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Ron May You Run

*A veteran and
amputee stays
active in Agility
League with a
special canine
partner*

Rosemary McGavin

Thirteen years ago, Ron Godshall and Heather Eckenrode entered agility class as newbies to the sport.

Ron had a majestic Giant Schnauzer named Boopsie who was a star in the conformation ring. Heather had two cute spaniel mixes, Bradshaw and Rooney, and limited experience with dog training.

The two started chatting, and Heather had a lot of questions for Ron about the dog world. A friendship began. They advanced through classes and into competition.

“When we started trialing, Ron would occasionally ask me to run one of his dogs if his leg was too tired to finish out the last runs of the day. His leg had poor circulation due to diabetes related to Agent Orange exposure when he was in Vietnam in the Marines,” Heather says. “Since we were in class together, Boopsie, and later Ron’s other dogs, Nellie Belle and Maxie, became familiar with me and would run with me.”

The condition of Ron’s leg declined, and in 2020, doctors recommended amputation. His leg was removed above the knee, and Ron entered rehabilitation with the goal of returning to agility.

Sadly, his last Giant Schnauzer passed away before that could happen.

But Heather made sure that Ron’s wish came true. She offered her new puppy, a mixed-breed named Franco, as his agility partner.

MEETING FRANCO

Ron got to know Franco while Heather drove him to his numerous post-op medical appointments. (Ron’s wife, Bonnie, has vision issues that prevent her from driving, and ride share options were limited during the pandemic.)

“While I was helping Ron get to his medical appointments, he became friends with Franco, who would hang out with me in the car waiting for Ron

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at his leg fitting and other sessions,” Heather says. “Franco started on his agility journey with me, and it was apparent that he finds great joy in running so we decided to start a new journey training him to run with Ron driving his electric scooter.”

They started training but realized there were limitations to Ron’s scooter, which had a very wide turning radius. Heather collaborated with others in the agility community to organize a fund-raiser to purchase a sportier model of scooter.

“Franco is so fast sometimes I have a hard time seeing him. Now I can turn 360 on a dime and what a difference that made,” Ron says. “In the last six months, I think Franco’s tuned into me an awful lot. I think to remember he

watches my front wheels, so I have to be pointing them where I want to go.”

Every Tuesday evening, Heather drives Franco to meet Ron for agility class at Keystone Agility Club in Barto, Pennsylvania.

“Because Ron lives about 50 minutes away from me, we don’t get a lot of time to practice together. The instructor, Jacky Mento, has been so wonderful, supporting us from when this was just a crazy idea until now when Ron and Franco can run full courses,” Heather says. “I got Ron a shirt last summer for his birthday that says ‘Ordinary.’ We were hoping we would get good enough at class to be doing the same courses as everyone else and having the same challenges that everyone else has and we have.”



LADS IN LEAGUE

Not only are they completing courses in class, Ron and Franco started competing in the AKC Agility League in the fall. They run on the novice-level team High Octane Moonshots based at High Octane Agility in Colmar, Pennsylvania.

"The best thing that we have done is join the League. We get to run and

be competitive and work on things we need to work on—plus all the help we get from our teammates is great," Ron says. "We still have a lot to work on, but I think it would be pretty exciting to get to the nationals."

Agility dogs cue off their handler's feet and pay attention to how their handler's direct with their arms. It is an

ongoing process to figure out how Ron can best direct Franco while driving his scooter.

"Our first season of Agility League was even more awesome than we had hoped. The team aspect of it is really fun. It took us a few weeks to get our first clear round, but since then we've had a clear run every week," Heather



says. "It's so wonderful to have a regular opportunity to work on our skills with a little extra pressure closer to what a trial is like.

"Who knows where this will take us? Maybe after we build more skills, we'll get to compete or do a demo at a big event. When I told Ron that there is a para agility championship in Europe, he said he'd get his passport!"

Ron began working with dogs more than 60 years ago when he obtained a



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job at a kennel while in high school. The kennel trained dogs for a local police force, and Ron went on to breed German Shepherd Dogs and Doberman Pinschers before discovering the Giant Schnauzer. He and Bonnie bred many Giant Schnauzers, which won both in the breed ring and in sporting competitions.

VALUABLE BONDS

At 78, Ron said he may not get another dog, so he values the time that he can share with Franco, thanks to Heather.

"Heather has been my rock," he says. "And I only see Franco two times a week, but we have a bond. Heather will say 'Can you please call him out of his crate?' and then he hops out and loads himself in the chair with me."

Heather and Franco still take a weekly agility class together, but, for now, she is letting Ron take the lead in handling him.

"Franco is a very talented and excitable guy. I knew by having him work with two people, we would not be able to be as consistent with training criteria and that would create some gaps and challenges, but that is OK," she says. "This journey with Ron is more important and impactful than any title I could earn with Franco. What he is giving to Ron is bigger than that. And he is giving me a learning opportunity of a lifetime." **FD**

Penny Leigh is the director of the AKC Agility League and AKC GoodDog Helpline and competes in dog sports with her canine team.