

Marcy and Josie's Excellent Barn Hunt Adventure

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On March 14, 2020, I celebrated the last day of our local Winter Barn Hunt League, and as I posted our photo on Facebook that day, I noted that this would likely be our last ribbon for a while. My plans for the next two weekends were already cancelled. I had been eagerly anticipating an upcoming agility trial and I was looking forward to bringing our six-month old puppy to her first conformation show. Like all of my friends who participate in dog events, March was the start of a long string of cancelled shows and trials, and as I write today, there is still much uncertainty about the future of our sport.

Our adventures in Barn Hunt began in 2016 after attending a local seminar, participating in some local practices, and quickly recognizing that my youngest wheaten, Josie (Marchwind The Girl of His Dreams, RATM ACT2), two years old at the time, appeared to have a strong interest in this relatively new sport. Earlier that year it had become apparent to me, that it would be hard and potentially impossible to earn her conformation title, and worse yet, it was interfering with the positive relationship I was so hoping to have with this lively busy girl who loved life in the way only our wheatens can. At the time, I had never participated in any type of performance event, and I knew few people who did. Regardless, I attended a local seminar, and four years later, I have developed both a new appreciation for my dog's innate ability to "untangle a scent puzzle," as well as a deeper understanding of what it means to work with my dog as part of a team.

The purpose of Barn Hunt is to assess a dog's ability to find and indicate live contained rats in a "barn-like" setting. A course is built using bales of hay or straw and in addition to searching for rats, dogs are required to complete tunneling and climbing challenges. The sport measures a dog's speed in running a course, their ability to successfully read the various scents on the course, the handler's ability to interpret and respond to their dog's signals, and importantly, the team's ability to communicate throughout this activity. When you enter the course, neither the dog or the handler knows where the tubes containing the live rats, the empty tubes, or the litter tubes are hidden. Progressively more complex tunnels and challenges are introduced at each title level, and at the highest level of competition, the team must

determine when they have found anywhere from 1 to 5 rats (the actual number is not known to the handler) within 4 minutes and 30 seconds. Calling a litter tube or an empty tube on the course results in your immediate disqualification.

Barn Hunt provides a series of titling levels that offer increasingly more complex challenges. While Josie and I successfully navigated through the novice and open levels with confidence, like many teams, we became stuck for more than a year at the senior level when the course and the number of hiding spots dramatically increases in size (35-60 bales of hay), the tunnels have two or three turns, and the eight tubes on the course (one empty, three litter, and four rats), creates a steep learning curve. The senior team must move quickly through the course, finding all four rats in 3 minutes 30 seconds, execute a climb, and go through the tunnel. Eventually we successfully completed our senior title and then last year, we earned our master title. We are now working on our RATCH which requires 10 master legs.

Not surprisingly, terriers often make excellent barn hunt competitors. Importantly, however, while our terriers often have working instinct in hunting vermin, no rats are harmed in the sport of Barn Hunt, and special care is taken to assure that the rats are handled in a humane manner. Therefore, training is important to reinforce with our dogs (and remind ourselves) that there is an important balance to the game of Barn Hunt involving skill, motivation, competitive drive, and fun. As of today, more than 160 wheaten terriers are listed in the Barn Hunt Association registry, 11 wheatens have earned “Master” level Barn Hunt titles, and several exceptional wheatens have earned titles beyond this level.

To get started in Barn Hunt, it’s important to find a venue for practice and trials. In Western New York, I am fortunate to have easy access to multiple trials each month, as well as locations offering lessons and practices. Beginners will find that the opportunity to participate in practices and/or watch a trial before participating, will reinforce the rules of the game, and help teach handler strategies. Trials routinely offer instinct tests to beginners which provide a “low stakes” introduction for your dog to a rat tube, a litter tube, and an empty tube in a structured setting.

Finally, did I mention that the barn hunt community is fun, supportive and welcoming? Participants take turns volunteering for various jobs during the trial, routinely organize potluck lunches, and celebrate wins and disappointments with fun awards and ribbons. Dogs of all breeds love Barn Hunt, and handlers who are used to other more competitive sports, will appreciate the more relaxed, game-like elements of this sport. I am grateful to Eva Fowler and Deb Eldredge, two of our

local Barn Hunt enthusiasts whose book *Barn Hunt: A Game of Hide & Seek for Dogs*, was helpful in writing this article. For further information and to find a Barn Hunt club in your area, I encourage you to visit the Barn Hunt Association website (<http://www.barnhunt.com/index.html>).