

There is no “I” in Team

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As we all have experienced in our own NAVHDA journeys, it takes a village to train a dog. Well, that phrase holds true in other areas of the organization as well, like when both you and your husband are apprenticing to be judges at the same time. The NAVHDA Apprentice Program is at least a two-year commitment in order to evaluate a minimum of 125 dogs, with at least 35 of those being Utility or Utility Prep. That doesn't sound too daunting on the surface, but let's drill that down a little bit. In order to make those requirements, a person would need to judge a minimum of roughly 22 different test days (depending on how the stars align in finding tests with Utility dogs). Now take that number of days, times it by two, and add in work, homeschooling two girls, shooting and dog competitions for those same girls, NAVHDA training and testing your own dogs and client dogs, and that equals a very full schedule with very limited weekends. Husband and wife teams are not allowed to judge together or judge each other. We were expecting the apprentice program to take us a total of four years to complete. We had contemplated one of us apprenticing and, when they were done, the other starting, but our area has such a need for local judges that we were hoping to

find a way to be in the program at the same time. We received special accommodation to apprentice together if a test had the availability for both of us to go. This was such a huge blessing for our family.

When people ask us about apprenticing, the first question we always seem to field is, "Did you two ever fight about scores?" That always makes us chuckle. We are so lucky to get to train dogs day in and day out as a team. The hours spent together in the field working birds, at the lake sending dogs on duck searches, and driving to different blind waters to prepare for the Invitational are some of the best parts of our work week. We bounce training ideas off each other and make suggestions when the other is struggling with a particular progression. We have gone to clinics, spent hours on speaker phone with our mentors and friends, and together we have poured blood, sweat, and tears into improving as dog handlers.

As you can imagine, when you spend that much time with someone honing a craft, you tend to see situations relatively the same. As with any good partnership, any time we don't see eye to eye, the feedback of the other was valuable to helping both of us learn. Often, we saw the same things happening in a scenario, but we just read the situation differently. The whole goal of the

apprentice program is to develop an eye for reading situations and determining how that aligns with the standards of the NAVHDA system. That was exactly what we learned to do, and the best part about it was that we were developing those skills as a team. Now, we would be remiss in not saying that whoever's score aligned more accurately with the judging team might have had a little more pep in their step going into the next dog. Then, another dog would come along, and the tables would be flipped the other direction.

Another question we got a lot when traveling solo for tests was, "Where are Jake (or Sara) and the girls this weekend?" It is a rarity that our whole family isn't all in attendance at a NAVHDA event. One of the biggest draws for our family to NAVHDA was that there was a place for everyone. Our girls have grown up in the chapter from playing with toys in the back of the truck, to being judge stewards at tests, to running their own dogs. "Go see Sara and Jake," is such a common phrase we hear. It's not one of us or the other, but us together as a team, that people are sent to find. On occasion, when we would have to drive further and weren't able to come home each night, one of us would have to stay behind to take care of everything at home. Any time we traveled, the one at home had the heavier workload. Our girls are two of the most spectacular helpers that parents could

ever ask for. Growing up on a farm, they have learned how to lend a hand and do their share of the work (and sometimes more) with such willingness. They help haul bags of feed and fill water barrels in flight pens, feed and air out dogs, and the biggest task of all... they manage laundry and dishes in the house daily. If it weren't for the critical three people we leave behind while one of us is getting a weekend away to build friendships and relationships with our NAVHDA family, none of this would have been possible.

The final question we seemed to entertain on quite a few occasions was, "How do you manage it all?" That by far was the easiest one to answer. We didn't. Not by a long shot! During the training months, we have amazing friends that we are privileged to train with. They come and help us with the dogs we are working, and we help them with theirs. None of us ever want to burden friends with "our" stuff, as we know they have real life to get back to when we are done. We've had training days wrap up earlier than expected and these folks will say, "I've got an hour before I need to be anywhere, what are you doing next?" Someday, they are going to figure out that's not a safe question. Most often, it's unloading pallets of feed, cleaning the brooder barn because we moved a batch of birds outside, or tearing down kennel panels so they can be power washed and moved. These crazy





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friends of ours just roll up their sleeves and dive right in. We lean on these people, and they are always so willing to lend a hand. They help catch birds each night before a test or training day, they haul the chapter trailer over to the testing grounds while we are doing chores in the morning on test days, and they help us prepare our place before clinics. They are the background worker bees that we rely on so heavily.

Coordinating apprentice judging and testing dogs on the same weekend is no small feat, especially when you have a total of four Natural Ability and three Utility dogs slated to run in one day. Since we filled the full Friday of testing, organization going into the weekend was a must. Our 13-year-old, Makenzie, was running her almost two-year-old dog, Faith, in Utility, along with Jake running one dog and Sara running the other. Kaytlyn, our nine-year-old, ran her first Natural Ability puppy along with the rest being run by the two of us. Everyone had a part of the action! It may sound like we did a lot that day, but it really was our team. We had people that would take dogs to and from the trailer for us. They refilled water bottles and helped us organize gear. Because of their selflessness, we were able to watch our daughters run their field work and stand with them while they waited (for eternities as they would say) before the duck search or the pheasant track. We were able to give them hugs and fist bumps as soon as they

finished each segment of the test. Besides everything our friends did at the test grounds for us that day, there was more. We had others that were willing to leave the test to drive to our house at lunch and let dogs out to potty since it was such a long day. To be honest, the scores of the day were only the icing on the cake. The true memories from that test are reflecting on our NAVHDA family that supports and encourages us. We couldn't have done any of it without them.

Watching good dogs work, building new relationships, and spending time with our NAVHDA family across the country were all among the reasons why we wanted to become NAVHDA judges. More than that, was a desire to give back and encourage all those that do so much for us. We are so blessed by the many people that give themselves so we can continue our NAVHDA journey. We've been asked by new apprentices what advice we have going through the program. Most expect to hear that "reading dogs gets easier with time," or "make sure to take good notes." Those things are true, but here is what we feel is most important: to all those looking to take a leap of faith and start down the path of becoming a judge, remember you aren't in this alone. Your spouse may or may not be as crazy as you are and take the plunge, but you do have a team behind you every step of the way. Make sure to lean on them... they won't let you fall! 🐾