

# Building THE Agility Dream

By Micky Jerome and David Bailey, photos by authors

What makes two fiscally conservative professionals who never dreamed of owning a business toss a substantial portion of their savings to the dogs? Was there a reason no one else had done this, or were we doing what every agility enthusiast would like to do, if only they had the resources? Can they make it in a dog-eat-dog business? Crazy or clever? Only time will tell.

So here's how it started. We're two nearly empty nesters in our early fifties who each are still running our first agility dog. Not an impressive resume for canine entrepreneurs, but we had been solidly hooked on agility for about four years. Living in a small Midwestern city with only a few places to train or trial, we traveled a fair amount to compete and to attend seminars. Our travels took us to Lacrosse, Wisconsin, home of Jim and Laurie Haake's Family Dog Center. We had never been in a facility built expressly for dog training. We looked around and wondered why we had nothing even remotely like this at home.

At the time, the company where Micky worked was sold and her role in the business changed. She was surviving in the new corporate culture, but missed the autonomy she used to have running her own department. Micky interviewed around the country for a new job, but never quite found a job worth leaving a community where we had both become quite comfortable. In the spring of 2007, Micky gave up climbing the corporate ladder and decided to channel her business skills into developing a dog business on the side. We took the cash from the sale of her old stock options and we bid on land.

## Land, Ho!

We decided against buying an inexpensive piece of Iowa farm land outside the city. We wanted accessibility, with an infrastructure of roads and utilities already in place, and resale potential.

We knew the site when we found it, nearly four acres of land in a slowly developing industrial park on the edge of town, just off the interstate. It was zoned light industrial and had water, sewer, electricity, and a paved road. The city was growing out to meet it. It had adequate room for a building, parking, and outdoor rings with some room left for earthdog or tracking events. Better yet, we had no close neighbors.

## Now We Need a Building

We wanted a steel manufactured building (for pros and cons of various building types, see *CR* June 2009). Yet we still had much to decide: how big, how high (a lower ceiling means less to heat and cool, higher gives the building more versatility), supported roof (less expensive) or clear span? We wanted a minimum of a 100' x 120' agility ring. We also needed restrooms, an office, and crating space. While bigger is often better, we were mindful of the budget. We figured 100' x 150' would give us just about the minimum to do what we wanted—offer classes and run one-ring indoor trials.

We identified vendors of steel buildings, drew up plans, and started talking to them about various options and pricing. Clear span (no building supports other than the steel buttresses that extend from the sides to support the roof) was more expensive than a supported roof; however, it gave us great versatility in arranging the indoor space. In retrospect, that's allowed us to divide the working area to accommodate running two classes at the same time. We opted for 16' ceilings, more than you need for agility, but high enough to accommodate a 14' foot overhead door so a truck could drive in if we ever converted the space to a warehouse.

Once we knew what we wanted for a building, we needed someone to build it. While the building vendors would provide contractors, we instead chose a local contractor who was connected with local subcontractors and knew local building code. We wrote a contract specifying that our building vendor would provide the design, steel and shell erection, and our contractor's subs would do the excavation, concrete, plumbing, and electrical work. Once the interior was roughed in, we would do the remaining interior finishing (hanging doors, painting, trim work, and so on). Although we wrote the contract anticipating as much detail as we could, we

still occasionally revisited the agreement with the contractor to figure out how to handle some new detail.

This practical stuff is important, but for true agility people, it's all about the running surface. High-quality rubber mats over concrete, right? That's what we thought, until we started brainstorming with our agility friend, Roger. He suggested turf over earth. Back to the Internet, lots of research on both mats over concrete and turf over dirt. What we'd save on mats versus turf, we'd spend on the concrete to put under the mats. Cost wise, it was a wash. We knew it would be heaven to run on, but what about care and durability? Accidents and spills can easily be hosed and deodorized away. For dog hair and debris, an ordinary lawn sweeper from Sears cleans it off quickly.

There are many brands of turf and you can buy both new or used. (We learned quality turf in good condition has decent resale value if we decided to get out of the dog center business). We decided on FieldTurf. Buying new turf got us expert installation, including the sub-surface. Ours went over 6" of crushed stone with embedded drainage pipe and 2" of "fines" (finely ground stone, the texture of concrete powder). The "grass" is about 2" long and quite silky. Sifted in between the blades is a mix of sand and extremely fine rubber pellets. It was guaranteed for eight years, but we wanted to run on it forever (see *CR* November 2005 "Under Foot: A Look at Indoor Agility Flooring" or see the online Magazine Forum for an updated version).

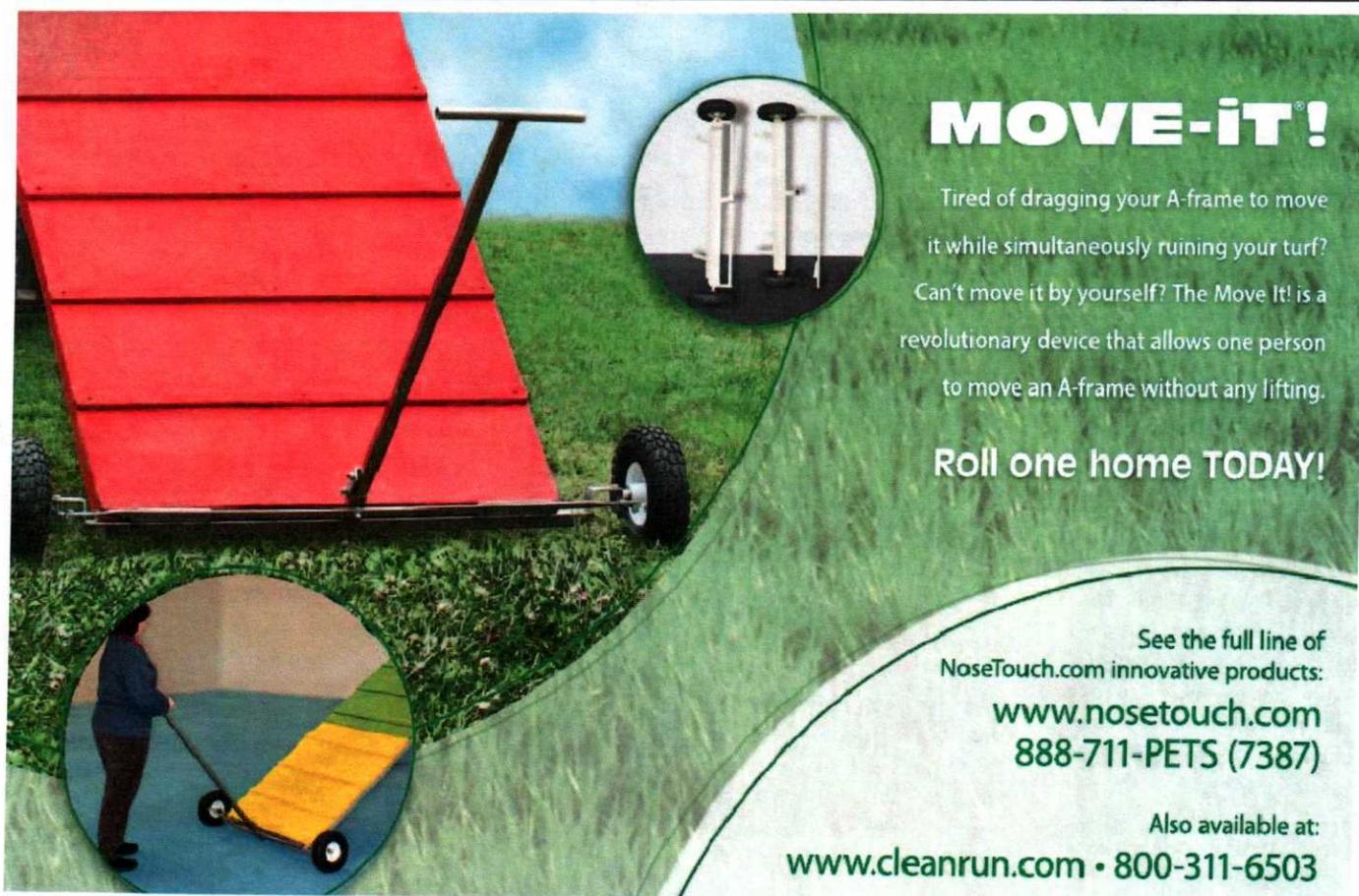
### It's Time for a Business Plan

We needed financing. Could we convince the bank? Back to the Internet and SCORE ([www.score.org](http://www.score.org)) where we found a business plan template. It seemed daunting at the start—so many sections, so much information to gather. You can't finish until you start, so we worked our way through a first stab, doing the sections we felt confident about and identifying the areas that would really need work. In the process, we collected references, conducted a marketing survey among our agility contacts, gathered records of all our assets, assessed our competition, and did projection after projection of our income potential under a variety of scenarios.

This was the first time we really had to articulate our business model. To afford the center, neither of us ever

considered giving up our day jobs. Realistically, with our agility experience, we weren't going to be trainers. The model we developed involved our managing the facility and renting to other dog trainers and organizations. While agility would be the mainstay of activity in the building, we envisioned a center for all dog sports. We knew we could run our own trials and also sponsor run-throughs for the nights and weekends the building wasn't leased to others.

After weeks of hard work, we had a 30-page document with floor plans, site plans, competitive analyses, our pricing structure, tables and charts of our survey, and equipment and operating budgets. It was off to Kinko's to copy and bind, and then we were ready for the ultimate test—showing it to a banker.



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### Finding Financing

The time we spent selecting our banker was at least as important as the time we spent selecting our contractor. We had one or two recommendations from friends who were small business owners, and selected a few more based on reputation. We met with several, but some banks only did home mortgages or had loans with interest structures we didn't find attractive. Eventually, we shared our business plan with two larger commercial banks and began the loan application process. The bank we chose was the one that seemed more interested in working with us, took time to understand the financial resources we were able to apply to the project, and came up with a more creative solution: By re-mortgaging a home we already owned, we qualified for a fixed-rate mortgage with

better interest rates than an unsecured commercial loan. With lower interest rates, we felt comfortable the business could soon make enough to at least cover the mortgage. And we would still have enough working capital to meet the expenses of a start-up business.

Having the business plan made it much easier for the bank to help us. All our assets were spelled out. It was easy to see exactly how much we would need to open our doors and to operate for the first several years. It also made the application process easy, since the needed information was already gathered.

The bank we chose offered many online business services and helped us tap into them. While we don't speak nearly as often as we once did, we continue to benefit from their help in getting all our accounts set up. Our busi-

ness banker even contacted us about refinancing when the bank was able to lock us into a lower interest rate.

### Becoming a Business

After we purchased the land, but before we executed our business loan and signed with our contractor, we worked with an attorney to establish our business as a distinct legal entity. To protect our home, retirement savings, and other personal assets, our attorney advised us to form two limited liability corporations: one to own and manage the property itself and a second to be the operating company to run the day-to-day aspects of the business. We also talked with the city about a business license and established accounts with all the needed utility companies.

As the building neared completion and the property began to have value beyond

that of the land itself, we sought quotes for business insurance. Insuring the building was relatively straightforward. But being neither a kennel nor veterinary facility, it took more time to find a company that would insure our rather unique business.

### Now for the Fun Parts

Till now, I've spent a lot of time talking about the serious business stuff we worked on to make this happen. It needed to be done and it was time well spent, but if it wasn't interspersed with lots of more fun activities, we never would have arrived at opening day. Amid the practical planning, there were parts of the project that satisfied the agility lover in each of us.

Our business plan called for about 25% of our income to come from trials. To be able to hold trials, we needed to

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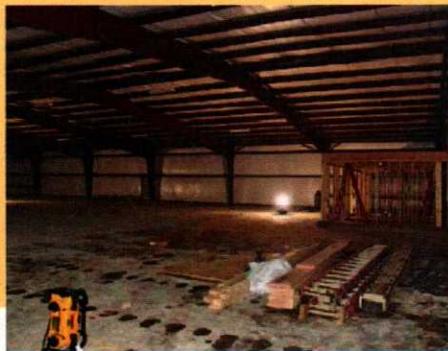
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affiliate with one or more agility organizations. We had experience in AKC, NADAC and CPE. AKC was the dominant venue in our area, but we could not qualify as an AKC club on our own. NADAC was our favorite venue, there was a reasonable following of handlers in the region who had started competing in NADAC, and becoming a NADAC club is pretty easy. Although we were concerned about getting trial dates because of the large number of clubs offering NADAC within a 300-mile radius, we decided that NADAC was where we'd start. If trial dates became a problem, we'd see about CPE, TDAA, or another second venue. During our first year of operation, we did well on our two NADAC trials and quickly moved to obtain five weekends per year on the NADAC calendar. Right now, that feels comfortable, both with

what we can handle and what the region will support. We've considered adding another venue, but in a tight economy, we have delayed it until we're sure our customer base can support and is interested in earning titles in another venue. Instead we've opted to offer events other than agility to broaden our customer base.

Another really enjoyable part of developing the business was researching and purchasing equipment. We wanted flexibility to do as many venues as we could. We created a spreadsheet with the specs for each piece of equipment in each of the venues we were serious about. We then set out on a quest to get the best quality, value, and versatility in each piece of equipment we needed. We opted to have our AKC A-frame and dog-walk made by a local contact. Since each piece was

custom, we ordered the dog-walk to AKC, NADAC, and CPE specifications and had both slatted and non-slatted interchangeable ramps made. The 9' A-frame would satisfy both AKC and CPE, but we were never able to find a good way to have both a slatted and a non-slatted surface on the A-frame. So we bought a smaller, lighter 8' A-frame for NADAC and surfaced it with their preferred rubberized surface. We spent considerable hours learning the wonders of PVC mass production, making a total of 30 single jumps, 15 pairs of wings, 22 hoops, a double, a triple, and a panel. As our garage filled to bursting, each piece put us a little closer to being a viable agility business.

#### Relationship Building

We are active members of the local AKC-affiliate club and we worked to further develop that relationship. They

are now a major client, renting the building one night per week for club members to train. To date, they have hosted three AKC trials in the building with plans to move all four of their annual trials to the building. We believe the relationship has been mutually beneficial.

We knew several local trainers who, like us, had full-time day jobs but who wanted to pursue a part-time career in training. Ultimately two of them joined together and rented the building one night a week, dividing it in half for obedience classes in the front and agility classes in the rear. The Dog Center maintains the listings for all our services in the local phone directory and provides frequent referrals to both trainers.

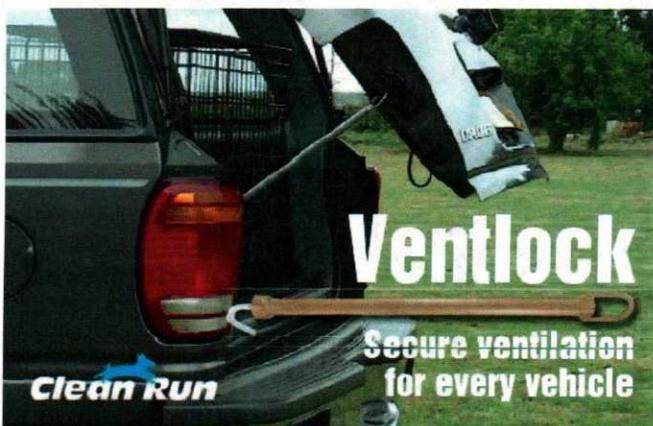
It was always our intention to have more dog sports than just agility in the building. So far we have a local



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Schutzhund group that uses the building on a regular basis. Flyball is quite popular in Iowa, but there is no competitive team in the Quad Cities. So we partnered with an experienced flyball trainer who now travels to the Quad Cities once a week to teach a flyball class. Our goal is to grow flyball business for the facility and hers is to create yet another competitive team in Iowa.

A second agility instructor recently started renting time on a regular basis. We were up front with our original agility instructor that we were going to try a lease with a second trainer. Each trainer offers different services; our original trainer provides basic agility classes and the second trainer offers more personalized instruction for her advanced students. Agility has room for lots of trainers, lots of training styles, and we all need a variety of training opportunities

to develop both our and our dogs' full potential.

### Watch Us Grow

We wanted the world to be ready for what we had to offer the day we opened our doors, and we decided that a website was the least expensive way to communicate with potential customers. We designed it and launched it, and provided a photo diary to chart our progress. Now that we're open, we have a few things that have taken priority over the website and it's not quite as creative as it once was, but it still guides competitors to our trials and students to our classes.

Since mortgage payments come due whether there is income or not, we opened our doors as soon as we had usable running surface, functional restrooms, equipment, and power. We ran off the auxiliary heating system and parked on

### Marketing Survey

Handler Demographics	
Average Age	49.5
% Male	37%
% Female	63%
Average Number of Dogs Owned/Handler	2.8

Current Dog Sport Activity Level	
Times per Year Compete	21.1
Times Overnight Travel	12.4
% Participating in Regular Classes	83%
% Who Practice at a Facility	83%
Number of Times/Week Using Facility	3.1

### Build vs. Buy

	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>BUILD</b>	Tailor space for type of business Use running surface of choice Bright and clean	Possible cost overruns Must build to code Requires more work & research
<b>BUY</b>	In business faster Predictable costs May find a bargain	May have structural supports Ring dimensions may not be optimal Will have to replace floor with running surface & have fewer options

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crushed stone until spring arrived and allowed excavating and concrete work to be completed. Since no facility like ours existed elsewhere in town, we didn't hear complaints about our work in progress.

Keeping the business running does not afford us as much time for construction work as we had before opening, so we still have a long list of "want-

to-dos" waiting for us to find the time and/or the money to complete them.

#### **Our Two-Year Anniversary**

We recently celebrated the two-year anniversary of opening the center. We have steady income from rental to other trainers or groups three nights per week and have run-throughs on our remaining week night and occasional

weekends. We currently host five trials per year and are rented for an additional six trials per year. We have struggled to get more daytime use of the building, which could move us from meeting building expenses to substantial profitability.

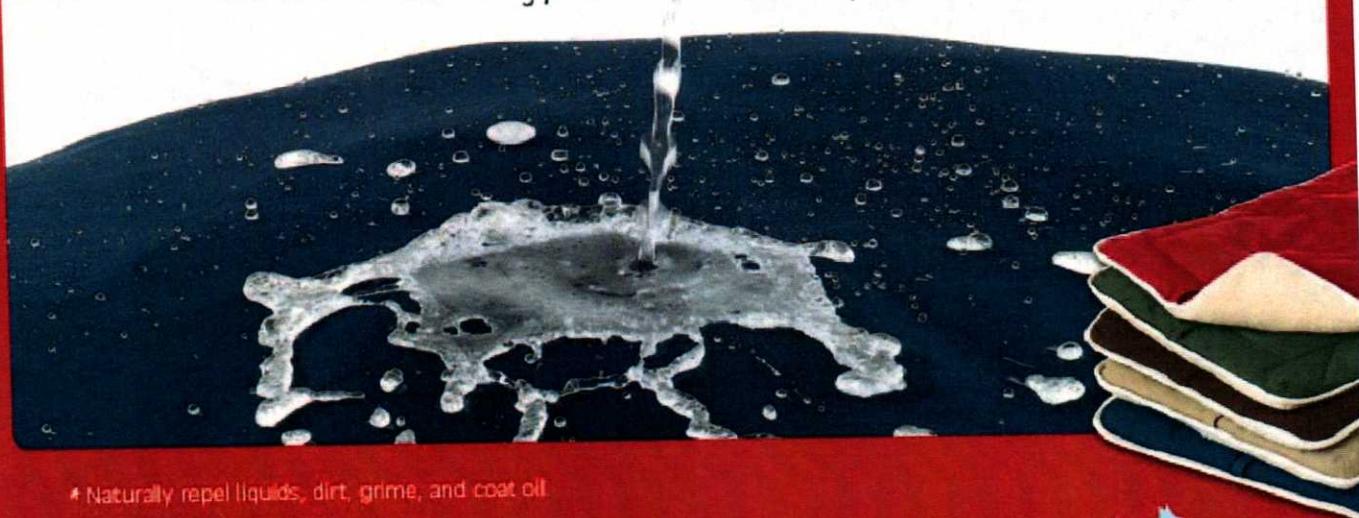
The support from our local dog sport community has been really gratifying. Word of our efforts is spreading across the

region. We are happy to report that most people appreciate the substantial investment of both our time and funds and treat the facility with the same care that we do. Closing up after our last trial, David, my life and business partner, turned to me and said, "I'm really glad we did this." He didn't define what "this" was, but he didn't need to. I nodded, smiled, and knew exactly what he meant. 🐾

*David Bailey and Micky Jerome have competed in dog agility for five years and have dogs that have achieved multiple agility titles in AKC and NADAC, as well as Canine Good Citizen. They are co-owners of Quad City Dog Center, LLC, a limited liability corporation, licensed in the State of Iowa. They are members of the Scott County Kennel Club, North American Dog Agility Club, Canine Performance Events, West Highland White Terrier Rescue and Cairn Rescue USA. Lifelong dog owners, they own two West Highland White Terriers and frequently foster needy terriers.*

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