

Dancing with dogs by Richard Curtis



Dancing in Denmark

AFTER A BUSY weekend at Discover Dogs I had only a few days off before getting ready to go to Denmark, as I had been invited to judge at one of their shows. The sport is still in its infancy but it has been recognised by the Danish Kennel Club for the last two years. I think they are one of the first countries where it is possible to make up a champion in heelwork to music and freestyle.

Many people have asked me why you cannot make up champions in this sport in the UK as we have been doing it longer than most. I think the reason is that our Kennel Club prefers to let a sport establish itself and then when there is a sufficient competitive base it will consider allowing CCs to be issued.

Judging abroad is always interesting as each country's rules are different so I needed to make sure that I was fully conversant with them. Although most judging systems are along the same lines as the UK there were several differences in the Danish rules.

First they had a section which was called

known sites in the area.

I think in many countries nowadays it is hard to find venues in which to hold dog events and it is the same in Denmark. They are lucky that one of their members has access to a small sports hall and although the ring was smaller than the usual size, it had decent flooring and the acoustics were good for the music. The judges were placed on the stage and I met up with my fellow judges just before we were due to start the first class.

As is common in the UK, many of the judges were working dogs in various classes as well as doing some judging, so I was the only judge who was judging all the scheduled classes. Alongside each judge for part of the day was a trainee who discussed with the judge after each dog why they had given those scores. Denmark has a judge's development programme where a prospective judge needs to be a trainee at a few events then has to complete various exams.

The morning was taken up with three heelwork

but this dog didn't want to play ball today so lost a few marks for barking and position inaccuracies. The eventual winner was Emmy Simonsen with her Border Collie Whisper. They performed a very controlled routine to the theme from *Harry Potter* and did some of the best backing with the dog in heel on the left and the right. For me I would have liked to have seen the theme of the music reflected more in the routine and also the handler do a little more acting to bring it to life, but saying that it was a good routine.

The second place in this class was another Border Collie who at 11 years old has only just started to be trained for HTM. You could see that this dog had done a lot of obedience as it had good left hand heel position which it also carried through to the other heelwork positions around the body. This team performed to *Drink Up Me Hearties* from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* with the handler wearing a subtle but effective pirate costume. Although they came a close second I think we will see a lot more from this handler as she gains more experience in

Freestyle class 2 had two entries with the eventual winner being Johanna and her merle Border Collie Spooky. They performed a routine to the theme from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The handler was carrying a spade and used it during the routine to get the dog performing various moves. The only thing that was lacking here for me was the handler just giving a little more performance to music.

I don't like routines where the handler is almost overshadowing the dog with their exotic movements but it is nice to see a handler moving in a manner that suits the style of music they are using. In the days following the competition I had been asked to give a couple of workshops so the rhythm and movement of the handlers was something that I focused on.

The last formal class of the day was the freestyle class 3 or advanced class. Emmy Simonsen is considered one of the best handlers that they have in the sport in Denmark and this was evident in the class results as she took two of the top three places. The winning routine who gets a freestyle certificate (three of these are needed for the dog to become a freestyle champion) was a lovely blue merle Shetland Sheepdog called Biscuit.

Having judged this dog earlier in the year at Crufts in the international competition I know he is a lovely happy boy. This team performed some nice jumping and reversing work to a track from *Moulin Rouge* called *Sparkling Diamonds*. On occasions



Whisper performing to *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

'presentation' which consisted of things like show quality, co-operation from the dog, signals etc which carried ten points.

The further two sections which also carried ten points were similar to the UK, as one was 'technical merit' and the other 'music and interpretation'. The other main difference was that they had recognised the position of the dog being between the handler's legs facing forward and back as a heelwork position. This was discussed by the UK working party when the UK rules were put together recently but was not included. Personally, as I am a bit of a traditionalist and come from an obedience background, I view heelwork as being anything close to the outside of the handler's legs. Having the dog between the legs to me is more of a freestyle move.

So as I flew into Copenhagen I read through the rules one more time just to make sure I had everything clear in my head. Arriving a little later due to delays at Heathrow I was met by one of the organisers, Mugge Pinner, with her Welsh Terrier. She kindly took me around some of Copenhagen on the way to the venue so I got to see a few of the well-



A charismatic Corgi in the starters class.

to music classes. The first was HTM 1 which was the equivalent to our starters, and the eventual winner was an Australian Shepherd who performed to *My Boy Lollipop*. This merle bitch had excellent attention and the routine flowed well from one heelwork position to the next. A good ending is essential to a routine and this team had a big lollipop as a prop which the dog licked at the end which was a nice touch.

The second class of HTM only had one participant which was a German Shepherd who was performing to *Puttin' on the Ritz*. This was a nice dog called Victor who again had excellent attention and really excelled when the handler moved out with the dog across the front of her body. A lovely touch was where the dog took off the handler's hat in time with the lyrics of the song.

HTM 3 had seven teams and the first dog to come into the ring was one of my favourites as it was a Portuguese Water Dog. Having a Portie myself I know what the breed is like and this one was certainly a bit of a character. The handler tried to get many different heelwork positions and directions



Biscuit the Sheltie winning advanced.

the sport.

After a bit of lunch we sat down ready to judge the afternoon's freestyle classes. Freestyle 1 had many different breeds from a Malinois to a Cavalier. The eventual winner of this class was a red and white Border Collie who performed to a safari theme with the handler dressed appropriately. There seemed to be lots of leg weaves in the routine but some were done with the handler's hands behind her back which really showed off that the dog knew the direction to go in. Many handlers get stuck at using their hands to encourage the dog through on the weave so it was nice to see in this first class a dog that had been trained to complete the move on command.

Second place went to a Japanese Akita called Fuwa who performed to a track called *The Simple Life*. This was the first time I have ever seen an Akita competing in this sport and you have to congratulate this handler on the standard of work she has achieved with this dog. Attention was good and there was a good variety of moves with excellent sidepasses being one which stood out.



Mugge Pinner and her Welsh performed to *When I'm 64*.

Biscuit lost a little attention but he is still young so with time I am sure he will settle down. Second place went to Annette and Zico a very enthusiastic Border collie. Dressed in a complementary black and white outfit Annette showed off some nice moves with a good beg at the start.

Following the formal classes there were various additional classes to encourage new people into the sport. The six-plus class was for pairs and teams and there was a very good synchronised routines.

The eventual winners were a pair of Beagles; you wouldn't think a Beagle would be the easiest breed to train but these handlers had obviously worked very hard, as they had brilliant attention and the dogs' tails never stopped wagging. I later found out that these two dogs were actually obedience champions, which explained why they had a high standard of work.

The organisers did a great job organising the whole weekend and I was looked after very well throughout. I think the sport will develop well in Denmark as they have a committed bunch of people involved in it there.

If you have any questions regarding the sport please contact me via my website www.k9freestyle.co.uk.