

Feline Agility Good for the Mind and Body

CatChannel Manging Editor Nikki Batalis blogs about feline agility competitions and why they're beneficial to cats and their people.

By Nikki Batalis

Posted: Feb. 18, 2009, 3 a.m. EST

Experts say that feline agility competitions are a great way to exercise a cat's mind and body, and reinforce the bond with his human. Photo courtesy Cat Fanciers' Association. A few weeks ago, I ventured south to check out a cat show, the San Diego Cat Fanciers Food and Water Bowl in Del Mar, Calif. I love looking at all the different cat breeds, but one of the big draws for me was seeing a feline agility competition for the first time.

Now, I am familiar with dog agility. One of my friends is involved in agility trials with her Australian Shepherd, and I enjoy hearing about his training and how he's doing in his competitions.

But feline agility? Most cats I know would have to be coaxed through an agility course with an entire tuna — and even then might turn up their noses if they didn't feel like participating.

So this I had to see. The agility course in Del Mar was set up inside a netted-in corner of the exhibit hall. There were ramps to climb, hoops to jump through, bars to leap over and tunnels to shimmy through. The facilitator had a feathered fishing-pole toy to lure the cats through their paces.

The first cat I watched would have none of it. No amount of coaxing could get him to leap through even one hoop or over one bar — though he did roll around on the ground a lot and bat at the toy with his paw.

Then an Abyssinian came in and showed everyone how it's done: The cat — sleek, lean and toned — leaped and winded his way through the agility course like an Olympic athlete, never hesitating, never showing any uncertainty. In fact, he did it twice.

Think a Persian cat can't excel at feline agility? You might want to think again. It got me thinking: Cats are intelligent creatures and natural athletes. Of course, they have minds of their own when it comes to most things, but if you started them at the right age, why shouldn't a cat be able to do agility as well as a dog?

My question was answered on Sunday evening when I watched "Why We Love Cats and Dogs," a great show on PBS' "Nature" series. One portion of the program covered feline agility. What do the experts say about it? Dr. Nicholas Dodman, of the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, said "Lots of people think you can't train cats. Well, that's wrong. For a cat to engage in those aspects of predatory behavior — the leaping, the springing — now, you're working with nature.

"And when an owner spends time interacting with their cat, in the form of training and agility and things like this, it empowers both sides of the equation."

I had assumed before watching the show that certain breeds of cats would naturally do better at agility — the lithe, athletic breeds like Bengals, Ocicats and Abyssinians — while the more laid-back breeds, such as Persians, wouldn't do well at all.

But I was wrong: On the show, a Persian whipped through that agility course like a champion.

It just goes to show that cats — no matter the breed or the preconceptions we have about them — should never be underestimated.