



One Eye on the Prize

The accident damaged his vision but did not dim his agility prospects.

By Penny Leigh

If you tuned into the AKC Agility League Championship livestream, you may have spotted a spunky young Poodle in the novice class.

Tribute jumped, weaved, and tunneled with joy, and his handler Lyndsay Klemens looked just as happy to be running by his side.

Their enthusiastic performances did not reveal that this pair's agility career nearly ended before it began.

Klemens' journey with Tribute started

a little over two years ago when she was looking for a new agility partner. The Indiana veterinarian is an experienced agility handler and competed with a Belgian Tervuren at an advanced level.

"I wanted another dog to compete in a different size division," she says. "Fellow competitors recommended a mini Poodle and also the breeder, Estelle Kapsner, for her devotion to versatile and competitive Poodles as athletes and family members."

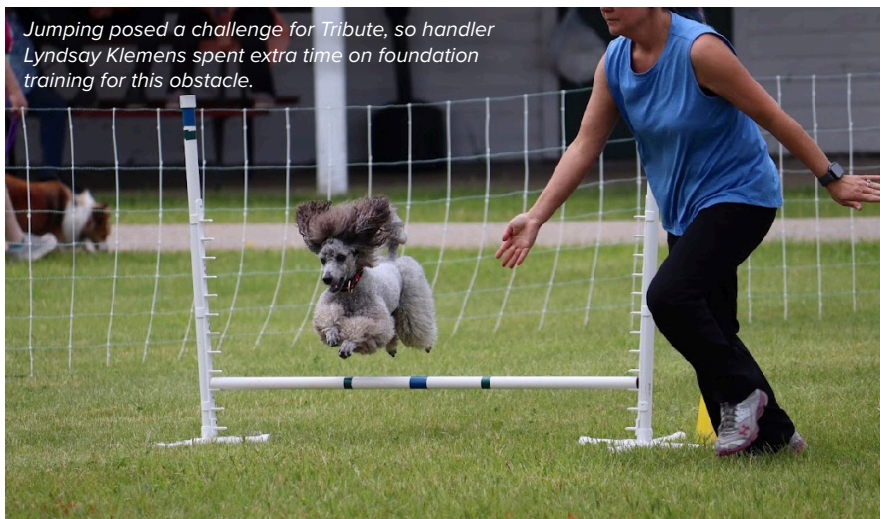
Klemens brought Tribute home when he was 10 weeks old, and agility foundation training began immediately. Socialization was part of the process—and then what should have been a fun outing changed everything.

Bad Blow

"Tribute had a tragic accident when he was about 4 months old," she says. During a playdate with a larger breed, the two pups were jumping on their

Courtesy Lyndsay Klemens

Jumping posed a challenge for Tribute, so handler Lyndsay Klemens spent extra time on foundation training for this obstacle.



hind legs and slapping each other in the face. “This is still one of Tribute’s favorite games,” Klemens says.

“Unfortunately, the other pup hit him just right on top of the head, and his baby face sustained multiple fractures, leaving his left eye with permanent retinal damage. This left him completely blind in that eye. I thought his agility career was over.”

Klemens started thinking of other sports that the puppy could pursue with the damaged vision, but her Agility

League teammates at Stoney Run Canine Camp refused to let her consider options.

“Luckily, all my friends in Agility League encouraged me to still play the game with him,” she says.

Instead of turning to a different endeavor, Klemens developed a plan to make agility work for Tribute.

A New Perspective

“His depth perception for jumps and contacts is a challenge, as well as seeing the obstacles and keeping track of me at

the same time,” she says. “When he has to run on my right side, it is much more difficult for him because he loses my position unless he completely turns his head to see me, making it more difficult to assess the obstacle in front of him.”

Jump training was very important, and she took longer with Tribute on the jumping foundation than with any of her previous dogs. Tribute’s jumps are kept low, and Klemens often uses targets after contact obstacles and jumps to help him focus ahead. The young dog loves praise, so Klemens gives him plenty of verbal reinforcement, pats, and hugs.

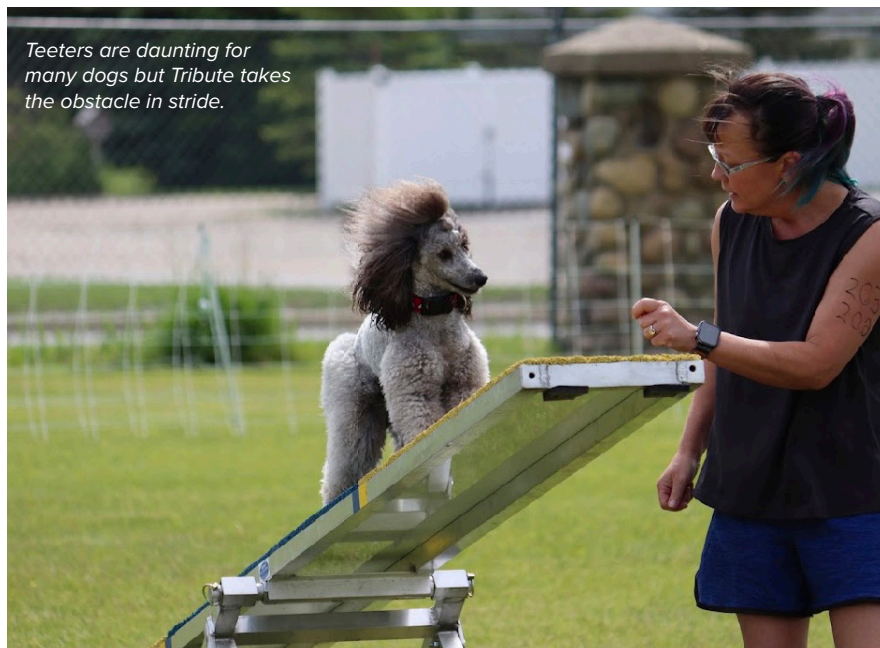
“A big issue with losing 50 percent of the visual field is that the remaining 50 percent becomes his 100 percent. This is an advantage to him in life because he sees small details (a tiny fleck of hair or dust) that other dogs aren’t as likely to investigate. This often gets him a missed piece of kibble or tiny piece of paper. He loves playing with paper!

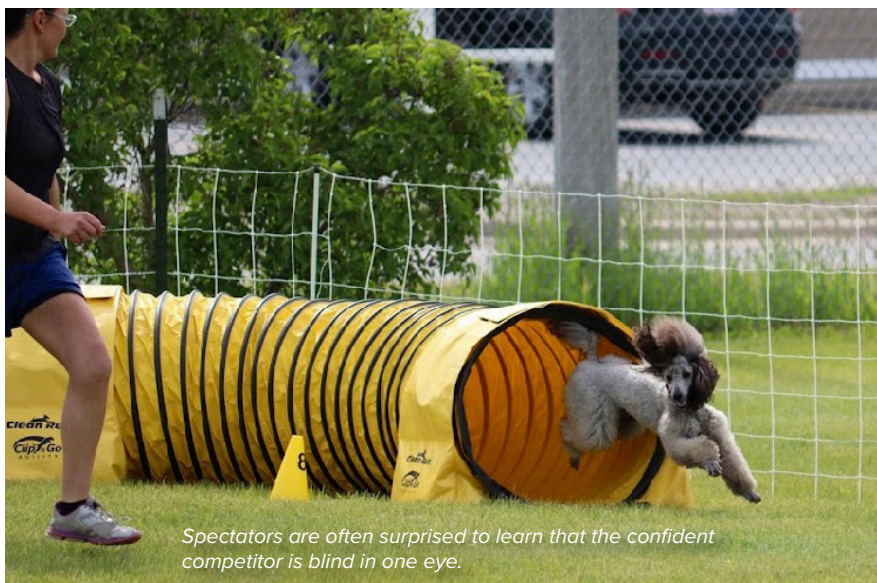
“However, in the ring, this also means he sees a fallen tissue or course map off the line of jumps that other dogs will run right past. While this is also a young dog issue, his limited vision plays a role.



Tribute looks proud with his Agility League rosettes.

Teeters are daunting for many dogs but Tribute takes the obstacle in stride.





Spectators are often surprised to learn that the confident competitor is blind in one eye.

In everyday life, I verbally praise him for his detective abilities, but on course we just keep running. I praise him for leaving foreign objects.”

When she walks the courses, Klemens covers her left eye so she can better see things as Tribute will.

“This helps me figure out where challenges might occur, especially with turns or striding. I give more verbal

cues with him than my other dogs, and I do my best to give those commands early enough that his GPS has time to recalibrate,” she says.

View from the Podium

The AKC Agility League has enabled them to receive encouragement and coaching from teammates and compete in a lower-pressure environment. Hundreds

of nationwide teams compete in the AKC Agility League, which features at-home competition for all skill levels. Teams and dogs are ranked against the other participants around the country, and the winners are named at the end of each League season.

Jodi Zandstra is the captain of Tribute’s team, SRCC Speed Demons, based at Stoney Run Canine Camp in Hebron, Indiana.

“Lyndsay and Tribute have grown so much as a team since starting League. He is doing so well and has made so much progress,” Zandstra says. “We love watching his enthusiastic runs and his love for the sport.”

The SRCC Speed Demons cheer every run for every member as though each course was set up for the national championship. The commitment to the success of every dog has kept Klemens’ spirits up while she works through Tribute’s physical limitation.

“League has renewed my commitment to the sport of agility. It’s so easy to feel defeated, especially when the odds aren’t in your favor. To be able to enjoy my sport again, with a group of people who are just as excited as I am, is wonderful.”

Tribute has also become active in scent work and rally competitions, but agility will always be a part of their lives. The AKC Agility League Championship, held at Purina Farms in Missouri, was his first AKC agility event. Tribute did so well that he won the 12-inch Preferred Freshman class and made his debut on the podium.

“I hope that Tribute can continue to have an agility career where people are surprised that he is blind in one eye. After competing at the Championships and listening to other competitors exclaim they didn’t know he had visual deficits, I’m excited to continue our hard work and training!” **FD**

AKC Agility League

The AKC Agility League is a fun, recreational way to train in the sport of agility—with a competitive edge.

Hundreds of teams, each composed of three to eight dogs, compete nationwide, including Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. There are classes for all levels of dogs from international, featuring ISC style courses, to beginner, which has courses without weave poles or teeters.

Anyone can form an Agility League team, provided they have the regulation AKC agility equipment. It can be a club, a private group, a training school, or an individual.

Teams compete at their home-based facilities, and the captains report scores. Judging is on the honor system. All teams run the same courses designed for their skill level, and at the end of each season, the winners in both teams and individual dogs are named.

An annual “live” League championship is held so teams can meet and compete on the same playing field.

Three seasons a year are offered: winter, spring/summer, and fall. Each season is 12 weeks long, and teams run six courses during it.

For more information akc.org/akc-agility-league/



Penny Leigh is the director of the AKC Agility League and the AKC GoodDog Helpline. She is an avid competitor in several sports with her canine team.

Courtesy Jill Miller