

Peak Performance – Chris Zink Wrote the Book on It

By Susan Chaney

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M. Christine Zink, perhaps best known for her books ["Peak Performance: Coaching the Canine Athlete"](#) and ["The Agility Advantage,"](#) grew up at a time – at least in Canada – when little girls might think of becoming veterinarians, but knew they weren't going to be. The veterinary profession and veterinary colleges were for men, not women.

So Chris fed her love of animals with the Miniature Poodles her mother preferred. "We always loved dogs," she says, though she didn't grow up in a "doggie family." The canines were pets, not for show or performance. Although as adults, both of her brothers and her sister have dogs, "I think I was more attached to our dogs than my siblings were growing up," she says. "I used to teach them to do tricks and things like that."



Six-month-old Hobby is the future of agility, obedience, tracking and field trials for M. Christine Zink, DVM, author of ["Peak Performance: Coaching the Canine Athlete."](#) Photographs courtesy of M. Christine Zink, DVM.

A Life-Changing Decision

Though Chris heard society's message loud and clear that women aren't veterinarians, she started to think that perhaps she could be one as she traveled around Europe after graduating from her Toronto high school. "I went to every zoo in every city I could," she recalls. A week before her return flight to Canada, she decided to spend a year in a commune in Switzerland. It was the early 1970s after all. Her time in the Swiss Alps gave her the chance to think about her future and her career – and remember what her parents had often said to all of their children. "You can do anything you want. You've got all the tools. You're smart enough. It doesn't matter whether you are a girl or a boy."

"I decided I was going to do it anyway, even if there weren't any women who did it," she says.

That decision would lead her to a veterinary degree, then a doctorate in pathology, from Ontario Veterinary College, a career as a pathobiology professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore and a second, part-time career as an instructor of canine physical therapists and a canine sports medicine lecturer.

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Chris Zink lived without a dog while studying for her veterinary degree. Today she shares her home with 13-year-old Border Collie Fate, 9-year-old Norwich Terrier Vespa, and 6-month-old Golden Retriever Hobby.

While getting her veterinary degree, Chris was dog-less. "I was studying very hard," she says. "I didn't feel I had time for a dog." As all dog lovers do, though, she took whatever chances were offered to spend time around them. Just such an opportunity was her introduction to the concept of canine performance. At the veterinary college's annual open house, students would recruit dogs from the nearby neighborhood to be trained in obedience, then hold a novice competition. "As soon as I saw that, I was hooked," she says.

Growing up in a household of six with only pet Poodles, Zink was stunned by the fact that dogs could sit calmly and quietly in a ring together, just two feet apart. "I found that just amazing," she says today, a few decades later.

A First Dog

Because she went without a dog while in school, Chris says, when she was able to have one, she "had to have the absolutely largest dog possible. I got an Irish Wolfhound. I did obedience with her. She got three scores of 188." Her name was Shauna, and she and Chris were pals while the new graduate did two years at a large-animal practice – working mostly on cattle and pigs on farms – then while she pursued her doctorate.

After her large-animal work, Chris was offered two opportunities: join the faculty at the University of Saskatchewan Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon, where she interviewed in February, or that of Johns Hopkins Medical School, where she interviewed in April during cherry-blossom season. In addition to the predictive weather contrast, Chris knew Saskatoon hosted only five dog shows a year, while Baltimore was home to about 50.



Vespa was the Number 4 Norwich Terrier in AKC agility for the 2010-2011 period. When she gets her MACH, it will be time to go back to obedience for her CDX.

"I really wanted to stay at the vet school where I'd been trained. I'd have been really, really happy to stay on the faculty for the rest of my life," she says, but it wasn't meant to be.

Despite the fact that it was "never" in her mind that she would go into human medicine, she moved to the United States. In addition to teaching at Johns Hopkins, she does AIDs research. Zink is investigating how HIV causes systemic and tissue-specific disease, including neurological disease and pneumonia. Her team has shown that replication of the virus in the brain leads to inflammation, some of it helpful and some harmful. "How these two scenarios play out in the tissue probably determines the outcome of infection," she's concluded. The research has identified an inexpensive antibiotic that "safely suppresses" HIV replication, and the encephalitis and neurological degeneration associated with HIV/SIV infection.

Zink also works in canine stem cell research. A veterinary orthopedic and sports medicine group where she works "very part-time" is involved in clinical trials on the effectiveness of two kinds of regenerative therapy. She's been assisting with that research. "We're devising a study and working to get grants to compare the methods. The stem cells used are taken from each dog's own fat, she explains. "Ultimately stem cells are going to be the solution to Parkinson's, HIV, brain disease, MS and all the neurological diseases, as well as arthritis and a host of other diseases," she says.

A Bug Bites – the Agillty Bug

Once ensconced near Baltimore, Chris showed her dogs in conformation, especially her third dog, Bannor, a Golden Retriever. She had noticed while competing with her Wolfound in obedience that "all the top-scoring dogs were Golden Retrievers." Shauna died young, at age 5, of bone cancer. Chris added Cajun to her family, then Bannor who was two years younger. But Cajun was a "phenomenal dog," she says. "He taught me so much. He was just game for anything."



A dog lover all her life, Chris Zink doesn't limit herself to canine pets. Here Zoid gives the Johns Hopkins University professor some love.

It was Bannor who shone brightly in the show ring, but both dogs also competed in the field. "That was everything that was out there," she says.

After a decade of conformation, obedience and field trials, Zink was thoroughly enmeshed in Baltimore's Oriole Dog Training Club. When members heard about a new canine sport going on in England in the mid-'80s, they were quick to hire some Brits who'd written a book about it to come to the states to give a workshop on agility. "We were all frantically building the equipment" before they arrived, she recalls. "We had to make it all by hand."

"They demonstrated it and told us about the rules and everything," she explains. The sport caught on, and the second agility club in the country was in Zink's area, she says. The dog training club did **USDAA** agility at the time, and **Kenneth Tatsch**, founder and president of the United States Dog Agility Association, was a "big influence in our club's development into agility," Chris says. "We started having classes in it and running trials."

Chris' own dogs quickly took to the new game. "Goldens are ideally such an all-purpose dog," she says. "They're ready to do anything. I said, 'Oh, go over there and jump,' and they jumped. While they weren't as fast as the Border Collies, they were as biddable. I really like the multipurpose nature of the Golden Retriever." She, too, made the transition easily. "In those days, agility wasn't all that different from obedience. We just sort of ran along with our dogs at our sides. There was nothing like what we have now. It was much more relaxed than obedience and a little faster than obedience. We had to learn how to train agility from scratch." If something seemed to work, that's what they used, she says, pointing out that this was before operant conditioning was being applied to dog training.

A Book Is Born

It was 1991, and Chris had been doing obedience for years and agility for half a decade. "Every time I would go to a trial, people would ask me all these questions about their dogs and their illnesses and injuries [related to performance]. Most of that stuff we never learned in veterinary school," she says. The concept of canine athletics didn't exist when she was studying for her veterinary degree.



After almost 30 years in agility, Chris Zink still loves training her dogs for it and competing in it. "You never know what challenge you're going to deal with," she says.

"One day I was driving back from West Virginia with a friend. It was pouring down rain," so there wasn't much scenery to be seen. She told her friend "I want to be helpful, but I get really tired of answering all these questions. I should just write a book. I'll put all these answers in a book." Right there in the car, on that four-hour drive, Chris and her friend put together a first draft of the content for "Peak Performance."

The very next day, Chris decided to write a book proposal, so she did. She sent it to Macmillan to "see what they'd say." Two months went by. Then she got a letter from the publishing house with a check for \$3,000 as an advance on writing the book. Right after the letter arrived, she says, the transmission on her van went out, so she cashed the check and fixed her van. Then she had to write the book. She'd been given six months to turn in the manuscript. "Then I didn't write the book," she says. "And I didn't write the book."

"Two months before it was due, I quickly wrote something up, got in touch with my friend who's a phenomenal illustrator, got her to do the illustrations and sent it in."

The book was not a hit. Macmillan "didn't know how to market it," Chris says. "They didn't understand the contents." It also had a "disgusting, gray-brown cover. I knew some friends had the book on their bookshelves, and I couldn't find my own book on their shelves," she says.

After a year, McMillan took the title out of print and offered her all the remaining copies for \$1.70 each. "I sold them all within two months," she says.

"At the very beginning of when people started to realize dogs could be athletes, it was timely," she says. "I think it was actually ahead of its time." After selling all the books, she decided to self-publish it, first revising it in 1996. "There's never been another book published like it," she says when pressed.

Zink is currently revising the manuscript, and it's going to be split into two books. "There's so much more information now," she says. One book will be on structure and locomotion for canine athletes, and the other about injuries and rehabilitation.

A Different Branch

Zink's interest in sports medicine led her to a course in canine rehabilitation about 10 years ago. To her, canine sports medicine was such a "big deal and such a well-known field," she "really thought" she'd get a lot out of the course. Instead, she found herself in a classroom just looking at "slide after slide after slide." Whenever she asked a question related to canine athletes, she got only disappointing answers. "The guy would just look at me like I was from another planet.

"I learned nothing about canine sports medicine," she says.

But she met Janet V. Van Dyke, DVM. "At the break, she came up to me and said, 'So, do you think you could do a better job?' Oh, I could do a better job than this," Chris answered. Van Dyke had no idea that Chris had a veterinary degree, assuming she was a dog trainer. Van Dyke was thinking of starting a training program for veterinarians and physical therapists who wanted to be able to help canine athletes.

So they designed what became the [Canine Rehabilitation Institute](#) in Wellington, Fla. The institute trains veterinary and physical therapy professionals in canine rehabilitation. On-site dogs provide hands-on lessons in anatomy and biomechanics. Van Dyke owns and runs the institute, and Chris teaches there several times each year.

More than 500 people have been trained at the institute, "some of the top rehab people throughout the country," Chris says. "It's really an outstanding training program."

The field has come so far that there is now an American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation.

A New Agility Generation

Nearly three decades in agility have not dampened Zink's enthusiasm. She and her 9-year-old Norwich Terrier, Vespa, enter trials at least two weekends a month. "You can't get bored with agility because it's different every single time," she says. "Or I can't bored with agility, or field, or tracking. When you get out there, you never know what challenge you're doing to deal with."

Vespa was the Number 4 Norwich in AKC agility for the 2010-2011 season. Now Hobby, a 6-month-old Golden Retriever, is in training.



Nine-year-old Vespa is the apple of Chris Zink's eye at the moment as they focus on the Norwich's MACH title.

These days, Chris says she does obedience for fun. She put 85 percent of an OTCH – Obedience Title Champion – on Banner before he was forced to retire because of vision problems, but she "will not do obedience with that kind of intensity again. Too many other things are less precision-oriented and equally challenging," she says. Vespa does have her CD and will start working on her CDX as soon as she gets her MACH.

"If appropriate," Chris still shows her dogs in conformation. "So many times performance dogs aren't consistent with dogs that show," she says. "I'm not averse to it. I think we have to recognize that it's its own game and it's got its own rules." However, she says it's a "sad thing" that breed standards don't support dogs' original functions. "The AKC has steadfastly refused to do the things they could to change that, such as requiring a basic retrieving title before a Sporting dog could get its championship. We see Golden Retrievers in conformation who can't retrieve well enough to get the simplest field title.

"So many conformation dogs are not able to experience their original function," Chris says. "I don't think a dog is truly fulfilled unless it gets that. You can see a change in a little Golden Retriever puppy when it smells a live bird. My puppy was raised with this kind of early stimulation. Each day from the time they're born, they're given a different scent. When those puppies smell the scent of duck, you can see their attitude change. It's built in."

Giving dogs the experiences they need to live fulfilled lives is just part of Zink's philosophy. "I think that every one of us needs to be our dog's best advocate. We need to always be on guard to make sure that we're caring for them in every way. That includes keeping our eye on dog legislation and on our dogs themselves. We're all tasked with caring for these incredibly giving beings. We're in charge of that, and we need to make it a priority. If you think there's something wrong with your dog, there probably is. Nobody knows your dog as well as you do. If there is, you need to find someone who can help you."

Zink's other canine family member is 13-year-old Border Collie Fate. Chris rescued her from a shelter in Virginia, where she'd been left in the outdoor drop box. "It was my fate to find her," Chris says.

Just as, apparently, it was her fate to become a veterinarian, move to the U.S. and teach at Johns Hopkins, all while spending decades running agility courses with her dogs.

Not a bad fate. Not at all.