

I hope everyone has the opportunity to try earthdog with their Norwich. It can be both rewarding and frustrating at times. However, I have found it to be a great bonding activity between you and your dog. It is much more relaxed than being in the Conformation ring. In earthdog, you are not competing against anyone but yourself. Everyone is rooting for you to pass and get another leg towards your title.

My Leo and his mother are true backyard hunters. Many birds, baby rabbits, and a mole have fallen victim to their hunting prowess. My new girl Lexi is not much of a hunter but loves tunnels. We are working on bringing out the "hunter" that is in there somewhere. We have made some progress as she will now bark at the caged rat occasionally. Each Norwich is different and some seem to have more of the hunting instinct than others.

Leo loves earthdog and we are currently working on our Master Earthdog title. He makes everyone laugh at the trials because he howls with excitement anticipating his turn to play with the rat. One time, I decided to let someone else run him in Masters for me. Evidently, Leo decided that he could only do this activity with me as he peed on some grass and started running down the hill looking for me. This was when I realized that we were truly a hunting team.

To begin, the first step is to find a place to introduce your dog to earthdog. It is always interesting to see their reaction when they see a caged rat for the first time. Most Norwich are not sure what to make of it and don't show much interest in the rat at all. They might sniff at it for a time, but are typically more interested in checking out the surroundings. I have found that you have to keep working at it. Just like any performance activity, your dog needs to figure out the new game and what is expected of them. It is very exciting when it finally clicks and you see your dog's natural hunting instinct come out. How wonderful it is for them to be doing an activity they were bred to do.

Sometimes it takes a while for them to get the idea and practice is invaluable. I remember the first few times Leo tried earthdog. He was the typical male and peed on all the bushes. We kept working at it and finally the light bulb came on and he started barking at the caged rat. It was very exciting to see him barking and pushing the cage around. The next obstacle was the intro tunnel which was "L" shaped. He would go into it but would not make the curve. We finally put him in the end near the rat and I called him out the entrance. After a few tries, we were able to get him to go through the tunnel from the entrance to the exit. Now we had to get him to work the rat by digging, whining, or barking and to stay with the rat for the allotted time. Finally all the pieces came together and Leo was successfully doing the Intro tunnel and eventually the Junior tunnel.

It was now time for an actual earthdog trial. How exciting it was to look forward to getting your first leg towards a Junior Earthdog title. Then you realize just how many ways there are to fail at all the levels. Your dog might not get to the rat in the allotted time or might not go in the tunnel at all. They might not work the rat for the required length of time and dash your hopes by leaving the rat. The handler might release the dog past the start line. They might also speak or move before the judge tells them.

In the Senior level, there are even more ways to fail. The false entrance/exit typically at the back of the tunnel was a big problem for Leo. They have to go in the front entrance and get to the rat. Leo usually failed by taking the shortcut through the false entrance/exit. Your dog might not do the recall out of the tunnel after successfully working the rat for the 90 seconds. I think this level was the most difficult for Leo and typically other dogs as well. Maybe that is why it is known as "Senior Purgatory". Finally after many trials, Leo got his third leg for the Senior Earthdog title. We were on to the next level.

The Master level offers more fun and more challenges. At this level, your dog hunts with another dog. The pairs are randomly selected among the other Master Earthdog entries. At this level, the dogs are off leash. A walkup to

the Master Earthdog tunnel proceeds through a field or wooded area where the dogs are expected to leave your side and go hunting on their own. Leo loves this part and I swear you can see him grinning as he runs around. I about lost it the first time Leo disappeared in the woods out of sight and didn't immediately come out when I called him. As hard as it may be, you have to trust your relationship with your dog and the fact your Norwich typically doesn't want you out of their sight for very long. Fortunately, Leo has always come back to me eventually even when he was out hunting way in the woods with another dog. The next test along the way is a false den with rat bedding. Your dog must check it out to make sure "no one is home". The judge tells you if you have passed that requirement. You continue your walkup and finally the earthdog tunnels are in site. You are now ready for the next portion of the test. The Master tunnel contains more turns, a false den, a constrictor that narrows the tunnel and a roller/baffle that the dog has to go over or under. A back entrance/exit also exists. At this level, your dog is familiar with working the rat and traversing through the tunnels. You have practiced with your dog and know he can do all the obstacles in the tunnel. With Leo, it depends on the mood he is in that day whether we pass or fail. On some days, he won't go in the tunnel. On other days, he has decided that he can only do right turns and won't make the left turn to the rat. Other times, he takes a shortcut to the rat through the false entrance/exit. You just never know what they are going to do and hope for a successful run. Either way, at the end of the day it was a fun time for both handlers and dogs.