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Champs—Coaches, Handlers and Many Paws....but so much more

By Amy McCarthy

What comes to mind when you hear “Champs?” For me, I first think of the 1931 movie “The Champ,” featuring Wallace Beery and Jackie Cooper, or the 1979 version with Jon Voight and Ricky Schroder. Then the theme song from “Rocky” starts playing in my head.

The Champs Foundation is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. Their mission is to offer a program for handlers with challenges, where they can be partnered with a coach and a dog (either a dog trained in obedience or a therapy dog), with a goal of learning to train dogs. The requirement for handlers is that they have been determined to have disabilities.” Through this program it is hoped that the skills they gain might open up possibilities for employment or volunteer opportunities. Skills to help them in everyday life, improving interpersonal and social interactions, better communication, increased self confidence, and better ability to stay on task and follow instruction.

Champs is a new program, first started in November of 2012. Mindy Stevenson, one of the co-directors, says her two sons with special needs were the catalyst behind the creation of this unique program. Originally running a therapeutic horseback riding center, she realized that using dogs would likely provide greater accessibility, allowing a larger number of people to benefit. Having taken classes at the K9 Manners and More training facility, she approached owners Mary Green and Kim Sykes about the possibility of starting the program. They agreed and the rest is history! Their goal is to develop a curriculum for the Champs program, hoping to expand it to other facilities, not only across the state, but throughout the nation. From there their aspirations include developing and organizing recognized competitions on the local, state, regional and national level.

Montana Mtn’s Dance N The Twist and Shout, CGC, ThD, aka Twister (or “T” or “Mr. T”), has been a registered therapy dog since 2011. He is a 170-pound lapdog, a gentle giant, a dog with an incredibly therapeutic persona. I have seen him approach babies in strollers with a gentleness that would make you believe he could walk on eggshells without breaking them. It is an innate sensitivity. In my opinion, that is his gift.

When I first heard of the Champs program, Twister and I were not lacking for opportunities for involvement. We visit an assisted living facility and the local Cancer Treatment Center of America regularly. We are a Grace Hospice therapy dog team and are involved with the Paws for reading program at the public library. Yet something caught my interest with this unique activity! I watched a video of the handlers training, available on the K9 Manners and More website (the facility where Champs is based). We decided to attend an introductory meeting to evaluate whether this might be a good fit for us.

Our first meeting was attended by coaches and dogs who had already participated in the program, in addition to prospective volunteers.
Mary Green, co-director and primary instructor, reviewed the aim and philosophy of the program. Coaches shared their experiences. It sounded like a wonderful avenue to continue to spend time with Twister in a novel way. As is often the case, we were obviously the largest dog participating. Would these handlers, who often have tactile sensitivities, be able to work with a giant dog that comes with large amounts of slobber and hair? Would Twister, who is a definite “mommy’s boy,” seemingly “Velcroed” to my hip at times, be willing to work with someone else? And while not a significantly disobedient dog, Twister was a dog that had a less than stellar showing at a Rally Trial when he decided on that particular day the “sit” command must have meant “lie down.” Mary seemed confident that we would do just fine.

The first day we arrived at class, a number of the Champs handlers stared in near disbelief. Were we going to intimidate by our size alone? Rumblings of “wow” or “that’s a BIG dog” could be heard repeatedly. It was not long, however, before curiosity took the upper hand and many came over to pet Twister. And, in usual Twister fashion, it was not long before he flopped on his side, securing his best belly rub position. Aaron quickly named him the “big lug.”

One of the requirements for being a Champs handler is to have intellectual disabilities. The handlers learn how to approach a dog, how to pet a dog and what type of voice to use to motivate your dog. They progress to basic skills such as “sit” and “stay.” From there they are taught Rally signs and work their way through a course. What is most noticeable is how supportive they are of each other, giving positive comments, applauding or giving a thumbs up for a job well done. While each success belongs to the individual, they share in each other’s glory.

Some of the handlers are quite vocal, while others are more reserved. Throughout the weeks of classes, you watch them grow and gain confidence. Verbal skills improve, as do social interactions. Mindy’s son Danny, a young man who normally says little, lets Mary know that he wants to work for a Mountain Dew, or get a ribbon in the match. Smiles are plentiful with a job well done. But most of all, you get a new perspective that is refreshingly basic in its honesty and understanding.

During one class, Twister and I got up to work with Jesse. Twister shook, and in typical St. Bernard fashion, slobber and hair were shared with all in close proximity. Jesse very appropriately remarked “Its raining hair!” On another occasion, when I had my slobber rag in hand, prepared to wipe away any drool that Twister decided to share, Jesse looked at me seriously and questioned “Don’t you think you should wear gloves?” During the fun match, Billy, a Trailblazer Champs member and quite skilled handler, was having difficulty getting the dog he was working with to listen to him when he came up to the “slow pace” sign. He repeated “slow... slow... slow” and then, when the dog persisted in walking at a faster pace than was required, he said “Are you deaf?” This was not said out of anger, but was an honest query as to why the dog was not doing what was asked of him.

Each handler is allowed to choose the dog he wishes to work with during each exercise, but every dog will also get a turn. Handlers obviously have their favorite dogs, but are encouraged to attempt working with a variety of different dogs. Ultimately, the goal is to have each handler work independently with a dog, with minimal guidance from the coach. And, with repetition, the dogs and the handlers gain confidence in their abilities.

Working with a 170-pound dog vs. a 40-pound dog presents a bigger challenge for the Champs handlers, as you cannot just gently nudge them into the desired position. I am sure there must have been times when a handler chose Twister that they were thinking it was like Mission Impossible... “Your assignment, should you choose to accept...” I am happy to report that every handler in the class has accepted this challenge and worked with Twister on at least one occasion. They are less intimidated by him, and he is becoming more comfortable in a situation where someone other than me is in charge.

I believe that all the volunteer coaches would agree we get as much out of this program as the handlers do. To watch the growth of these young people, all done with a smile on their faces and a positive attitude, is inspiring. And, to quote Danny, Champs is “Fun, Fun, Fun!”

Check out pictures and videos of the Champs Foundation on Facebook!