



COME ON, BOY: Charlotte Austen Hardy coaxes her dog, Tommy, through the tunnel. Right, Patterdale terrier, Izzy, finishes the slalom. CO87959-14

Day I put my dog through his paces

■ Reporter tests her pooch on agility course

Charlotte Austen-Hardy

AS the owner of a mischievous Bearded Collie, I have always been in awe of dog owners who can do agility courses with their dogs.

Being able to convince your dog to run around a course of jumps, tunnels and bridges is something that many dog owners, as they struggle to make their pet sit on command, would long to achieve.

Yet Mandy-Sue Sarti, 46, of Stonebridge Hill, Colne Engaine, regularly competes in agility competitions with her dogs and, together with her eight-year-old Patterdale Terrier, Izzy, even qualified for the Kennel Club Olympia Agility Finals in London.

She also teaches the sport at her training centre, Stonebridge Dog Agility, in Colne Engaine.

"I have been doing agility for more than 17 years now," she said.

"It's addictive. It's a great way of bonding with your dogs and understanding them as something other than a pet.

"Everyone has to walk their dogs and agility is a great, fun way to do that in all weathers."

I took my dog Tommy, seven, to meet Mandy-Sue and put him through his paces.

Despite the grey skies and drizzle when we arrived, a dozen dogs and their owners were waiting their turn to tackle the courses.

One course looked quite daunting with waist-high jumps, a seesaw and a bridge, while another had a tunnel and weaving poles.

Some dogs took every obstacle in their stride, but others were



KEEP GOING: Tommy knocks off a jump barrier, watched by Charlotte and David Hardy, left. CO87959-20

more reluctant.

One pooch ran underneath a jump instead of leaping over the top and another ignored the tunnel completely, no matter how many toys or treats were used to try and tempt him through.

Before we started, I asked Mandy-Sue for some tips on turning my laid-back Lassie into an agility superstar.

She said: "You have to be a partnership with your dog and work as a team.

"Every dog has different levels of ability, but there are very few dogs that can't do it.

"It is very reward based so you have to find a reward that's worth doing the work for them."

So, armed with a fluffy pencil case full of his favourite treats, we tried Tommy out with the tunnel.

He was a little bit nervous, but to my delight soon dived into the tunnel and out the other side...before making a break for it and running for the exit.

After luring him back with a

treat, we tried some jumps, but although Tommy would hop over the first, my rewards of his favourite toys and treats were not tempting enough to sustain his interest for the second so we brought in a secret weapon - my dad, David Hardy.

Eventually, with my dad calling him and me running alongside him, Tommy happily trotted over both jumps.

Mandy-Sue's daughter, Hazel, 13, then showed us how it was done, effortlessly running their dog Ruby, a collie-cross, around the course before a show-stopping leap through a hoop.

By the end of the session, I was exhausted, soaking wet from the rain and covered in mud, but I can understand why so many people choose to spend their Saturday mornings in a damp field with their pets.

It was brilliant fun and completing our little course was exhilarating, so I'll definitely be giving it another go.



BALANCING ACT: Tommy sits up for a treat. CO87959-04



OVER YOU GO: Mandy-Sue Sarti, of Stonebridge Dog Agility, in Colne Engaine, takes Tommy over a jump.