



Islander Maggi McClure with Buster, her competition dog, who she's trained for three years. (Courtesy Photo)

# Respected island dog trainer competes in World Sheepdog Trials

Islander Maggi McClure was among the nearly 250 people from 30 countries who competed in the World Sheepdog Trials in the Netherlands last month, and despite some bad luck when it came to the sheep, she said the experience was inspiring.

McClure has been training dogs in obedience, agility and herding for more than 20 years. She competed in some of Vashon's first sheepdog trials in the early 2000s and is a regular on the national sheepdog trials stage, but before this year, she had never made it to an international trial competition.

"I had a friend twist my arm and say I should throw my hat in the ring to be on the U.S. team, so I did," she said.

The world trials occur only once every three years. Getting a spot means competing in as many trials as possible in the two years leading up to them, and gaining the most points, which are taken away at trials if the dog does not perform smoothly. Together with border collie Buster, who she has been training as a herding dog for the past three years, McClure attended what she estimates to be 10 trials per year. She gained enough points to make it on the U.S. team as a reserve — meant to fill in in case one of the 10 pairs was unable to compete.

Sure enough, one of the dog/handler pairs set to go to Worlds didn't enter, so McClure and Buster got bumped into the competition in March. They traveled to the Netherlands in mid-July for the world trials and a couple others McClure packed up around the area to get familiar with the landscape and the sheep before the main event.

"I competed in the Dutch Open, and it was literally I got off the plane and an hour later was running my dog," she said,

recalling her first trial overseas. “It was a super fast turnaround.”

She said the sheep were “very different,” and she was glad she had the opportunity to study them before heading to the world stage. From there it was off to the Belgium Open, where she and Buster came in 15th of more than 100 dogs all heading to Worlds.

“I felt my dog and I had the skill to hold our own with the top, top competition,” she said.

But the “luck of the draw,” as those in the sheepdog community call it, was not on her side at the world trial.

“I had a bad sheep,” she said. “One of the five just was not interested in competing. I did what I could.”

She said the unresponsive and disinterested sheep sealed her fate at the trial, but the camaraderie found being surrounded by people of the highest level was “a great feeling.”

“It was great having the opportunity to compete against the best in the world,” she said, explaining that while the competition is high, it’s a different environment than that found at many other competitive events because everyone is competing against the perfect run, not each other.

The competition was also the culmination of two years of effort by McClure, who tried to attend as many trials as she could to gain points, but had to balance her family life with her love of herding.

“I’m more limited because I stay on the West Coast,” she said.

“I’m trying to hit as many trials as I can, but I’m a mom too, so I try to pick and choose the trials I will go to more carefully to balance competing with being a mom and my family,” she said.

But while her ability to compete is more limited than others in the herding world, her dog's skill is anything but. McClure does not own Buster — he belongs to Oregonians Don and Donna Shaw — but she has been training and competing with him since 2014 when she realized he “kept getting better and better.”

“I have some clients, and they let me run their dog while my young dogs come up in their training,” she explained. “It’s a common practice in the horse world, not so much in the dog world, but it happens.”

The Shaws used to be very active in the competitive retrieving world and had a kennel of Labradors for many years, but retired and decided to turn their attention to border collies — a breed they had always been interested in, McClure said.

“Don and Donna knew Buster had talent. They were intrigued with border collies and got one because they had admiration for working dogs. They wanted me to get him trained up,” she said.

And train him up she did.

Last year, on his way to the world trials, Buster came in ninth of more than 150 dogs at the Meeker Classic in northwest Colorado, known as one of the world's toughest sheepdog competitions. The Shaws were there to see McClure's training in action.

“That was the pinnacle of his success,” McClure said.

“Knowing it's someone else's dog allows me to push the dog more than I would my own. I appreciate them (the Shaws) giving him over to me.”

There's no time for the pair to rest and soak in the experiences they had overseas. Last week, McClure was on the road having just finished the first trial post-world competition. There's no time to waste as Nationals are

already next month in Virginia, and McClure wants Buster there again.

“I’ve been getting him (Buster) ready for Nationals, but now it’s been like, ‘Heck, let’s see where he goes,’” McClure said.