

Best BOY

Boxer Wins Awards for Agility Skills

by David Gallant

On a crisp morning in Springfield, Ohio, Heather Cline and her dynamic partner in agility, 10-and-a-half-year-old Boxer extraordinaire Serge Ibarka, stepped onto the scene of the 2023 North American Dog Agility Council (NADAC) International Agility Championships. This elite event, also known as CHAMPS, gathered the finest competitors in the country, all vying for glory.

As they checked in, the air buzzed with anticipation. Serge, whom Cline adoringly calls Sergie, tugged Cline eagerly toward the competition area. Something about him stood out that day — his excitement levels were off the charts, and his confident stride and trademark ear-to-ear smile set the stage. The gates closed behind them, enclosing an arena of dirt and dreams. While waiting for their turn, they surveyed the challenging course of jumps, tunnels, A-frames, and hoops that awaited them.

This competition marked Cline and Serge's fourth journey to this prestigious competition level. They hoped to secure a championship placement, a testament to their unwavering dedication.

Inside the arena, Cline crouched beside Serge, entering a serene trance that blocked out the ambient noise. In that muted moment, she whispered to Serge how proud she was of him and gave her "best boy" a tender hug. Serge responded with a quick lick on Cline's cheek, a silent assurance that he had everything under control. As they geared up for their performance, Cline focused on her mental strategy, while Serge, with an eager fidget, waited for the thrill of the game.

And then they were off.

At the judge's command, Cline unleashed Serge, who transformed into a lightning bolt, conquering the first set of hoops. Cline raced to the center of the are-



Jeff Cline, Heather Cline's husband, holds Serge on the puppy's first day at home.
Photo by Heather Cline.



Serge proudly shows off his NADAC championship ribbons.
Photo by Heather Cline.

na, precisely signaling Serge as he maneuvered through the course. It was a high-stakes race against time and perfection,

and any misstep could cost them dearly. Cline choreographed the run with shouted commands: "Over!" "Tight!" "Right!" "Left!" "Tunnel!" A blur of athleticism, Serge completed the course in minutes, crossing the finish line flawlessly.

Cline erupted in excitement, her cheers echoing through the arena. As a seasoned NADAC judge, she recognized the perfection of Serge's run. The spectators, captivated by the duo's performance, exploded in cheers and applause, having witnessed Serge's spectacular feat.

This electrifying scenario repeated throughout the weekend. Serge accumulated more points and medals with each round, inching closer to the coveted national championship ranking. The dynamic duo left an indelible mark, a testament to the thrilling synergy between Cline and her four-legged agility maestro, Serge Ibarka.

Developing Canine Camaraderie

If you ask Cline about Serge, her voice overflows with emotion as she reminisces about the pup who miraculously waltzed into her life, transforming it into a riveting tale of love and devotion.

"I could have never imagined the happiness he gave me when I brought him home as a tiny six-week-old puppy," she says.

Serge's journey began with a puppy litter born into Red Dirt Boxer Rescue in the heart of Oklahoma City. That's where fate intervened, and Cline agreed to foster him. Little did she know that this decision would unravel a captivating narrative of canine camaraderie and unexpected bonds.

Cline shared her home with Chloe Ann, a spirited female Boxer. Initially conceived as a temporary arrangement until the next adoption event, Serge's arrival sparked an unexpected dynamic between the two dogs.



After the CHAMPS competition,
Serge relaxes at home.
Photo by Heather Cline.



At Serge's awards board, Serge and Heather Cline pause to reflect on his accomplishments in the middle of competition week at CHAMPS.
Photo by Lori Lednick.



Cline vividly recounts, “Chloe Ann stepped into the role of his mother, engaging in fake nursing and guiding him through the weaning process.” What followed was a spectacle of canine chaos, with the duo becoming inseparable, leaving a trail of 10 demolished dog beds and a cloud of pillow stuffing in their wake.

While consciously missing adoption events, the family — Chloe Ann, Cline, and her husband — became increasingly enamored with Serge. What began as a simple act of fostering evolved into a decadelong saga of passion and partnership, etched with countless adventures. There is a profound love story that could easily be the script of a blockbuster movie, proving that sometimes the most extraordinary tales unfold in the ordinary moments of fostering love.

Sniffing Out Success

The self-assured and confident Serge who is witnessed in competition these days belies the challenges he faced as a young and uncertain pup. Confidence was not a trait that came effortlessly to him, especially when confronted with the daunting agility ring.

In his early days, Serge grappled with anxiety, a sentiment all too evident in the agility arena. The manifestation of dog anxiety is as varied as the personalities of our furry companions, and for Serge, it translated into a deaf ear to his name when called and an overwhelming fear of navi-

gating the agility ring without the reassuring presence of his human companion.

Recognizing the need for a transformative approach, Cline temporarily withdrew Serge from agility competitions. During the hiatus, she delved into a different realm of training in the art of scent work, which became the pivotal moment in Serge's journey.

Scent work, which has consistently proved to immensely improve a dog's confidence, was the antidote to Serge's anxiety. Unlike agility training, in which the handler directs every move, Serge was in the driver's seat. It was a dance of trust and cooperation in which he was the leader as he beautifully communicated with Cline through scent, building a confident bond that transcended the physical cues of the agility ring.

Serge carried this newfound confidence back into his agility work, which was on full display at the International Agility Championships. With unwavering confidence and a seamless bond as a team, Serge clinched medals in all six rounds, securing an impressive fourth-place national championship divisional placement among a competitive field of dozens of skilled competitors.

Discovering the Power of Fostering

Reflecting on Serge's incredible achievements, Cline passionately emphasizes her belief in the power of fostering. In her view, there's no such thing as a foster

failure, only foster successes. Little did she anticipate that Serge would not only capture her heart but also lead her on a journey filled with exceptional experiences and unparalleled joy.

Cline says, “My life is enriched by having him in it. My heart overflows with love, admiration, and respect for our boy.”

Ever the advocate for rescue dogs, Cline recognizes that some people have reservations about fostering or adopting rescue dogs because of concerns about health, temperament, and breeding. Still, she implores skeptics to observe the many foster success stories, such as Serge's, which serve as a testament to the fact that a loyal and capable companion can succeed in every aspect of life.

The decision to foster changed Serge's life and Cline's, and she can't fathom what life would have been like if she had not agreed to take him in.

The return journey after the championships, a 12-hour, 870-mile trek, was a testament to the enduring bond between Cline and Serge. As they arrived home, they were joyously greeted by Trixie, Finn, and Moe Bandy — the Boxer Pack, as Heather affectionately calls them. Embracing his role as pack daddy, Serge snuggled with each member before demanding, “It's time for a long walk.” With that, life resumed its normal rhythm, but enriched by the immeasurable love and experiences that Serge brought into Cline's world — and a national championship. 🐾