



Victoria Banning and Blitzy run the course.

Agile in Alaska

Young sisters get into Agility League up north

Long-time educator Crystal Dennis loves teaching, whether it is in her classroom or in the dog show ring.

“I’m always looking for juniors to raise up into the dog sports that I love,” says Dennis, a 23-year teaching veteran and resident of Fairbanks, Alaska.

Friday nights, Dennis often heads to the Tanana Valley Kennel Club breed handling practices with her American Eskimo Dogs. One evening, a young girl sitting on the sidelines caught her eye. She was watching her older sister handle a dog and had a wistful look.

“I smiled at her. She smiled at me. I took my fluffy, little white American Eskimo over to her, and Blitzy promptly

jumped into her lap and gave her kisses. I then asked Victoria if she wanted to go into the ring and practice showing her,” Dennis says. “She was hooked.”

Victoria Banning and Blitzy became a team, as they met each Friday night for handling class. Crystal then invited Victoria and her mother, Christina Banning, to an afternoon of agility training.

“It took just one afternoon, and she was giggling with delight as Blitzy ran like a crazy dog all over that agility practice course with her,” Dennis said.

Soon, she paired up her more experienced dog, Buddy, with Victoria. The Masters-level dog was easier for the pre-teen to handle and enabled Victoria to really hone her agility skills. Today,



Brooklyn Banning and Lark

Victoria is 11 years old, and she and Buddy compete on AKC Agility League teams that Crystal captains.

“I like agility because I love dogs and found that it is fun to run with the dogs



in agility," Victoria said. "I like being in the Agility League because everyone is very friendly and knowledgeable and willing to teach."

CATCHING 'DOG FEVER'

The Banning family's involvement in the dog world started when their oldest daughter, Shelby, met a family friend's Icelandic Sheepdogs. She fell in love with the breed and begged her parents to let her have one.

"Shelby worked for a year doing extra math and schoolwork to earn her dog. The breeder took a chance on us and let her have a show dog," Christina Banning said. "Shelby is working with him in conformation and agility."

After Victoria was bitten by the dog show bug following her chance meeting with Crystal, the Bannings thought that was the extent of the hobby with their children. But the interest continued to expand.

Brooklyn, who is a year older than

Victoria, tagged along to an agility practice one day. Dennis offered to let her run Blitzy around the course, and another new junior handler was born.

Brooklyn needed a dog to partner with, and Agility League competitor and captain Dianne Marshall offered to share her fast Border Collie, Lark.

"A match was made in heaven. Brooklyn adores Lark and his drive on the course," Dennis said. "She has picked up how to handle dogs on the agility course very quickly...Brooklyn also listens and takes feedback easily and is willing to try different handling techniques until we find something that will work for the dog she is running."

The team has become a force in the Agility League, ranking at the top of their jump height divisions, as well as the junior handler standings.

"The most challenging part of agility for me is distance-handling Lark...you have to run next to him for parts of the course, and sometimes I get too close to

him, so he drops a bar," Brooklyn said. "That is probably the hardest part, not getting too close, but not too far away."

While the Bannings admit they were a bit surprised at the spread of "dog fever" in their home, they say it has been a blessing—teaching their daughters responsibility, discipline, respect for others, and how to win and lose gracefully.

"Dog sports have definitely helped my girls become more confident. I appreciate the fact that whether it is agility or conformation, there is a competitive aspect that encourages my girls to compete most of all with themselves," Christina Banning said. "It drives them to continue learning and do better the next run or ring."

ENTER 'THE BARN'

Living in northern Alaska can be challenging for youth, especially during the winter months that have limited sunshine and sub-zero temperatures. Thanks to an indoor space known as The Barn,



the Banning sisters can practice agility year-round.

"It is a great outlet for them in the winter—and in the summer. During the long, dark days of winter, it is great to have an activity every week to look forward to. During the summer, it's an excuse to spend more time outside with the dogs," Christina Banning said.

There is a shortage of indoor places to train in northern Alaska, so Dianne Marshall and her husband, Steve, built The Barn with help from their agility friends.

"We started 12 years ago to build an uninsulated building with a dirt floor heated by a wood stove. It has evolved into a turf surface with (a) finished insulated ceiling and walls, heated by pellet stoves and propane backup," Marshall said. "It is a bright place to play in during our cold dark winters and stays busy September through April or May."

There are agility trials and dog events



most every month in Alaska, but not always in the northern area where Fairbanks is located. "Getting to trials often means traveling seven hours to get to the

competitions and over treacherous roads in the winter," Dennis said.

The Agility League has given their community an opportunity to compete



Clockwise from top left: Brooklyn with Clew and Lark; Dennis working with Victoria and Blitz; Victoria with Buddy



on a regular basis and train new handlers and dogs in the sport. The League offers “at home” competition during three seasons a year: fall, winter, and spring/summer. Each 12-week season provides six new courses for the teams to tackle.

Rankings are produced after each round so you can see how your team and your dog stack up against other

agility enthusiasts around the country. There is a separate ranking system that recognizes junior handlers.

ENJOYING ‘BORROWED TIME’

Victoria competes with Buddy, the experienced Eskie, on the team Wild & Crazier in the Senior (Masters-level) division. Brooklyn now runs two dogs

in League—Lark and Clew, a husky mix, with both on the team Paws Under the Northern Lights in the Freshman (Novice-level) division. Both girls hope to get their own dogs soon, but in the meantime, are having a great time with their “borrowed” partners.

“I like running other people’s dogs because I get to run different breeds and learn about the breeds,” said Brooklyn, now 13. “What I enjoy most is getting to hang out with the dogs... I just really like dogs, and they’re both really cool breeds and have fun personalities.”

Christina Banning said she is thankful for Crystal, Dianne and others in the Alaska dog community who mentor her daughters.

“I am so grateful for the people who participate in all aspects of AKC events in our area and the Tanana Valley Kennel Club. My children have found a variety of friends and mentors of all ages who encourage them to learn new things and have fun doing it.” **FD**

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

