

The Versatile Shiba

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WRITTEN 2/4/2018

I decided to do something a bit different for my article. I decided to interview Mary Engstrom. Mary has accomplished amazing things with her Shibas and I figured she would have some wisdom to share with us. The NSCA honored Mary at last year's banquet for Mayday's and Mary's accomplishments. Mayday was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award for earning his CAX and the Versatile Shiba award for titling in Agility, Rally, Coursing, Fast CAT and Trick Dog.

I'm a firm believer in doing more with your dog. Dogs were not made to sit around idly. They need a job – an activity like nosework or barn hunt, a sport like agility or conformation, training exercises like obedience or rally will give a dog a sense of purpose and fulfillment. That's why I decided Mary would be the perfect person since she is a wealth of knowledge when it comes to working with our independent breed.

1. What made you get into dog sports with your Shibas?

I completely fell into it by accident. I had read a lot about the breed before I got my first Shiba Koshou, so I knew I was going to be working with an independent dog. Everyone I spoke to said "if you are serious about getting a Shiba, you had better enroll that dog in every obedience class you can find!" I enrolled in a series of 3 obedience classes taught at my local park district. The first session was just obedience. The second and third sessions were half obedience and half introduction to agility obstacles. I didn't know anything about agility really, but I thought if I had to include that to get the obedience, then so be it. At the end of the series of 3 courses, the instructor pulled me aside and said "I have done this for 20 years and I can't even believe I am saying this about a Shiba, but Koshou is a really good obedience dog and I see signs of him becoming an exceptional agility dog. You HAVE to go on training him, especially with agility." She recommended some trainers in the area. I figured it couldn't hurt me to get off the couch and he might enjoy it. The next thing I know, he was the top novice Shiba in the country his first year competing, he earned his PAX (Preferred Agility Excellence) title, earned high in trial at the NSCA national companion events in Jumpers with Weaves, high in trial for rally at the NSCA companion events twice, and went on to become the world record holder for the Shiba breed in the Clean Run 60 Weave Pole Challenge. To this day I am grateful to the trainer who saw the potential in him and encouraged me to move forward with him at a time when the conventional wisdom was "you can't do that with a Shiba."

2. Have you trained other breeds? What was the most difficult part of the transition of breeds?

I had a couple of other breeds before Shibas, but didn't train anything beyond basic skills with them. However, as my journey with Koshou progressed, the school where we

took agility lessons asked me to become an agility instructor after seeing us train for a few years. (The owner actually said “if you can accomplish so much with a Shiba, you can certainly help these handlers with more traditional agility dogs.”) That was a great experience in that it allowed me to realize that EVERY dog has issues that the handler has to work through. Shibas are just more consistent in that many of our issues revolve around the independence of the breed. If you look at what a dog breed was born to do (Shibas are independent hunters), you will find the clue as to how to best work with their temperament rather than trying to use a one size fits all training method.

3. I know I personally have struggled with competing with Nekora in the Agility Course Test - what are some tips you have to motivate a difficult to motivate dog?

I didn't know anything about agility when I started the sport beyond what I had seen on TV. It looked fun – the dog and the handler whipping through the courses. I figured if I just taught the dog how to correctly perform the obstacles, we were ready to enter a trial. It took me some time to learn that 90% of the success on the agility course was actually due to what happened BETWEEN the obstacles. The dog has to be acclimated to the trial environment by utilizing fun runs, UKI or NADAC trials (which allow some training in the ring) or just visiting an actual trial and using the warm up jump. You need handling skills such that the dog knows when to run full out versus when a turn is coming. All courses have requirements for side changes (when the dog is running on one side of you, but with a direction change, it is most beneficial for the dog to start running on your other side.) There are several types of side crosses and you and the dog must be fluent in how to execute them. The dog needs a start line routine and a recall after the run. I tell potential handlers that the dog should be performing at a higher level than the level you are entering because trial environment stresses will give you a lesser performance at a show than you get in a controlled environment like a class. Compared to teaching all of these, just getting them into a tunnel seems easy now, doesn't it?

4. What do you feel makes a good versatile/sport Shiba? Genetics? Training? Patience? Dog sense?

Obviously, the dog has to be structured in a way that suits the sports of choice. For example, a Shiba with a somewhat loose patella might not be the best fit for agility. For coursing, you want a dog with a solid prey drive. For obedience, dogs that have strong handler focus work well. Personally, I prefer a more spirited Shiba to a less independent one because, while the more timid dog might be more obedient, the more spirited dog will be better equipped to handle all the chaos and distractions in a show environment. To some extent, it will depend on what the handler is willing to spend time training. I have more willingness and patience for training to channel the energy of a driven dog than I have energy for motivating an uncertain dog.

5. What was one of the hardest things you've taught/accomplished with your dogs?

I spoke of Koshou's agility career earlier, and how as a handler, I had no clue what I was getting myself into. Shibas like to be right, and are quite offended if they believe they have earned their reward, yet none is forthcoming. In my case, unbeknownst to

me, the errors were because I didn't know how to use my body language to signal side changes, turns and obstacle discriminations, but of course at the time I thought "this dog is blowing me off." Some dogs stress up (get the zoomies) and some dogs stress down (refusals, no eye contact, etc). Koshou stressed down, so I found myself with this dog that I could see was easily capable of doing all the obstacles, but was refusing to run, hiding in tunnels, or stopping in the middle of a course and yawning! I kept taking class after class after class and, because the classes were just about obstacle performance, we kept failing in trials (a year and a half of shows with 0 qualifying runs.) We had our "aha moment" during a seminar when the instructor said "you have to break this down into WAY smaller steps for him. He doesn't know that it's just fun to run with you." And from that sentence, an agility career was born. I took ALL of the obstacles out of agility and pulled him out of classes. We went to our "yard" (a public grassy area in our condo complex) and worked on just making a highly rewarded game of running with me. I called it "the cheese game" (his favorite food). I put him in a stay and walked maybe 50 feet away, released his stay and took off running, zig zagging around the park. The lead out distance was important because it allowed us both to be running at full speed for some distance before he reached me. If he could catch me, he could have the cheese. After several weeks of this, all I had to say was "cheese game" and he would practically turn himself inside out for a chance to play. For the next couple of weeks, we continued the cheese game, but this time with an agility jump set up in the park. The twist was, I made sure to never send him over it. I just wanted him to learn that it was fun to run with me, and oh, by the way, there might be some agility obstacles out there too. I could see him eyeing that jump, and remembering those were rewarded. When I could see he was practically pointing to it, I sent him over the jump. You would think I had shot him out of a cannon. We GRADUALLY built up to having more and more obstacles there (that I might or might not ask him to do that day.) He learned that the real game was running with me and the obstacles were just bonus fun. Until the day of our last run together, we always referred to running a course as the cheese game to keep that excitement for him.

6. What do you think is probably the most difficult sport for a Shibas to compete in?

My hat goes off to the folks to do obedience. The guidelines for performance scoring can be pretty rigid. These people have made a serious time commitment to getting those sits perfectly straight, and having their dogs hold a down stay for a long time with the incredible distraction of other "strange" dogs lying down nearby.

7. What are some tips you would give someone who wants to compete in multiple sports with their Shibas?

Watch your dog and honestly assess its strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes. Pick sports that both you and the dog will enjoy. No matter what you pick, there will be show costs, training costs and a commitment to training time. I like to compete in multiple sports because it gives me options. I had a recent knee injury so I used the time away from more active sports to train tricks. Also, behaviors learned for one sport will carry over to other sports. We use tricks during our agility warm up to get the dog focused. I recently used the same "wait" command we use on the agility start line to

hold my dog in place off leash for more than 5 minutes in an open field when the coursing line broke. I highly recommend at least working for a novice rally title no matter what other sports you choose because it gives the dog exposure to working with you in the ring, and can be done on leash. No matter what sport you choose, be sure your dog is physically fit. And in the event your dog has been performing well and suddenly starts refusing to do something, be sure to eliminate any physical reason such as injury or hypothyroidism.

8. What do you feel is the most important aspect of competing with a Shiba?

Hands down, the handler's emotional state. Our emotions travel right down the leash to the dog. You have to remember that these are beings who can clearly read the slightest lowering of the head or a barely perceptible (to us) curling of the lip or dip of the tail. We might as well be screaming "I AM REALLY NERVOUS" before we go in the ring because they read our expressions that well. I had to learn to come to a place where I truly felt that whether we Q or not, this run is a chance to just have fun with my dog and get an assessment of what we need to work on. As I look back, I wouldn't give up any of our runs – even those where we messed up – because the dogs were giving me really good information about what they needed. I just needed to put my ego aside to see it.

9. Do you have any words of wisdom for owners who want to participate in sports with their Shiba?

Go for it! You don't know until you try. Just don't let anyone tell you "you can't do that with a Shiba." Your mind set must be "how do I get this independent thinker to WANT to do this" rather than "my dog knows the command and doesn't do it anyway." Work with the independence rather than trying to stifle it. I really like clicker training for shaping behaviors and getting the dogs to think "what can I offer her to get her to click the thing so I get the treat." The sooner they learn that they are actually in charge of when they get the reward (by guessing the right behavior), the faster they start to partner with you.

10. What do you look for when selecting a sporting Shiba?

My current Shibas are Mayday (who came to live with me at 8 weeks of age and is now 4 years) and Thunder (who became part of our pack at 8 months of age and is now 20 months.) Four years ago when I decided I wanted a puppy, I worked with Mayday's breeder to temperament test. We dropped things behind him to see how he reacted to the noise. He very appropriately startled, then went back to investigate the noise. I wanted a shiba with a somewhat higher ratio of leg to torso. That is, when you look at the dog in profile, I wanted his legs to be longer than his torso was high. Leggy dogs seem to have an easier time jumping and a longer stride for running. I also wanted a pup who would seek me out to engage. Finally, he showed his prey drive and work ethic by happily retrieving a ball again and again even at that young age. All of these have served Mayday well in his careers in agility, rally, coursing and trick dog.

Thunder came to me quite unexpectedly. I had expressed an interest in another litter that was planned a year out. I thought that particular breeding should produce a great working dog. Thunder had other plans. His breeders (the same folks who had the litter planned for the following year) had decided just the night before I met him to place him

in a pet home. He and Mayday adored each other; he was of an age where I could begin sports training immediately, required no housebreaking, and had all the physical and emotional characteristics I look for. SCORE! I am mentioning him separately because he had one additional characteristic that is critical in adding a second working dog – that is the relationship between the two dogs. I don't care how great of a working dog the next dog might be – I can't do it if my home will not be happy. The bond between these two dogs is remarkable and means that I don't have to spend time training them to get along.

11. Did you find a difference in attitude between males & females? Do you have a preference in gender when picking a working dog?

I think that is truly just personal preference. For agility I prefer the boys. They are just sillier and more tolerant of my mistakes. For coursing, I have never seen a Shiba with greater prey drive than my Chin Chin. She was ready to hunt no matter if it was birds, squirrels, rabbits or the plastic bag lure.

12. It sounds like participating in even one of these sports - let alone multiple Shiba sports - is a definite commitment of time and resources. What drives you to do it?

The day that each of my dogs joined my pack, I promised their breeders that I would see to it that they lived full lives with lots of opportunities for enrichment, and I promised each of the dogs I would give them a life that any other dog could only dream of. Each sport we do offers a combination of different benefits to the dog - physical challenges, mental stimulation, unleashing of prey drive, one on one time with the handler, problem solving, working structure, the joy of earning a reward, a deeper bond between dog and handler, and the joy of just watching a dog be a dog. These sports experiences help them become more confident dogs in everyday life. With the variety of sports that we participate in (rally, agility coursing, Fast Cat and trick dog) we always have something fun and exciting to do, and the work never gets stale. And while we talked a lot about all of our activities, I do make sure we schedule time with nothing to do as well. And this isn't just about the dogs-- the activity has been good for my own fitness as well.

Mary's Shibas and their accomplishments:

- Koshou Friend of Kurgan "Koshou" – RE OA OAJ MXP4 MJP3 MJPB PAX XFP and Clean Run Ultimate Weaving Shiba (60 poles)
- Hi-Jinx Designed in Black "Chin Chin" – RA NAP OJP NFP
- Hi-Jinx Jumpin Black Flash "Mayday" – RN NA NAJ DCAT TKA
- Shoei Hi-Jinx Thunderstruck "Thunder" – CAA BCAT TKN