Our Second Visit to the David Letterman Show

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Asa and I landed in NY for our return visit to the David Letterman show. As we came into the baggage claim area, there was a sign with our name being held by a limo driver, who turned out to be named Ahmet. Ahmet didn’t seem to be much of a talker. He’d only been driving a limo for a short while. Maybe he was hoping for someone a little more impressive than me in jeans with a backpack, or maybe he just wanted to concentrate on driving. I ran into Ahmet later, and I don’t even think he realized that I had Asa in a sherpa bag with me when I was in the limo. The driver on the previous Thursday was much more talkative. He’d been driving for 16 years and was happy to talk about his children: the eldest of whom was a physician, the next was in med school, and the youngest was still in high school.

Ahmet dropped us off at Le Parker Meridien hotel. I had been really impressed with the Sofitel, but Le Parker Meridien was even more impressive. The people at the front desk couldn’t have been any nicer. A smoking room had been reserved for me. I asked if I could switch to a nonsmoking room. The person at the front desk said of course and switched me to a room, which was not only non-smoking, but also was on the 39th floor with a view of Central Park.

I grabbed my stuff and spent a couple of minutes wandering around the lobby and eventually found the elevators. Inside the elevator above the door was a tv monitor showing mostly old cartoons and some film clips, e.g., Tom and Jerry, The 3 stooges, Charlie Chaplin, etc. I thought it was pretty classy, especially since there was no advertising on the tv. The hotel room was huge. I dropped my stuff, grabbed Asa, and took her outside to go potty.

The biggest problem on my previous trip was getting Asa to take a leak on concrete on cue. In Atlanta, I usually cue Asa to potty before going for a walk. If she doesn’t go when cued and we’re walking around on the streets in the neighborhood, she has to go on concrete, which she doesn’t like doing. I think it was a good thing that I had done this so Asa had at least potted on concrete some. Unfortunately, I hadn’t ever worked on getting her to take a leak on concrete on cue. After returning from the previous trip, I had worked on it for a couple of days and had Asa taking a leak on concrete in Atlanta. I thought it would transfer to NY, but it didn’t seem to on that first night on our return trip. I was almost tempted to pick Asa up and put her in one of the big pots with a tree in it in front of some hotel.
We went back up to the hotel room. I got down on my hands and knees and started crawling around the hotel room looking for anything that might be dangerous to Asa. A few months ago, I had been staying in a hotel room in Georgia when I noticed that Asa seemed to be chewing on something. I told her “release” and out popped some funny colored pill that Asa had found on the hotel room floor. That was scary. I couldn’t find any more pills on the floor, but perhaps there had been more and Asa had eaten them. In any case, I try to be more careful now.

After checking the floor and finding nothing, I let Asa loose. I spent about 10 minutes trying to figure out how to change channels on the tv. I was just about to give up and call the front desk for help (and not reveal that I’m a professor of engineering, which would only cause them to laugh harder) when I realized that there were 3 remotes in the room. In addition to the tv, they had a dvd player, a nintendo game station and who knows what else. When I tried one of the other remotes, I was able to do a little channel surfing before hitting the hay.

In the morning, I opened the drapes and saw the stunning view of all of Central Park surrounding Manhattan bathed by the rising sun. It was impressive. When I later talked with Christina and Wendy, they had room service bring them breakfast. Somehow room service has always seemed too decadent, and I’ve never been able to do that. I was hungry, didn’t want to leave Asa alone in the room, but couldn’t figure out how to get something to eat. I put Asa on leash, headed outside, and started wandering Manhattan. Fortunately, I ran into a street vendor selling bagels, tea, etc.

Back in the hotel room, I started waiting for Darren’s call. He had thought that rehearsal would start around 10:30 a.m., but when he finally called he said it had been delayed until later. By now, I assumed that any plans related to doing the show would change umpteen times. He said he’d send a van for the 3 of us, our dogs, and our stuff at noon. I had brought some work so I managed to get a little work done during the rest of the morning.

The van took all of us to the Ed Sullivan studio on the near 53rd street and Broadway. We took our stuff down to the Ed Sullivan’s old green room, which was starting to feel like home after spending most of the previous Thursday there. As we walked through the narrow hallway to our room, the Gary, who puts the sounds like breaking glass, etc. into the show, greeted each of us by name.

We grabbed our dogs and headed upstairs to do some practice runs on the course. In a real agility trial, the handlers get a few minutes to walk the course, but the dogs only get one try at running it. However, for tv we had the opportunity to practice the course. Chris Miele had designed a wonderful course with some interesting handling challenges. In particular, coming out of the tunnel the dogs saw a jump, which was a trap since the dogs were supposed to turn coming out of the tunnel and do the weave poles. Asa sometimes locks onto the next obstacle she sees in the tunnel so we practiced that sequence several times. When we got to rehearsal time, the bc’s ran the course, but the studio people decided that it was taking too much time so they shortened the course. Among
other things, they changed the sequence so that the dogs went from the tunnel to the jump instead of going to the weave poles. Unfortunately, I later learned that Asa “knew” the course sequence.

They had brought in a different surface called something like max-track (sp?). After a couple of knee injuries and surgeries, my knees are quick to let me know if a surface is too hard, but the max-track felt great despite spending a lot of time out there. The dogs seemed to be able to run much better on this surface than the previous carpeting. During the practice session, Asa ran well except for being distracted by all the stuff going on a couple of times. Once she perched up on the top of the a-frame looking off in the direction of some strange noises. Generally, however, she seemed focused. During this visit, she seemed oblivious to the evil camera on the boom.

After a while, we were wired for sound. Bob put a small microphone on my shirt lapel with a wire running underneath my shirt to a small transmitter, which clipped to my belt. There was a small receiver clipped to the belt with another wire going up to an ear piece that we put in our ears to hear what was going on. It was a lot less intrusive than I thought though it was strange hearing people talking in the earpiece. Once we were wired, we had to be a little bit careful about what we said. The women were particularly worried about making sure that it wasn’t transmitting when they went to the bathroom. I don’t remember worrying about it so I probably forgot.

They were worried about the rain that was moving into the area so they decided to tape rehearsal runs for each dogs. Wendy Pape’s border collie did a practice run first so that they could get the time and camera angles. After Wendy’s run, they wanted to shorten the time so they removed some of Chris Miele’s handling challenges including the tunnel–weave pole sequence. After they changed the course, we got to re-walk it and practice a little before doing the rehearsal run. The rehearsal run was going to be taped in case they needed it during the show if the rain was too bad. I think they really didn’t want to fly us up there for a 3rd visit.

The start was really strange since we were being interviewed while talking into a camera to a person in the studio. Corky was next to the camera man. We were supposed to ignore whatever Dave or anyone else said about starting and wait for Corky’s signal. We were also supposed to be standing in a particular spot while looking at Corky and the camera, which meant that the first obstacle was behind us. They also had a mini-camera on a microphone stand next to the tire, which made it hard to start with dog on left, which would have been my preference. It was kind of strange starting with my back to the tire, watching for the signal, and then turning and dropping Asa and running. I think in the rehearsal run, I might have punted Asa through the tire with my foot accidentally.

I was happy with her rehearsal run except for two things. The teeter seemed to take forever to fall despite her being out near the end, but, most of all, I was disappointed with her dogwalk contact. Asa has incredibly good 2-on 2-off contacts. Lately, I’ve been playing with running contacts in practice. In the incredible dog challenge, I ran all of her contacts for the first time, and we
ended up winning among the small dogs by only .45 seconds. If I had stopped
her on any of the contacts, I suspect I wouldn't have won. Until that time,
Asa had never missed a contact, running or stopped since our early days in
agility. During our rehearsal run, I asked her to run the dogwalk contact, and
she became airborne about 3 feet above the contact, flew over the contact, and
landed well beyond the end of the dogwalk. She blew that contact in grand
style. I figured it would be just my luck that everyone would get to see her
flying over a contact on national tv.

The next dog after me also had trouble with the teeter taking too long and
ended up jumping off the teeter while it was about 2 feet above the ground and
had an ugly landing. Then we all realized that something was goofy with the
teeter. When we moved the sandbag, we discovered that the chain was wrapped
up causing the teeter to be much higher than it was supposed to be.

It had started raining, but the max-track (sp?) carpeting was fine even
while wet. It was raining a lot harder, and we had time to kill before the real
taping. I finally managed to get Asa to take another leak on concrete so I was
reasonably sure she wouldn’t do it on tv. We went downstairs to our room with
our dogs. The Letterman people brought us a bunch of pizzas, fruit, soft drinks,
etc. There was one person from the p.r. firm that works with Purina. Three of
us were there since we had done well in the Purina Incredible Dog Challenge.
They were planning on showing only 3 of the 4 dogs. Even the week before, we
had heard that there would be a local dog as a backup. Boy was I surprised last
week when the local team turned out to be Erin and Jag who were members of
the U.S. team in the recent world championship in Portugal.

We knew all along that one team would be bumped. I was kind of wondering
and guessing who it would be. Erin was pretty sure that she wouldn’t run since
she’d been told she was the back-up. I wasn’t sure about our chances. We were
the least talented agility team, but we had Asa’s cuteness factor. I’m not cute
like Asa, but I was the only guy which might help a little. Anyway, I wasn’t sure
if we were in or out. I was pretty sure that Wendy was in though I wondered
about whether they’d like or dislike the idea of 2 BC’s, and Christina had the
youth factor going for her. By then I had eaten too much pizza, was starting to
get sleepy, and kind of hoped that I’d be the one that got bumped.

Poor Darren had to come down to let us know who was in, even though
he wasn’t the person who decided. I was surprised to hear that Wendy was
bumped. She had tried not to come back to NY, but Darren had persisted and
talked her into coming back. I was really glad to hear that Wendy was returning
since she had helped us out so much on the previous visit–particularly in making
sure that everything was safe for the dogs. I thought I might have seen a flash
of surprise/disappointment on her face when we heard that she was bumped;
however, she has too much class to say anything. Later, we heard a rumor that
a bystander had come up to her during the taped rehearsal and hollered, “I
know you; I saw you on Jay Leno last night!!!” She had done the Jay Leno
show long ago, and that show or her segment was re-run the night before. The
suspicion was that with the competition between the two shows, they didn’t
want to show someone on one show who had been a recent guest on the other
A little later, someone came in and said that it was time to go for make-up and hair. I pointed out that I wasn’t too thrilled with this make-up idea. We went up to the 7th floor and ran into someone dressed like a physician. I was pretty sure that he was an actor, but he finally convinced me that he was David Letterman’s cardiologist. We talked in the hall, while they were doing Christina’s hair and make-up. Being a gentleman, I encouraged Erin to go next when Christina finished. I was relieved when someone suddenly hollered for all dogs and trainers to come to 53rd street.

We headed out to the street and were given some instructions. We had no idea what Dave was going to say when he interviewed us and not much idea of when we would be running. We only knew the running order. Just before we were about to run, I see the limo driver Ahmet. It turned out that he was going to be giving someone else a ride, but now instead of being taciturn, he had all kinds of questions and seemed surprised to see me with a dog. I think he never realized that Asa had been with me on the way to the hotel. Then I saw another old friend Marie from years ago whom I hadn’t seen in ages. I didn’t realize that she works only a few blocks away. I was talking with her and trying to remember what I was supposed to be doing on the show. I didn’t see a lot of Erin’s run, but then I thought I’d better be ready since I didn’t know how much time I’d have before running.

Asa and I went over, and I tried to stand in a better starting point, but Corky moved me over to where my mark was taped on the carpeting. I don’t really remember much about what I said with Dave, but then Corky was signalling go. I dropped Asa and ran, which is something we never do normally. Since there was camera stand on one side of the tire, I had to start running with Asa on my right. I could hear Dave in my earpiece, and I had the impression that he was a little surprised that Asa took off so quickly. I could have crossed behind at either the dogwalk or the tunnel. The tunnel seemed a little safer though I usually do a cross behind at the tunnel if I want Asa to turn when exiting. Asa seemed a little slower on the dogwalk than normal, but I suspected she slowed down a little due to the wet surface. When she exited the tunnel, she turned right and entered the weaves. I was caught completely off-guard. I should have expected it since that’s what we’d practiced first thing in the morning. Asa was weaving, and I was trying to figure out what to do. My first reaction was to pull her out of the weaves and do the jumps. I’m glad I didn’t because I’ve been trying not to fix off courses since I think it punishes Asa for going fast. After the weaves, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that we were back on course; we’d simply replaced two jumps with the weave poles. The rest of the course went fine.

While talking with people at the end of the run, I realized I was messing up again since I had neglected to reward Asa for her run. I got out the treats and gave Asa a jackpot. I went over to talk with the old friend Marie, but the studio people wanted me to stand behind the camera. They wanted to keep tabs on us since whoever won would be rushed into the studio.

Since I was done running, I was able to watch Christina’s beautiful run with
Kaylee. Only seconds after she crossed the finish line, I heard something like “Christina’s our winner” in the earpiece. The studio people hollered “let’s go” and hustled her off to the studio telling her she didn’t have time to put a leash on Kaylee.

I hung around outside for a while talking with Marie. The show was nearly over. Then we were hustled over to Rupert’s deli for a scene with the two models, the woman from Cincinnati, the physician, Rupert, the 3 handlers, and the 3 dogs sitting around some small tables with a cake made out of dog treats for the dogs. Rupert’s deli is incredibly small. I was trying to keep Asa distracted since the sheltie Jag was getting too close to the cake, and Asa told the sheltie in no uncertain terms to get away from HER cake! Fortunately, that wasn’t filmed.

After the deli scene, I was standing in one of the doorways since it was still drizzling. The actress Debra Messing, who had said such nice things about Asa on the Letterman show, came out a door with her entourage. I was pretty sure she was going to look to the right and see Asa. I figured if she saw Asa, she’d come over to say hello and pet Asa. However, she didn’t look to the right and headed to her limo.

Our limo was waiting to rush us to the airport. I went downstairs to our room and to get my luggage. A lot of the crew members had been saying things like “Nice job!” As I was trying to climb back up the narrow stairs carrying a Vari-Kennel containing Asa, a backpack, and a big suitcase, I saw a red t-shirt descending the stairs and heard the person say “Great job.” I looked up to see the face of the person while saying “thanks!” when I realized that it was David Letterman. So I think I said something like thanks again.

Outside, I said good-bye to Erin and Chris. Christina and I hopped in the limo. Wendy’s flight was leaving the next day. Le Parker-Meridien was full so they were putting her up in an even nicer hotel, which is hard for me to imagine. During the ride to the airport, I took the vari-kennel apart, put it in the luggage, and put Asa in a sherpa bag. I could do curbside check-in, but Christina needed to wait in line inside at the counter. I checked my big bag at curbside so that I could help her with her luggage, vari-kennel, and Kaylee. After waiting inside in line, Christina was able to make an earlier flight. I was kicking myself for having checked my bag since that meant I couldn’t go on the earlier flight. We went through security, and Christina left on her flight. The show aired that evening April 30, 2002. Christina was able to make it back in time to see it, but I had to wait and see it on tape the next day.

My flight ended up being delayed, and I was sitting near the gate when a couple of flight attendants asked me what I had in the bag. Normally, I don’t take Asa out of the bag in the airport, but I figured I wouldn’t get into much trouble since the flight attendants asked. I took Asa out and had her do a bunch of tricks. I even let one of the flight attendants try to shape something with a clicker. I was having a lot of fun. Our plane arrived and the flight attendants got on board. Later, the passengers boarded. I was sitting in my seat when one of the flight attendants came down the aisle, put her hand on my shoulder, and said “Excuse me, Sir, but your upgrade to first class came through. Would you
follow me please?” I was tongue-tied, then managed to regain my composure, thank her calmly, grab Asa, and head to the front.