

Hop to it (the subculture and history of rabbit agility)

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Quietly sitting along the wall of a room reminiscent of an elementary school gymnasium, the best phrase to describe what I'm seeing is "small-scale chaos." And it is, indeed, very small. Cappuccino pulls his leash from his owner's hand and sprints away to complete the course on his own. Licorice attempts to jump over an obstacle, only to succeed in knocking down every bar, thus leaving his owner to pick them up as he moves to the next hurdle. Henry is simply sitting on the ground and refusing to participate.

This is the much-anticipated bi-weekly meeting of rabbit agility training at the Animal Humane Society of Golden Valley, led by the Minnesota Companion Rabbit Society (MCRS). Other volunteers and members often refer to Barb Kelley, the director of the organization's agility program, as the "bunny guru." When I first entered the multi-purpose room at the Humane Society, Barb welcomed me warmly. She then promptly told me to sit down, gave me a square of fleece to cover my legs, and plopped a charcoal-black fluff of fur onto my lap. I was told that his name is Fawn and he is a Dutch rabbit before Barb moved on to continue setting up the agility course in preparation for the arrival of the rest of the rabbits (and owners). I sat in a folding chair while petting Fawn and watched a full-fledged agility course materialize before me.

Barb moved briskly around the room, systematically placing obstacles. The course looked similar to that of dog agility with "fences" of red and white striped bars stacked on a frame holding pegs on the sides, a tire hanging from a square frame, carpet-covered teeter-totters, a wooden arch with bars placed along the curve of the semicircle, and a bridge with a flat top and sloping sides. "The fences are one bar higher today because we're testing,"
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Barb explained to me as she placed an extra bar on the peg of the fence, making it now about a foot high. Testing is an integral part of MCRS's agility program that allows the rabbits' handlers to witness the improvement of their pets as they gain colored bands based on their skill levels- much like the different colored belts one achieves in karate. As well as teaching the agility classes, Barb video records each testing so she can evaluate if rabbits are ready to move on to the next band level and for owners to review their pets' successes. MCRS also keeps all these videos for promotional or nostalgic purposes.

The MCRS is a relatively new organization, created only 12 years ago by Joanna Campbell and Andrea Nye. These two women, age 30 and 16 respectively when they started the organization, sought to benefit rabbits through " education and adoption" (Kelley). MCRS now has from 150-200 regular volunteers acting in the various divisions as adoption team, foster homes, PetCo socializers , teachers of the Bunny Basics class , or as response team to contact families post-rabbit adoption. The agility class currently has about 20 rabbits regularly coming for instruction, but has had more than 100 people pass through its doors in the past decade.

When Dell Robins, a close friend of Barb's and the founder of the MCRS agility program, passed away in 2005 after a battle with breast cancer, Barb offered to take the lead of the MCRS agility program.

Prior to this, Barb had only attended the training events as a spectator and didn't yet own a rabbit. However, after 30 years of competitive horse training, she recognized the striking similarities between rabbit agility and

the horse steeplechase as well as rabbits and horses in general. As Barb had said, “ Rabbits eat, get sick, and learn like horses. They’re both social animals, prey animals and herd animals .” (Kelley).

According to Barb, training a rabbit to conquer an agility course is nearly identical to training a horse – just with a much smaller student. Both are prey animals and therefore must be approached slowly as they are often skittish. Also, they must be guided from behind because if the trainer enters the sightline of their animal, they will turn the other direction. This is in contrast to training a dog for agility, who will follow behind the owner, whereas a rabbit or horse must be pushed ahead (Kelley). When coaxing a rabbit through a course, handlers use a combination of verbal and foot commands. Foot commands consist of stomps near the rabbit’s hind legs in an effort to get them to hop forward or over an obstacle.

These commands are also useful when trying to guide a rabbit in a certain direction if they are not following the agility course. One of the first lessons new participants in the MCRS agility program receive is how to effectively utilize verbal and foot commands. If an owner is too lenient, the rabbit will not listen. If an owner is too harsh, the rabbit may become frightened or overwhelmed. Patience is key for bunny success.

Throughout the gathering space at the Humane Society, I heard soft encouraging commands from owners to rabbits. Not once did I hear a rabbit receive a scolding, but their proud parents simply waited patiently for their furry little friend to complete the obstacle placed before them. Owners coaxed their rabbits forward with a few simple words. These phrases of “

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jump right," " jump left," " teeter," " bridge," or " hop tire," among others, were then followed by an ecstatic, " good [insert obstacle name here]!" which sounded like a mother praising her child. For even the most stubborn listeners, gentle foot commands and the occasional pat on the butt was all a rabbit needed to muster the strength to continue forward on the course. The skill set of the rabbits in the MCRS agility program varies greatly.

Rabbits who have been training for several years, such as Barb's white Netherland Dwarf Ray, are able to go fully off-leash, recognize the order of the obstacles, listen well to foot and verbal commands, and complete the course with almost no assistance from their owner. In contrast to Ray's flawless performance, I notice that some of the less experienced rabbits prefer to go their own way; I watched in awe as feisty little Lily skillfully zoomed through five consecutive obstacles, leaving her owner, 62-year-old Linda, in the dust. However, for the most novice of rabbit owners, it seemed that they spent the vast majority of their time following behind their pet, righting knocked-over fence bars. The participants in the MCRS agility program join for a variety of reasons. Many owners found their pets becoming bored and restless, needing a source of exercise and an outlet for fun.

Others felt that this was a creative way to bond with their rabbit and simultaneously train them to become better behaved. And of course, it's an opportunity for rabbit owners to join in community, swapping stories of their rabbits' latest adventure or triumph over a certain obstacle. I overheard snippets of tales about rabbits getting lost only to be found under the couch,

sneaking their way into the snack bag, or encounters with curious onlookers while going for a walk. MCRS members shared with each other the joy of a new rabbit joining a household and offered support for the loss of a beloved pet. As I watched owners guide their rabbits through the agility course at the Humane Society, what struck me most was how attentive these creatures were. They remained utterly focused on their owner's commands and were never distracted by commands directed at another rabbit.

The Humane Society is a hectic place, but these tiny competitors were undisturbed by the occasional dog bark or the movement in the crowded room. While rabbit agility is an unfamiliar topic to most, it is not much younger than dog agility – just less well-known. The first official dog agility event was Crufts Dog Show in 1978. By 1980, The Swedish Canine Kennel Club recognized dog agility as an official sport with a sanctioned set of rules and the first agility test under the new regulations was held later that year (Lewis). Dog agility had many aspects that made it pleasing to crowds and an instant hit – it was fast-paced, energetic, and easy to comprehend for the average spectator.

Soon after dog agility became an established sport, agility of other animals followed, such as goats, cats, Guinea pigs, ferrets, rodents, and rabbits (Kazmaier). Rabbit agility originated in Sweden in the late 1970s and slowly spread throughout the country. At its start, the obstacles were modeled after those of dog agility and the horse steeplechase, but were then modified to better accommodate rabbits' size and athletic capabilities. During the course of the next several years, two similar rabbit agility groups formed in different

locations of Sweden. Then in 1991, the two groups merged and in 1994, the Swedish Federation of Rabbit Jumping was established.

There are now rabbit jumping and agility federations in Norway and Finland. Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States have organizations, but no official federation (Sveriges Kaninhoppares Riksforbund). Despite often being lumped into the same category, rabbit hopping (more often referred to as “rabbit jumping” in Europe) and rabbit agility are completely different events. When I asked Barb to differentiate between the two, she scoffed as she said that rabbit hopping “focuses on speed, height, and nothing else,” whereas rabbit agility relies on “a well trained and obedient rabbit and an airtight bond between rabbit and owner.” (Kelley) There are four different sub-groups of rabbit hopping: straight course, crooked course, long jump, and high jump. In a crooked course, fences are set up in a zigzag pattern.

For a straight course, fences are placed one after another in a line. The goal of the straight or crooked course is for the rabbit to complete each jump cleanly (with points being deducted for each bar knocked over) in as little time as possible. Points are also deducted if a rabbit must be touched by its owner in order to complete the jump (Sveriges Kaninhoppares Riksforbund). The long jump (pictured below) simply consists of a low fence that has bars placed parallel with the floor and the high jump is a fence with bars placed vertically on the fence frame. Rabbit hopping focuses on the rabbit being able to overcome an obstacle with speed and strength, but rabbit agility requires much more focus and training. With the multitude of different

obstacles a rabbit will face in an agility course, rabbits must be able to listen to their owner's verbal commands and sometimes to memorize the course layout.

The vast majority of rabbit owners at MCRS never actually enter competitions. They just enjoy the bond they form with their pet and the MCRS community, as well as an entertaining pastime. Those training their rabbits range from teens, to middle-aged men and women, to retirees. Some own a single rabbit while others own as many as five or six. These people share a unique passion for their fun-sized friends and can take on completely different personalities when interacting with their " buns:" high-profile tax accountant Susan dons denim overalls and pigtails when attending agility training with Butterscotch and quiet Isla transforms into an energetic whirlwind as she rushes Susie through the course.

Despite not owning a rabbit as well as a complete lack of knowledge regarding rabbit agility - not to mention their basic behavior or how to care for them - the community of MCRS welcomed me instantly. They connected with me the exact same way they connect with each other and with each other's rabbits. They have not only developed a relationship like that of a extended, rabbit-adoring family, but have essentially adopted every single rabbit in the agility program. It's not uncommon to run across someone holding a rabbit and ask its name, only to find out it doesn't even belong to them - they just picked it up when it hopped by. In addition to the bond they form with other members of MCRS, the owners recognize the unmatched companionship that their rabbit offers.

As Cindy, the epitome of a suburban Minnesotan mother, said, she has become “fiercely protective” of all rabbits – not just her own. While absentmindedly petting the Holland Lop, Opal, Cindy made a point to pull me aside to describe her passion for rabbits with me. She shared that she became involved in the MCRS foster parenting and agility program when her son begged for a rabbit about six years ago. At the time, she knew nothing about rabbits but quickly grew to love them. After this deep affection blossomed, she has become a self-proclaimed “bunny hoarder” and would, if possible, adopt every rabbit to ensure it had a good home. By working in the foster program, Cindy has learned the importance of proper care for rabbits.

Cindy saw that the care for these pint-sized mammals must go deeper than a rabbit being “cute” and just “sitting in its cage 24/7.” Many believe that rabbits are low-maintenance pets, with simplicity of care comparable with a mouse or goldfish. Though this is true to some extent, rabbits need a much more engaged pet ownership than is often assumed. Their enclosures need to be cleaned weekly. Rabbits must also be provided with the proper diet, space to play, and toys to keep them entertained.

They are extremely social animals and require interaction not only with their owners on a daily basis, but also with other rabbits. There are programs such as MCRS Hoppy Hour held every week, which allows rabbits to socialize with one another, but rabbits typically live longer and happier lives if they have a constant companion in the form of another rabbit living in their enclosure. However, one cannot simply buy a partner for their rabbit and expect them

to instantaneously form an attachment. A rabbit must be introduced to its new possible housemate in a neutral location where they then “get to know” each other. This process is known as bonding, but Barb more casually refers to it as “speed dating” (Kelley). In their first meeting, rabbits will either bond, remain neutral, or intensely dislike each other.

A bond can be made from a neutral relationship, but if rabbits have a negative first interaction, it’s nearly impossible for them to bond later. Barb is a proud owner of nine rabbits, not including the various rabbits she will occasionally take in as part of the MCRS foster program, and has experienced successes and failures in bonding rabbits. After all, “the rabbit chooses its new partner, not you,” (Kelley). Though rabbit ownership has its trial and tribulations, Barb is keenly aware of the seemingly countless benefits of rabbit ownership. Unlike dogs, rabbits do not require daily walks, just some playtime.

They fit in well to any home, small or large, and are quiet and undisruptive. However, rabbits are still very social and love to be rubbed or play. They are also easily trained and listen well. Rabbits can oftentimes be overlooked when one searches to adopt a pet. Yet, these little critters provide for the owner as much as the owner must provide for them. It’s a common assumption that rabbits are not social, that they are not good companions, or that they simply sleep all day.

But with proper training and a bit of love, rabbit agility provides an outlet for rabbit and owner to connect while also having fun. With a variety of events and rabbit-enthusiast communities such as MCRS, even the most novice

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rabbit owner can find their place and hopefully advance their bun to the next brightly colored band - after all, it's only a hop or two away.