

**Most Versatile Handler and Most Versatile Airedales:
How Mary Barker and Her Airedales Won the Awards**
by Joyce Miller

In April 2003, the Airedale Terrier Club of America (ATCA) celebrated the versatility of the Airedale Terrier in St. Louis with a weeklong series of competitions, workshops and events that included hunting and working, obedience, agility, conformation, CGC testing, and more. More than 200 Airedales took part in this first-ever event. At the end of the week at the final ATCA banquet, the person who had worked dogs in the most events was awarded Most Versatile Handler; the dog that participated in the most events (with additional points for winning or placing) was recognized with a Most Versatile Airedale award. There was also a runner up to the most versatile Airedale and many awards of merit.

The winner of the Most Versatile Handler was Mary Barker from New Richmond Wisconsin. And her dog, Willie, (U-CD Imprimis Explore I Will CD, NAP, NJP, CGC, Can-CD, ASCA-CD) with 21 points won the coveted Most Versatile Airedale. Mary's girl Indy (Imprimis Indian Summer) with 17 points won Runner-Up Most Versatile Airedale. After receiving her and the dogs' sashes, Mary returned to her table, her infectious smile stretching from ear to ear, and said, "If you only knew how hard I worked for this."

How Mary trains her dogs and how she approached her training to compete in the Week of the Airedale is a story that provides an excellent guide for anyone who would like to work successfully with their dogs in any competitive arena. Her methods are based on shaping and luring, but her winning results come from the way she sets goals at every step of the way, visualizes the outcome, and puts the final pieces together more than from the particular training methods she uses.

An Airedale owner for 10 years, Mary originally chose the Airedale for its temperament, loving its unique combination of a strong will with a loving heart, and its eagerness to please. She finds training her Airedales very rewarding and cautions newcomers to "Always keep your voice pleasant and never raise your voice," a lesson she says she learned from long-time Airedale breeder, Joanne Vohs. "Airedales," Mary says, "are independent, thinking dogs that can go anywhere with their owner. They are a good match with my personality."

It all began with an unruly puppy. Mary began working in obedience because one of her first puppies was "rather unruly," and someone told her to just be patient. But she knew she had to make corrections, and Joanne Vohs helped her learn that "using a correction is giving information to your dog." To learn how to give the corrections, she turned to obedience training, and trained with trainer Patty Biggins, known as "The Terrier Trainer" in Salt Lake City. Under Patty, Mary learned "to keep everything black and white, to keep training pleasant, and to form a mental picture in her mind of what she wants the dog to do. "With that picture in mind," Mary says, "you can give corrections in such a way that you help the dog understand what you want." Not only does she visualize

her dogs working the exercises perfectly, she pictures them doing so with a good, happy attitude and their tails and ears up. This approach worked: That unruly puppy, Dave, ended up with 19 first places in obedience trials, and he finished his obedience titles through the first leg of Utility, before Mary lost him to cancer. For several years in a row, Dave held the national rank of #2 Airedale in obedience. Mary was hooked!

One approach for many disciplines. Since then, Mary has taken her Airedales beyond obedience, working them in agility, tracking, and now she is starting them in hunting. She says that in every discipline, regardless of how slow she may train an exercise, she always does the exercise exactly the way she wants it done. She studies how the dog works an exercise, notes the muscles that it uses, and then works the same muscles the same way time after time until the exercise is finished and smooth.

To help the dog do this, she puts peanut butter or cheese on the end of a paint stick or a wooden spoon, and guides the dog the way she wants it to go. And she will patiently do one exercise that way over and over. She never moves the dog; she always makes the dog move itself and makes the dog responsible for the behavior. Once the dog knows the exercise, she fades out the lure until the dog performs the behavior on his own when he is asked for it. She works with her dogs so that the dogs think the work through and learn to make their own decisions.

Training for Week of the Airedale: planned, purposeful and systematic practice.

When Mary heard about the Week of the Airedale, she was excited: For the first time, all the venues for all the dog sports that she loves would be in one place. She was excited at the prospect of really showing that Airedales can do so many things so well, and she knew that she wanted to compete with her dogs for the Most Versatile awards. She knew that if she did her training thoroughly, she could go to the Week of the Airedale and go in the rings and have fun—with total confidence in her dogs. And that is what she did.

Mary understands that a dog can only do so much in a training session, and it takes more time to train for so many events. But Mary is already training for several venues at once. She says, “That means it takes longer to get my dogs into the show ring. I don't back down from how I want my dogs to perform. I just train all levels of the venues at once so when they are ready to show, it goes fast. I train Novice, Open and Utility all at once to keep it interesting. I train advanced agility maneuvers as soon as they know the obstacles. I train TDX and VST (variable surface tracking) skills from the beginning. This keeps it interesting, but my dogs are typically three to four years old before I feel they are mature enough to compete with the precision I want.” In other words, Mary trains them thoroughly and mixes up the events during training so that her dogs pay close attention to her and have fun; above all, she does not hurry the dogs in a rush to get into competition. Like a good teacher, she makes sure her students are ready to do what she asks them to do before putting them to the test.

To train for the Week of the Airedale, Mary asked herself what she needed to do to win, and with that answer in mind, she planned out every detail: which events she would show in, how she and the dogs would prepare for those events, and what distractions her dogs

would have to work with. She broke every exercise down into goals, and then identified the separate things that she needed to do with her dogs in order to reach each goal. For nearly six months, Mary and her dogs worked six nights a week. Every night, she ran through routines. Each night, she focused on one thing: heeling, head up, sits, downs, weave poles, etc. until she was satisfied that she and the dog had that part of the exercise down pat.

Because the Week of the Airedale would be held outdoors and Mary and her dogs were used to competing indoors, she moved all her training outdoors as soon as the snow was melted in Wisconsin. “That only gave me a month,” she said, but she worked her dogs outdoors every day because “It is the trainer’s responsibility to expose their dog to all the things that he will encounter in the competition.” Flapping tents, people noises, other outdoor noises, dogs barking, the wind, rain, and more: the trainer has to prepare their dogs to work with all potential distractions. This attitude paid off: after the first class, Mary noted that the grass was longer than AKC regulations permit and that the long grass threw Willy off. So after that class, she took him and practiced in the long grass until he was ignoring it. In his next class, he came in second and was one of only three out of 35 dogs to qualify.

The Week of the Airedale. During the Week of the Airedale, Willy and Indy participated/competed in obedience, in Brace Obedience (Mary practiced with the dogs for Brace Obedience three times a week starting in January – “It was,” she says, “a lot of fun getting two independent dogs to work together.”), in agility (Standard and Jumper Preferred – in fact, Indy completed her first leg in agility at WOTA and as a result of her experiences at WOTA, “Indy really blossomed and is now competing more happily”), the Canine Good Citizenship test, the hunting workshop (neither had been exposed to game as an object before and at the workshop, they were confronted with raccoon and live quail – much to their amazement and delight. “In order to continue in hunting,: Mary says, “I will have to undo three years of training to ‘Leave It!’”), the Parade of Titleholders and the Fun Events. By Thursday, Mary and her dogs were happy to relax and spend three days sitting on the sidelines and watching the conformation competitions.

Success is in the details. To what does Mary attribute her success as a trainer? In part to her own professional experience teaching and as an engineer: She is accustomed “to focusing on details and to breaking tasks into little tiny details.” When she is training her dogs, she works on different parts of an exercise every week and then after the dog and she have learned all the details, she pulls the whole exercise together. She also seeks out fun matches and uses them to determine where the dogs’ weaknesses are. To help prepare for WOTA, she found fun matches in January, determined where her dogs needed to improve, and made a plan for strengthening particular behaviors. She also had friends run her through routines so she could check how the dogs were doing, and she worked the dogs until they matched her ideal picture of each routine. By working in such detail, Mary ends up with a lot of confidence knowing that she and her dogs are really ready to compete.

And what is her long-term personal goal for working with her dogs? “I want to show people how nicely Airedales can work.” To do this, Mary competes with her dogs at all-breed shows and sees her dogs as Airedale ambassadors to the rest of the dog world and to the public. Above all, Mary says “I want to give people hope that whatever breed they choose, they can succeed with happy dogs working well with them.”

Resources: Mary recommends two books for anyone who wants a competitive edge in any dog sport:

Jane Savoie, *That Winning Feeling! Program Your Mind for Peak Performance* (Traflagar Square Publishing, 1992).

Barbara Cecil and Gerianne Darnell, *Fear No More: Competing With Confidence* (T9E Publishing, 2002).

Background:

Mary Barker has been training her dogs for 10 years. She typically trains her dogs three to five times a week, and she and the dogs take a month off every year, usually December. This year, because of training for the Week of the Airedale, they did not take December off, so Mary took it very easy during April. At the present time, she is working hard on tracking with the goal to test her Airedales for their TD in late fall. As Mary says, “The dogs know how to track, I'm learning how to read them!” She is going to show Willie in open agility and obedience this summer and early fall. Her personal dream is to earn a VCD2 by the end of the year.

Mary lives in New Richmond, Wisconsin, a small town with lots of parks and trails for training and playing with her dogs. She trains obedience and agility at a facility in Hugo, Minnesota. She taught high school math and computer programming for six years and then went back to school for an engineering degree. She has worked as a mechanical engineer for the past 10 years.