professional athletes. But I don't think they are professional athletes, they just do some agility from time to time, they don't train twice a day like professional athletes, they train twice a week. I think for a dog that is on walks every day and is all the time in movement and also does some cross training, I think it is really not such a stress. I think agility dogs are healthier and more fit, for much longer time, than if they spend their time on the couch." Seems like good advice for everyone.

I next wanted to explore her thoughts about breeding and health issues. I started off by asking her if it was important to check breeding dogs for their orthopedic health. Her opinion was that it is important, but not as important as it is to others. "In a perfect world you have the best possible hips and elbows and all that, but still I think that there are more important things than that in a dog." Her first agility dog had severe dysplasia and it was only after she retired him, on the advice of others, that he began to develop symptoms from the loss of the muscles that he had developed through agility training. "I think that if you are choosing a dog for agility it is good if the parents are checked, but if you already have a

dysplastic dog, I think it is better to keep him in the sport and to keep him really, really fit, thin and fit, and continue with the sport instead of stopping.” Advice from someone that has been there, done that, is worthy of consideration.

I wanted to get a bit more specific and address one of the issues I have met with and ask if only dogs with A hips should do agility. Her answer was that “agility is good for all dogs, I think even those with really bad hips. But in general of course, if you are getting a puppy you should for sure ask for the parents’ checks, but personally for example La, she comes from unchecked parents. The Border Collie’s parents are checked, but again, this is not the first thing I ask, this is not the most important thing for me.” Note to self, leave the list of questions at home and bring ears next time. I missed the chance to ask what was most important. I am the type that is thinking ahead to the next question instead of listening individually. So naturally I did not leave my line of questions and asked the obvious about doing agility with dysplastic dogs that have symptoms and I was rewarded with some bonus information. She began by telling me the expected. “If the dog is limping already in normal life than of course you can’t do it. But you should do as much as possible on his fitness level, you should keep him thin and fit and then if you see there is improvement and he can handle normal life well, I would start with really low jumps and see how he does there and if he does perfectly ok without limping after that or having pain or other symptoms, I would continue. Because jumping especially I think is good for hips because it is actually stressful for elbows that’s true, but not for hips because stressful is the landing, but taking off it’s just muscle that works, not hips and I think having a lot of muscle around hips is very good for a dysplastic dog.” This was a useful morsel of information that perhaps I would have missed if I had asked the “other” question instead.

I then continued with the obvious and asked if there were any other health problems that might prevent a dog from doing agility? Again her common sense approach prevailed with her answer “Every health problem that would make a dog have pain from this, I would for sure stop it, but if he can do it without pain, why not?” This observation comes from her experience as she has dogs with some serious health concerns and others with them in her classes.

I decided to get a bit more personal and I asked if she does orthopedic exams on her own dogs. Her answer was not the customary one I expected. "Less and less. I used to, but then I figured out it is actually not changing anything for me, I would still do agility as long as I see a dog is not having pain. And if I knew I would not do anything differently, why to bother. Of course if I bred them I would x-ray first of course." More common sense that is difficult to argue with, I think she would have made a good philosopher too.

I stayed with the personal course and asked if she did herding instinct tests with her dogs since they are all herding breeds. I was not totally surprised by her answer, knowing the experience of a Slovenian friend we have in common, Polona Bonac. So I expected her to answer as she did, "No, because we don't have them in Slovenia. In Slovenia we have no herding at all actually. I see no reason in doing the test because I am not a breeder. Just to do the test I don't see a reason and I don't think my dogs would do to well because I think they are too focused on me. I would for sure do it if my breeder asked me to do it, but they never asked me. I think it is reasonable to ask that from puppy buyers, but I did not see any special reason." With this revelation it is apparent that Slovenia has a business opportunity available.

My last question in this area pertained to one breeding trend related to agility. It is apparent that the size requirements in agility classes have created a desire for some breeders to focus on producing dogs that fit into these categories to fill the demands of competitors to have a particular size of dog. I asked her opinion of this trend. "I think it is always a problem if a breeder has only one goal. I think that as soon as you concentrate on only one thing you will lose the other things, the things that are really important for the breed, so I think just breeding for that is completely wrong, but of course, for example if I was to breed my dog I wouldn't breed her to a really large dog I would try to find a smaller one, but to just breed for size I think it is wrong." I was more than pleased to hear this and it also fit nicely to the subsequent questions.

I began the size issues with a personal choice, I asked if she had a preference for one size class over another. She answered "No, for me it is all the same, it is only

the speed that matters.” This was intriguing and I got right to the meat of another developing trend. Why is there a midi class mania? Why do some agility competitors looking for their next prospective competition dog insist on it fitting into the midi class size range? Silvia answered that “It is only because when you have a 45 cm high dog, it is very difficult to compete against the Border Collies that’s all. And if you have one that is 43 cm, well it is not necessary with all, but in general, it can be a problem. And if you have one that is under 43 cm (in the midi class), it is much easier to be competitive. In general there are many more dogs, many more very good dogs in large, so that is why I think that if somebody is deciding for a breed that is not a Border Collie, they prefer to be medium. I know the problem because I have the Pyrenean Shepherds and also there everyone wants Pyrenean Shepherds under 43 cm.”

Trying to make some sense of this, I asked the next logical question. Isn’t it more training than it is the size of the dog? She quickly answered that “Yes of course, but the problem is if the dog is 44 cm, not only will he need to compete against much bigger dogs, he will also probably have a little shorter career as if he were jumping 45 cm. 65 cm and 45 cm is a big difference and I think that at age 12 a dog can still easily jump 45 cm, but I am not sure he can jump 65 cm. I have the same problem because my breed is the Pyrenean Shepherd and I would actually prefer to have a Pyrenean Shepherd in large class as is my Border Collie, but they are a little bit small and that shortens their career I think.” In hindsight I would have asked her how many dogs of any breed are still seriously competitive in agility at age 12 and if there were no Pyrenean Shepherds born anymore in the upper size range since the FCI standard (for the two breed variations combined) allows 38-54 cm in size.

I then asked if the competition was harder in the maxi class as this was my initial thought. She answered “Well there are more dogs and there are more better dogs because it is much easier to get a very good dog for large (class) as it is to get a very good dog for medium, because for large you get a Border Collie and you are pretty sure that you will do well, with the exception if you get mine (her BC, Bu)”, which evoked giggles from everyone. She continued “But in medium it is a little bit more difficult because mostly there are Shetland Sheepdogs and some

are good and some aren't. I mean it is easier to get a large dog that will do everything he can, than it is to get a medium dog (that will) I think. In general you have more working breeds, more working lines, more choice in large than in medium or small." From my experience that followed with the actual seminar, the Border Collie may dominate the large class, but the breeds that attended the seminar that were not of the BC kingdom, were certainly no worse than the BC's that showed their stuff. Perhaps my next questions would turn the black and white tide a bit.

I then asked if there was a difference between competing in the different size classes? "No I think there are differences between dogs, for example my large dog is much easier to handle than my medium dogs are because she is better trained, we did a lot of work on turns and she turns really, really tightly." Hmmm, maybe we are getting somewhere. She continued "And then there is a question of speed, for example my medium dog is much faster as any large dog, so it's more difficult to handle her and I think it goes the same for small and medium and large, for me it is the same, but there is a big difference between a slow and fast dog. To handle a slow dog it is really easy, to handle a fast dog it is difficult no matter how high he jumps, for me large is easier because she spends more time in the air so I have more time. But then on the other side if you have a large dog that is jumping really long, then a dog is a long time in the air, but he has very little time on the floor so you need to also react fast enough, so it brings some different challenges. But in general it is a question of how long the dog jumps, how well the dog is trained and how fast he is, that for me is what makes agility hard or difficult or easy. Then between small medium and large what is different is that there are more competitors in large so of course there are more good dogs as there are in small or medium but in general I don't see many differences in between." So perhaps it is about the training after all and not the breed.

I decided to leave this line of questioning, but stick with the same topic of size and I asked Silvia if she thought the size ranges for the classes were correct. In her usual short and simple approach she replied "No. I think it is very stupid." From her lips to the responsible ears was my immediate thought. Delving a bit deeper I asked her what she would change if she could. This proved to not be an easy

answer for her. “Well when they chose (sizes) before (what they are presently) it was just two height classes, now that there are 3 sizes, it is really stupid because the small class is still not for really small dogs, it is still too high for them to jump and they are still not competitive in comparison to other dogs that are 35 cm. So this is really stupid because now they only made two classes for actually the same breeds so it does not make any sense. And if they did 3 classes I think the cutoff for small should be much lower than that and the cutoff for medium could be a little higher, but then again you have the same breeds in all classes. For example the Border Collie would then be partly in medium and partly in large. I don’t know what would be the best solution actually, but I think small cutoff is especially stupid because we are still losing the Cavalier King Charles and breeds like that, that are actually doing pretty well, but not on that height, 35 cm is still too high for really small dogs.” I can only hope that the powers that be will read this as it does not require a degree in rocket science to see the current size limits are not working to offer more breeds a competitive chance.

Going just one last question deeper into this issue I asked her if there was an ideal size of dog for each class. She continued on with her previous thoughts and said “I think it is noticeable in small class, I think that in small class as I said, those really small dogs are still not competitive, they need to jump too high and they are not covering enough ground to be competitive to those that are 35 cm tall. In medium and large I think it is not really obvious, for example, La that won the Championships 2 times, she is 37 cm, so she is just over the small cutoff and she can do pretty well in medium, so for her it is not really a disadvantage for size, and I think there are also some dogs in large that are really small but they are still perfectly competitive. But in small I think it is important to have a big-small and not a small-small, and that is also why I actually don’t like small class too much, I probably will never have a small dog because it is risky that he either goes into medium or he is too small to really be competitive. There (in small class) I noticed this, but in medium and large not really. The only thing in large that I see problematic is that those really small dogs will have to be retired sooner than those that are a little bigger I think.” Perhaps the time has come to make the playing field equal for more breeds and more dogs, rather than to make agility

(which should not favor any breed since special instinct or breed purpose are not agility requirements) only for those breeds and dogs which fit to the ideal class height requirement. I seriously doubt the founders of the sport intended this when they created what was initially labeled “the most fun you can have with your dog”, not just your Border Collie or Sheltie. Or perhaps participants take competition to seriously?

With this thought in mind I jumped right to the chance to ask what was more important for her, having fun or being competitive. She answered without hesitation that “fun was of course more important”. This gave way to ask if some people she has come across have not expressed to her, that their lack of competitive spirit is often criticized and devalued over their wish to compete for fun. Silvia’s comment was that “No I’ve never seen that attitude. In general, yes I know many, many dogs that have lots and lots of potential and could do brilliantly, but their handlers are not ready to do that, to put that much work into it, it’s still better than nothing I think, the dogs are still enjoying it, they’re still enjoying it, so why not.” I hope that this attitude prevails and the sport can continue to be about fun. But the winds of change have already begun to blow.

I recently heard that in at least one other European country, money prizes are already being offered, so I thought I would explore her ideas about this. First I wanted to know how popular she thought agility was around the world. The answer was almost expected, “I think it is the most popular sport and I think it is getting more and more popular.” I then asked if she would like to see it become more popular. “Well yes as long as it is not getting too much of those things that we see in real sports, like everything is ok as long as we get to the goal, doping and going for the best dog possible and just buying pups and selling them when they are not working out. If this will come with popularization than I think it is not good, but if things like more people do more things with their dogs, keep them more occupied, more fit and all that, if this means popularization than it is good, but it probably means both, it probably comes with both things.” I followed this up by asking her opinion on the commercialization aspect and businesses getting involved with sponsorship. Her honesty prevailed as usual “I think some good things would come, but I think more bad things than good would come.” And

finally I asked her the ultimate question, do you think it is good to offer money at agility competitions. Her answer was sadly grim, "I think with money there are always problems and things like I mentioned before, the more competitions you have with that, the more you have people that are in the sport for the money and with those people there are problems." The future could indeed be gloomy.

I decided to change the subject and I asked her what my agility instructor, Ákos Kontor, always groans about, why are there more women than men in agility. It seems this is not the case the world over as she replied that "It is not like that everywhere actually, it is like that in the US, and it's like that in eastern (European) countries in general, but in the west I don't think it's like that, its 50/50 and in France it is more men than women, so it actually really depends, but in general the worlds average I think goes towards women." Again my curious nature got the best of me and I asked what she thought was the reason for this. She answered "Maybe we handle failure a little better and perhaps it (the sport) is not so macho. And for guys if they have a really good dog they have no problems, but as soon as they encounter some problems, then it is a problem with their ego." Maybe more than just dogs have something to learn from Silvia.

I again changed direction and asked her if she thought that mixed breeds should be allowed to compete with purebred dogs. She answered "Yes of course why not. I think it is just because it is a pedigree organization, in the FCI it is not allowed, it is just like AKC, it is not allowed in them and in the other organizations it is, so for that we would need another agility organization I think. Another organization could take better care of agility than FCI can because they are a breed organization, they are not a sport organization, but for now that is all we have in Europe." Seems herding in Slovenia is not the only business opportunity available.

Not straying too far from the competition topic, I next asked if she would like to see each country's selection methods for the World Championships uniform. Her years of experience provided an easy answer, "I think it is pretty impossible for them to be equal. I think in Slovenia we have a pretty good system, but it is impossible to do it in a big country. I think it is good to have try-outs and get

invited there, like in the US, I think there is no other choice. They do something similar in France. They choose some people and they go to the final, its only one competition. In Slovenia it is 6 competitions that are equal and you go to all, but it is not a problem as they are really close (in distance). Another thing is that some countries have more dogs to choose from and then you can look also more at dogs that are really reliable. In Slovenia for example you sometimes have to send a dog that you know probably won't run 4 clean runs but as we don't have that many choices you just send those that you think will do best." Her answer was simply logical, but still left me feeling that for some there is an advantage based upon your residence and no simple solution exists to remedy this.

I moved on to ask her about course design and her preferences as I was interested if she was more captivated by speed or handling. First I asked how important course design in a competition was. She humbly answered that "In general I don't complain because it is the same for everybody and I see everything as a new challenge and when I see something new I will also try it in training. Of course I think judges should avoid putting in dangerous things, but again I think it is more of a handling problem, for example some difficult entries to the contact obstacles and stuff, you can still handle it to make it not so difficult, so in general I think handling and training is more important than the course that you are getting." Not getting the answer I sought, I followed this by asking directly her preference for a tighter or faster course. She answered by saying that "I find those really wide open courses a little boring and I think that they are about the speed, but (saying) the other ones are not about the speed is not exactly correct, I think that tight courses on a high level are still very much about the speed. Friends from the US have told me that FCI (courses) are in general tighter and harder, in Europe we are used to that so it is not really difficult for us. But when they make it really simple I am disappointed a little because then it is only about the nature of the speed the dog has on a straight line, but you can still have very good speed actually on tight courses if you know how to let the dog know there is a turn coming and so on. This is more interesting for me than just running a straight line up and down, for me straight lines are a little boring. I actually prefer tighter because it gives more of a challenge." So perhaps it is not speed or

handling alone, but the possibility to achieve both along with the challenge each competition brings that keeps her in the sport.

Again moving on and not wanting to skirt the training issues totally, I thought I would ask the questions not likely to occur during the seminar. I started with the obvious first. Did she always use the clicker? She answered simply “No, because I did not know about it.” I then asked if she used the bridge word method which was the predecessor of the clicker, she confirmed my suspicions, “That is what we did at the beginning. But then I learned about the clicker and I got some and I tried it and at first I thought that it was the same as ‘yes’, but in fact it is more exact and it’s less interpretation in the brain of the dog, because that sound means ‘oh’, the dog doesn’t need to think he just knows. So I think it is faster with the clicker.” An opinion she shares with many trainers today.

Continuing along I asked why she thought her training methods were so successful with her dogs and I presumed other people’s dogs, after all, she would not be asked to do seminars in so many countries if they only worked for her dogs right? She mentioned her Samoyed and all she learned from him and then added that “I find it is really important, really important that the dog is enjoying it, so I do everything that the dog really enjoys to be there and I think that is why those dogs are successful, if they are enjoying what they are doing, they will give everything what they have and on the other hand if they are forced to do it or asked to do it, or whatever, then they only do it for you because you want it, they will never do everything they can. So it is really, really the most important aspect of my methods I think, is to make a dog love it and if the dog loves it he will get everything out of you.” Of course that followed with the next obvious question. And your methods make the dog love it? She answered without hesitation “Yes that is my first rule. I try to make everything so easy for the dog, for it to be easy for him to succeed, I do a lot of rewarding, I do a lot of playing so that he really sees this is great and that he is great, that builds confidence and it gives them self esteem and it makes them faster and happier.” Neither man nor beast gives their best efforts to something they hate.

I was now interested to know where she learned these things. Did she develop these methods by herself, from someone else, a book? Apparently necessity is truly the mother of invention, as she divulged her sources, "A book no, because I never read a book on agility training and there weren't any when I was starting and later on I just didn't. Some things of course yes I read about them and I tried them and they worked. But most of the things I thought on my own because when I started there were no books on it and I did not have internet so I had no connection with anybody and in Slovenia we were just starting so nobody knew more than I did, so we were pretty much just trying and seeing what works and what doesn't. For example the contact method I use I also thought it on my own and for the turns and things, so yes it's mostly everything we thought on our own. But later on we learned there are people already using something, for example the channel method, we started to use it before I read about it and then realized, oh it is called the channel method, we just tried it, it worked, it looked good, but then of course somebody else invented it before us." It seems she is more than just a pretty face, she has a creative mind to match. But this should not come as a surprise to anyone, she was a philosophy student.

I next asked her if she thought it was possible to train one sport in the morning and another in the afternoon. "Yes, yes, yes, of course. I actually think it is actually better for a dog, the cross training so that you train in different areas which is good, physically and also mentally, because the more you do with the dog the easier it is, every next thing you teach is easier. I see that a lot in tricks for example, when you are teaching the dog the first trick goes really slowly and it takes lots of time but then it goes faster and faster and every next trick is really easy. And I think it goes the same with the sports, when I am getting people in my classes in agility, I can see if a person is already doing something with the dog or not, it is very easy if you get a dog from I don't know- Schutzhund which is a totally different sport, but still you can see also in agility that the dog already has some kind of relationship with the handler, already knows some commands and everything is much easier and much faster actually." This made a lot of sense and made me wonder why some people think the opposite.

I was then interested to know her viewpoints on training and age and asked if there was any age when a dog was too old to start agility training and competing. “No it’s just that it could be he’s not fit enough, but it could be at any age, so wanting to do agility to lose weight on the dog, this is not the right way to do it, first you have to lose the weight on the dog and then do the training. But otherwise you can start at any age, but at first of course the dog should not be too fat. Get fit and then we slowly start jumping the dog, even with an adult or old dog especially, we start really low and then slowly go up, up, up, so that the dog can develop those muscles that are specific for jumping because even if the dog is fit and all the time on walks and in the mountains or whatever, it is still different muscles being used than during working jumping, so I give them some exercises to work on at home and we do low jumps and then slowly go higher and higher, but yes you can start at any age, I think it is actually good.” I hope this applies to older humans too.

I asked her what the difference was between training a puppy and an older dog. She told me that “what would be different is I would probably still go a little faster than with a puppy, if I start with a puppy I would make sure to go really, really slowly, to not work too much, to work on weave poles only in the channels so that he is only running through, and things like that. With an adult dog I would still be careful to hit the height really slowly but still faster than with a puppy and also the corridor with the weave poles I would put it closer sooner, than for the puppy.” Perhaps with age there are some benefits.

I followed this thought by asking if the older dog can be just as competitive as the dog that started training at 7 weeks old. Her answer fit with all she has told thus far “Well depending on the trainer, depending on the dog and depending on the age, if you start at 10 then the dog will be 12 when you start competing so he probably won’t win the world championships, but he can still do good.” After a good laugh we went on to the next question which of course followed with thoughts of the older dogs and what becomes of them, did she think veteran class was a good thing for old dogs? I was sure she has already thought of this when she gave this answer, “Yes of course. When a dog is not able to jump normal height I think it is the best thing to put him in veteran class. When Lo will have

problems with jumping 45 cm I will for sure put her in veteran class and when she can't jump 35 then we will stop." I hope every owner can be as compassionate as this.

Changing the theme just a bit, I asked if there was a difference between training and competing for the dog and did she think the dog senses a difference? Silvia replied "Yes but mostly because of the handler, I think it is a handler thing, if you can control your nerves, if you can behave completely the same, right from the start and if you can keep your criteria the same, then it is the same, if not then it is different and usually it is the latter option." Certainly for most competitors this is easier said than done.

Time was quickly passing and I wanted to ask just a few more questions before she retired for the evening. I was very interested to know how she kept her dogs and what she thought of some of the trends and practices that occur in dog sports. I asked her if she crates her dogs at home, she replied "Sometimes yes and some yes. Puppies are in crates, but then for example Lo and La they cannot be together, so normally La is in another room or in a crate because I can't leave them together as they fight." This was not an expected answer, but another time her honesty was refreshing. She also told me that she crates them in the car when driving and at competitions "they are mostly in the car before we run and then before each run I warm them up and then we run and after each run we walk and then again back to the car, of course they need to rest a little bit and if I am sitting by the ring they are not resting, so I prefer to have them not even close to the ring in a crate but preferably in the car in a crate because otherwise they don't rest and I think they need to because we are there from 9 in the morning till 6 in the afternoon, but I make sure to walk them a lot because they are used to that." This is good advice for the competitor too!

I then asked her what she thought about the practice of crating dogs routinely to make them a more competitive working dog, in any sport. She replied that "Maybe if you have a rather bad (unmotivated) dog then this is a trick to make a dog more motivated, but if you have a good dog and if you do a good job on training I think it doesn't affect the results." Continuing on I asked if she thought

that it really mattered where you keep the dog for the team's performance. She responded that "I think it depends on how much time you spend with the dog, how much time you spend with the dog outside that kennel, because I know some people that have dogs in a kennel because they have no other option. As long as they go for walks with them, work with them every day, play a lot with them, I think it is not so horrible. I think it is just easier to have the dog in the apartment because you can take 3 minutes and do something with the dog easier than it is to go outside, so usually you spend more quality time with the dog if he is with you. But if you are really dedicated and you really work with the dog even though he is outside, then I think it is possible too. I don't think it is necessarily that bad." Wanting to get more definitive, I asked her opinion directly if it was better that the dog lives in the same house with the handler, she acknowledged "probably yes." I now wonder how many of the top performers keep their partners in the home with them and if this is truly a factor.

Next on the list of questions was one about a disturbing trend that was brought to my attention and I wanted to ask Silvia about it. The need to have a dog in the midi class (or mini) is so important, that some owners keep their puppies in a crate as much as possible and feed them very sparingly to keep them from growing over the size limit into the next class. Silvia had not heard about this but did make the following comment "I think that agility dogs in general do stay smaller than other dogs, but I think it is mostly because of all the movement they do. Because we all play a lot with the puppies and do tricks and train them, and all the time something is happening, so I think they sleep less than other puppies, they are also more active and that is why I think they usually grow less, even though you would actually want them higher. For example my Border Collie, I was really hoping she would grow some more, but she just didn't want too, and also my Pyrenean Shepherds are smaller than the breeder expected, but I think that is mostly because they were so active as puppies. I don't think that keeping them in a small crate would help. That's strange also about feeding, I think the dog will grow as it's written in the genes no matter how you feed it." As I understand it, neither nutrition nor exercise, will affect the final height of an animal, even in the extreme cases, final size will be only minimally affected to

fractions of a centimeter. I hope this trend will not become common in the sport and owners will realize that active pups need more food and rest as well.

However, keeping a puppy on the thin side is beneficial for orthopedic health, rather than being overweight, but there is a finite line between fit and too thin and it is not an easy balance to maintain, especially with growth spurts and changing activity levels.

Wanting to return to a more pleasant direction, I thought I would ask if she thought the everyday life for an actively competing agility dog was different than for a family pet. "Well yes I think it is more fun. I think an average pet is spending a lot of time alone or even if his family is there, they are not really interacting with the dog and I think that most agility people are really doing a lot with their dogs, not only agility, but also tricks and playing and going for walks and in general I think they have a much better and more active life. That's also why I think they stay healthier for a longer time and live longer." I can see her point in this. But to maybe fine tune the answer I was looking for, I asked her if agility dogs are any different than dogs active in other sports. I wanted to know if she thought an obedience dog was different than a Schutzhund dog was different than an agility dog. "Yes for sure there are some differences if nothing else agility is a sport that actually allows quite a lot of different dogs to compete as opposed to Schutzhund for example which has very specific demands to be competitive, I think agility is really open to a lot of dogs, even more than obedience because I think it is actually easier to motivate a dog to do agility as it is to do obedience, because there you have a lot of heeling and heeling and heeling, it's actually you have so many various dogs there that it is actually hard to describe an agility dog, well in these days it is mostly a Border Collie. But in general it is really open to many different profiles of dog." Still not quite what I was getting at, so I became a bit more direct with my next question. Many agility dogs seem to be really barking and hyperactive and very difficult to live with. Is this really necessary to have a good agility dog? "If he is a Border Collie no problem. My Border Collie is like that (calm) all the time, my Pyrenean Shepherds are never like that (calm). So I have never seen a Pyrenean Shepherd that would be totally not problematic, not barking, and a calm dog in the house and a really good dog on the agility course. But

I think that 99-100% of BC's are like that. But with some breeds I think it is more difficult to get a dog that still has drive but is not hyper. So my 2 Pyrenean Shepherds are a little bit hyper." I think I need to hang out with the agility BC's she knows since this is totally opposite of my experience. I became even more direct and asked if she thought that the hyperactivity is necessary for a good agility dog. "As I said I have never seen a Pyrenean Shepherd that would be really calm in normal life and really, really fast and eager on the agility course, but I have seen thousands of BC's like that. But I think it really depends on the breed. So it is really hard to say." So then you can have a calm dog and still be successful? "Yes I think most BC's are like that. In Pyrenean Shepherds most really good ones are not like that, in normal life, they are hyper even at home. It really depends, but I actually like them a little bit hyper, I think my BC is really boring. I think you can otherwise get a dog that is really calm but is good in agility." Finally what I was searching for, hyperactive-barky-spinning dogs are not necessary to be competitive in agility.

My last questions for Silvia were on the more personal side. I asked her what she fed her dogs, I did not want brand names, I just wanted to know if she fed raw, homemade or kibble. Her honesty blew me away " Kibble. I'm too lazy." This is the first time anyone ever told me this. So wanting to know more, but still avoiding the name brands, I asked if she fed the super premium foods. I again received an answer I was not prepared for "Normally I just give them what I get (win) in competitions, now my BC had some problems with coat, so I was giving her some of this super premium food, but in general my dogs live really long and really healthy on normal dog food that I get at competitions so for now I didn't see any special reason to change it." I may not agree, but I certainly applaud her truthfulness.

I decided next to ask a question that I thought would reflect her beliefs on dogs and their value in our lives. I asked her if she saw a problem with people that keep a lot of dogs. She was true to form with her answer "I think if you have a lot of dogs there is no option that you spend enough time with each. Personally I can't imagine having more than 4, maybe 5 dogs if one is really old. And I don't work so I am with them 24 hours a day, if you work I can't imagine having even

3.” This is coming from a top competitor that sees her dogs as her team partners and companions, not sports equipment to replace when they don’t give the results you expected. Bravo!

I gave my thanks to Silvia for her time and awaited the two days of the seminar that lay ahead. I hoped to learn more about the sport and this woman before I left for home. I found it interesting that the lives of the women involved in this article are not so different, even though we come from very different parts of the world. Perhaps we can meet again in the future and compare notes and see if life changes us or we remain true to our game.

(I want to thank my significant other, Dr. Péter Pongrácz, for accompanying me on these endless and boring dog journeys and for his editorial assistance with this article. Without him (and our dogs) nothing in my life would be possible!)