

European Open Agility Championships 25th – 28th July 2013 in Neeroeteren, Belgium

When I received the call offering me the job of Agility Team GB Manager back in October 2012, I was incredibly happy but aware of what a great responsibility I was about to take on. The role of Team Manager is in many ways my dream job, as it not only provides me with a chance to put my learning, research and coaching skills into practice but also an opportunity to build a world class agility team.

While it would be a privilege to represent Great Britain, I recognised that there would be a lot of work to do before the European Open (EO). Training began in earnest following the selection of the team at the Performance Weekend in April. In the months leading up to the EO, the team of 16 handlers attended six training sessions and practiced on the many course plans made available by this year's judges. My support team put in a lot of hard work helping the squad prepare for what was going to be one of the toughest EOs to date, due to this year's high entry of 34 Teams with 800 dogs.

Although the team enjoyed a comfortable journey on the Eurotunnel, on Wednesday morning, we arrived in Belgium to scorching temperatures in the 30s. On the Thursday, we made our way to the arena so that the dogs could undergo a vet check and the handlers could get an idea of what to expect. The team were also given the opportunity to practice on the equipment.

The first day of the competition was made up of Team Classes for each height category. As it can take more than two years to qualify as a judge in Europe, the courses are often cleverly designed. The EO was no different featuring fast, technical, big open courses with high calibre judges. The first day finished with Team Red finishing 12th, securing a place in Sunday's final.

Day two threw up some challenging Individual classes, which tested handling skills, dog & handler physical ability and mental fitness. Due to a shifting sand surface under both dog and handler, many teams had a few unfortunate runs with bars dropped and valuable points lost. Undeterred, Team GB put in many fantastic runs. This caught the attention of fellow competitors and coaches.

The Team finished day two exhausted but elated with their achievements. Superb results saw two of the four small dogs qualify for the finals, along with all four medium dogs and four of the seven large dogs. Sian Illingworth had secured 1st place in the Medium Individual Agility and Shaun Hunt came 2nd in the Large Individual Agility.

Thankfully the temperature dropped over night and there was a breeze which helped energy levels for finals day. We had been experiencing temperatures of over 30 degrees on Friday and Saturday along with a few terrific storms. If there were going to be any outbursts or thunder bolts on Sunday, it was coming from Team GB!

Sunday kicked off with the Team Relay. Four courses were built within one ring, featuring four start lines, four finish lines, two dog-walks, two A-Frames and goodness knows how many pipe tunnels. Team Red produced three clear runs, resulting in a very respectable final position of joint 5th.

The Small dog final was another demanding course. The current and previous World Champions put in super-fast runs taking 1st and 2nd Place. Bernadette and Zaz and Louise and Smudge achieved 5th and 10th place.

All four Medium dogs qualified for their final which was once again a very fast, technical course with a few handling options that proved crucial. No one could fail to notice the intense atmosphere that surrounded the class and the Team were gripped as Natasha & Dizzy and Sian & Maybe reached the final top ten. In her final run Natasha achieved a time of 36.916 seconds

and looked unbeatable, until now no one had beaten 39 seconds. However, when Sian stepped on the line the hundreds of spectators went silent. Despite the intense pressure, Sian and Maybe rocketed round the course in a time of 36.291 seconds. The crowd erupted, Team GB had secured Gold and Silver!

By the time the large dogs ran, everyone had settled down again. Greg was first and he set the standard for the other 84 handlers. He stayed in the lead for over half the competition finishing in a creditable 7th place. Matt and Shaun were in the last 10 to run and both had incredibly fast runs. Shaun's dog Phix was marked on his up-contact, if not for this, his time would have secured him first place. Matt and Quincy were one of only three to get a clear round in under 40 seconds finishing their first EO in an impressive 3rd place.

The final prize giving and closing ceremony cemented what a great championships this had been for the team. To have two handlers on the podium at once was an incredible moment for us. Picking up so many places has certainly set Agility Team GB very firmly back in spot light as a team to be reckoned with.

The successes were truly down to team effort. Everyone involved with the preparation and work at the Championships played a crucial part. In addition to my support team I would like to say a huge thank you to our sponsors the Kennel Club, CSJ Specialist Canine Feeds and Eurotunnel. Without whom this would not have been possible.

Full Team

GB Union Jacks - Small / Medium

Sian Illingworth - Maybe

Nicola Wildman – Zoom

David Wright - Otis

Louise Eden & Smudge

GB Red - Small / Medium

Natasha Wise - Dizzy

Steve Richardson - Libby

Bernadette Bay - Zaz

Rosie Cavill - Spice

GB White - Large

Shaun Hunt - Phix

Ian Jackson - Bobbie

Roger Teasdale - Jingo

Karen Marriot - Puzzle

GB Blue Large

Greg Derrett - Detox

Matt Goodliffe - Quincy

Charlotte Harding - Scandal

Support Team

Mark Laker - Manager

Marc Saunders - Assistant

Rachel Mowbray - Vet

Emma Fretwell / Tace Allen-Hunt - Chiropractor

Ruth MacGill - Handler Fitness Coach (non-travelling)

Emma Butler - Data Analysis (non-travelling)