

The "O" Word ...

By Judith LeRoy and Shag

Here I rest, a handsome patch of brown silhouetted on a freshly mowed field of fragrant, sun-warmed grass. It's a sweet and drowsy spring afternoon—the kind of day humans write songs about. The late April sky is cloudless, a butterfly drifts lazily in the gentle breeze. Though my eyelids are heavy, my eyes are alert. I'm immobile, resolute, vigilant, and my face is aglow with a huge Beardie grin.

Several feet away sprawls a Rottweiler, his heavy presence intruding on my space despite the distance. He's not smiling. On my left, a Poodle regally reclines; she peers disdainfully at the motley crowd of canines of varying size, shape, and hue around her. She's not smiling.

Why am I lying so still, smiling this vapid, ingratiating smile? Because I'm a dog that just flunked Obedience, Novice A level. I really, really screwed it up. And I need to make amends.

How did I get into this mess? Since we have at least two minutes left on this long down, let me tell you

It all started a little over six months ago, the day I got my Breed Championship. She Who Feeds Me was exhilarated. I am her first and only Champion and, as a matter of fact, her first and only dog. She was justifiably proud and irrationally effusive. As she and her doggy friends sipped warm champagne from paper cups at the show site on an unseasonably warm day in October, she opened her big mouth. And then The Troubles began

"You know," said she, "I think it's time to start Shag in obedience. Time to get a CD."

That brought my ears up. There I was, resting in my ex-pen with the remains of my congratulatory vanilla ice cream cone slowly melting in my otherwise empty water bowl. And she, without a moment's thought, opened this monstrous can of worms.

"Obedience!?" queried Mary, our Border Collie friend. "A CD?"

Nancy, with two Golden Retrievers who request permission before sneezing, smiled broadly. Joanne, who has Dobes, laughed out loud. Debbie, a Poodle person who's always polite, remonstrated gently, "But Judy, you've no experience in obedience ... and Shag's a Beardie!! They're super independent dogs ... and getting a Companion Dog title isn't easy, and ... well, you have no obedience experience" Debbie's voice trailed off as she repeated herself and thought maybe she'd better stop.

"So??" She Who Feeds Me said belligerently. "Bearded Collies are smart. They herd sheep in Scotland. They're friendly and loyal. So, what if they're independent and think for themselves? And I didn't have any experience in conformation either, and yet here we are, celebrating Shag's Championship!" She smiled broadly and expansively

Mary, Nancy, Joanne, and Debbie looked at each other dubiously, wondering if maybe the champagne had gone to my mistress's head.

"Well, I guess it can be done," Debbie ventured.

"Of course, it can," said She Who Feeds Me. "If Shag and I can get a Championship; we can sure get a little old obedience CD."

Now let me tell you something. Not long before this, my beloved mistress thought a CD was something you bought at a bank. Or something you played on your car audio system when you didn't want to listen to the radio. Then one night she sauntered off to a dog club meeting and heard someone talk about "obedience." She came home all fired up and told me not to jump on her when I greeted her. "Off!" she said. Now, why was it she never cared if I greeted her on two feet before? Hadn't she just yesterday told He Who Walks Me that she liked my enthusiastic greetings? And then she yelled, "Off," when I tried to take my midmorning nap on the sofa. So, does "Off" mean, 1) to not greet humans or, 2) to not nap? You can't have it both ways, can you? You can see my dilemma. And when I barked at the mailman to let her know he was messing with our mailbox, instead of saying "Thank you, Shag," she shook a can filled with marbles at me and yelled "No!" What the heck do marbles have to do with a mailman or, for that matter, with "No?" As you might surmise, I was already getting a pretty strong notion that this "obedience" stuff wasn't something you wished upon a dog. Not this dog, anyway.

Back to my story. Here we were, relaxing at the show ground after a heady day in the conformation ring, and she told her friends we were going to get a CD—an AKC Companion Dog Obedience Degree. Serious stuff! Soon, all her friends—including the gentle Debbie—were looking at each other furtively and trying not to snicker.

All right," said she. "Six months. I'm betting you that in six measly months, at the Plainview dog show, Shag will get the first leg of his CD, or I'll take you all out for dinner."

"That's like taking candy from a baby," Nancy observed as they loaded up the grooming supplies.

"Candy from a baby," Mary echoed as we reached the parking lot.

"Candy, my foot," She Who Feeds Me fumed as she gunned the van's engine. I pretended to be asleep in my crate.

At dinner that night, He Who Walks Me, husband to She Who Feeds Me, responded only a bit better than Mary, Nancy, Joanne, and Debbie.

"You and Shag? Obedience?" He guffawed. "And the Iditarod is next?"

Anyway, that's how I got here. It wasn't my idea. She enrolled us in an obedience class the very next day.

I couldn't really complain about obedience training. Every week, we'd go to the park for class or, if the weather was bad, to the gym. I'd get to see other dogs. Every day we'd go

somewhere in the car to practice obedience exercises. I'd get treats. It didn't take much to please—her gratitude was pathetic when I stopped forging ahead when she told me to heel. Don't get me wrong. I didn't always do what she said. If you always do what humans say, they get complacent; and our instructor said there's nothing worse than a complacent obedience trainer. So, I did my best to make sure she didn't get complacent.

It wasn't all roses for me, either. Some parts of obedience get pretty silly. For example, this "heeling" business. Walking next to a human with your head by the human's left knee while you crane your neck to watch the human's face doesn't have anything to do with heels. And this "front and finish" stuff. Wouldn't you think when you finished something it meant you were done? Not so, in obedience.

Despite it all, six months went by quickly. A month before the show, she told her friends, "We're READY!"

Her friends said, "Try a match, first."

She said, "No, we're REALLY ready!!"

So, she sent in our entry for the obedience trial. During the next month, we practiced at shopping malls (no lifting legs there), at bus stations (watch out for the fumes), and in strange parks (no smelling new smells). We practiced with cats in crates behind us (no barking), with bicycles riding around us (no chasing) and with ducks in ex-pens next to us (no herding!!). The day before the show I got groomed within an inch of my life. She bought a discreet brown barrette and convinced me that Beardies can wear them in the obedience ring.

All set. Ringside!! Mary, Nancy, Joanne, and Debbie were there to offer support (and to collect dinner, I suspected). She Who Feeds me nervously took me aside.

"Now Watch Me," she said. "Be Good!!"

I really meant to be good.

Things started all right. We went into the ring and the judge asked if we were ready. She squeaked that she was. Oh, oh. Stage fright. I suspected she was sorry she made that rash promise six months ago. She could be home reading a good book. Instead, here she was, heart pounding, with a strangle hold on my lead. I hoped I didn't pass out from lack of oxygen during the leash exercises.

We were off. I made sure that my nose was right by her knee, and I watched her intently. We started to move. I kept watching her. Probably too intently. That's why I stepped on her foot, and that's why she stumbled. As she tried not to trample me, her leg got tangled in the lead. Oh, oh! We were falling. And I knew that unless she loosened her hold on the lead, neither of us would be able to get up. The judge shook his head.

There's hushed silence at ringside. I can tell by the look on her face that she really had lost her concentration. In fact, I wondered if she remembered where we were? I knew, right then and there, that we were going to flunk. So, couldn't we just go home?

It seems not. Ah, the figure eight. I told myself that we could do figure-eights blindfolded. In fact, we'd done it that way for practice.

But she started off, moving so fast I couldn't keep up with her. I took a short cut and ended up on her right side—and that's the wrong side in this damn obedience business. Oh, oh, watch that lead!! She tripped over it again but didn't go down. At least it slowed her pace. One of the stewards had her face in her hands. Was she laughing?

I knew we were in deep trouble, so when I stood for inspection, I really laid it on. Every inch the proud conformation Champion that I am, silken hair blowing gently in the spring breeze, I regally postured for all to see. The judge bent over, and his hat fell off, right at my feet. I figured it wouldn't hurt to grovel a little in view of our earlier miscues. Would picking it up for him earn us some much-needed goodwill? Wouldn't hurt to try, right? So, I picked it up. The crowd tittered. I don't remember anything like this ever happening in obedience class.

When the judge extricated his hat from my teeth, I licked his face gently. I never could resist a nose that close to my tongue. Besides, as I said, we needed all the goodwill we could get. The judge pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and assiduously wiped his face.

It was time to heel off-lead. She handed the steward my leash. The steward was still giggling. I glared, remonstratively, and missed She Who Feeds Me's take-off. By the time I looked up, she was half-way across the ring. I bolted like a startled cat and raced to catch up. She hadn't missed me yet, striding forthrightly ahead, changing pace and direction with aplomb as the judge gave commands.

Just as I approached, she did an about turn and saw me racing toward her. The expression on her face when she recognized me was not pleasant. I thought she'd be glad to see me! Whoops!! We narrowly avoided collision. After a shifty little two-step, I pulled up beside her in terrific heel position, staring up into her disbelieving eyes.

The audience started applauding.

I wasn't prepared for that. I'm a sucker for applause. I'll admit it—I lost my head! I turned a few cartwheels, bounced around like a hyper-inflated beach ball, barked my head off, and flew around the ring a couple of times. After getting a grip on my behavior, I managed to catch up with her just before she stopped heeling and I performed an exquisite (if I might say so myself) sit at her side. The judge's face was contorted.

Thank God, it was almost over. Her face was ghastly pale, the judge's, crimson red. The stewards were trying to stifle snorts of muffled laughter, and the crowd was roaring and applauding. At least somebody out there appreciated me. I idly wondered if one of them might take me home until this blew over. I suspected that She Who Feeds Me was going to be a fairly intolerant dinner companion for a while.

Recall. She's across the ring from me and I have to run to her on command. I looked for friendly faces in the crowd while I awaited the signal to "Come." It was such a long time in coming that I figured I missed it. So, I barreled in. When I got halfway there, the look on her face told me that I hadn't missed a thing. She hadn't called me. What do I do now? I backed up, step by cautious step, 'til I was back in my original position. Maybe nobody noticed. The judge sighed

... I guess he noticed. I sat alertly, awaiting the summons. It came. Across the ring I flew and stopped, perfectly, in front of her.

When she gave the signal to "finish"—which means get in a "sit" position on her left side, I knew I had to pull out all the stops. We always did a plain old uncomplicated right finish—me moving around her right side and walking behind her to sit on her left side. But I'd seen a poodle in class do a left finish—where you (the dog) just kind of hopped up in the air, turned your rear around and came down sitting pretty at your human's left side. I figured, "It's flashy—go for it." We needed all the points we could get.

So, I launched myself, got my rear turned in mid-air, and then realized I didn't know how to land. My tail hit the ground a couple feet from where I planned. My seat was strangely bumpy. It dawned on me that I was sitting on both her feet. It's hard to look cool and composed when you're sitting on your human's Nikes, and she's wearing them. I comforted myself with the fact that at least we were both facing the same direction

"Something new, I guess", the judge ventured. "A totem pole finish?" The audience erupted in laughter and more applause. I tried to take a bow, but she glared at me fiercely. As the judge turned to leave the ring, he muttered something to a steward about hiring us for his next party as a comedy act.

You'd think, after all that, we wouldn't have shown our faces for the long sits and downs. But, through gritted teeth, the masochist said to her friends, "We need the practice. You know, Shag wasn't the only one of us who performed badly today."

After she put me in position, she watched me dubiously as she crossed the ring with the other handlers.

I figured I owed her something for graciously accepting part of the blame for the obedience trial debacle. So here I was. Sitting. Downing. Staying where she put me until she told me otherwise.

Now do you understand why I'm being so resolute? Why I'm lying here, Sphinxlike, smiling at her as she stands dejectedly with the other handlers across the ring? I want her to see my furry little buns just where she left them and my great big ingratiating smile beaming reassuringly at her. Maybe then she'll be able to tell herself that she's not that bad a trainer after all, and I'm not that bad an obedience dog. And maybe, just maybe, she'll be a bit less distressed.

I realize this is a two-edged sword. When she sees my smiling, cooperative self behaving like a real obedience dog, she just might recover her confidence and promise her friends a Companion Dog Excellent degree by next year. Heaven help us all ...!