

WHOC World Hoopers Open Championship

A Personal Perspective from Members of the 2025 Hoopers Team GB

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Introduction

Having been a member of the first ever Hoopers Team GB we wanted to share our experience to help others in the future. Things we found useful, lessons learnt and recommendations; our personal opinions only. Wishing you all the best!

Rules

Before going any further it's important to realise this is a totally different competition to any other throughout the world. As such it has its own set of rules and regardless of your own opinion about such, they are the rules that you need to be prepared to learn and execute right from the get-go.

So, step one you need to be open to these rules and whilst you may not be able to make sense of some of them initially, it is critical you take a positive attitude to learning the rules and focus your training on managing your handling your dog to comply with those rules.

This may be a huge step for some. If you know you are not good at accommodating change or tend to be a bit negative about rules that don't suit your beliefs, then maybe WHOC is not for you. If you are to make progress you need to embrace change. To those of us who 'stayed the course' and persisted at getting to know and understand the rules I think it's fair to say our dogs found it a whole lot easier than we did and got on with it without anywhere near the amount of soul searching we humans had. Dogs are just phenomenally amazing, take a 'leaf from their book' and have faith you can do this!

Tenacity

Right, you have decided upon having a positive attitude and you are going to commit to training. There will be a cost. Of course, some financial cost but also in terms of time, patience, persistence and dealing with failure. If you have become used to success in getting round a course you may need to adjust your mind set because the challenges in getting round a WHOC course will likely be testing. It is vital you hold on to every little bit of success and tell yourself that failure is the best way to learn and be ready to come back again for more.

Fitness

A whole WHOC course is huge. For example, if you went clear you could easily expect your dog to run 5 to 10 seconds or more than on a conventional UK course. Take, for example, a four-hoop sequence in a wide curve. A typical UK course might have obstacles 6m apart. At WHOC small dogs have obstacles now up to 10m apart, almost double the distance to complete the same sequence. For large dogs the max distance is 15m so an almost tripling of the distance. If you aim to normally run 9 sequences in a training session perhaps you may now be only able to

run between 3 and 5 per sessions, or you will need longer recovery breaks, or your dog needs to be fitter. So, training a big sequence has a demand on your dog as well as you getting to grips with what is required. Dog fitness will be part of your training requirement.

Distance Handling Area

One of the biggest challenges has to be adapting to handling entirely from within a 2m distance handling zone which can be located up to 20m away from the further obstacle on the course. This is of course on top of the fact that the arenas are 50mx50m (or the equivalent thereof) and obstacles are further away. For those already working at a more Advanced level of competition within the UK i.e those working comfortably within a Distance Handling box or behind the most extreme challenge line such a concept might already feel familiar. But for those who regularly move about more than a few steps work will need to be done to achieve confidence in the partnership when working the dog at distance.

Thinking about how you handle your dog. If you tend to move around quite a lot, even if it's only forwards and backwards a few metres it is going to feel quite odd keeping within a 2m circle. You may need to adopt your handling style quite considerably. If you are familiar with ninja turns then it will be easier. If you are a 'sway back and forth' person using this to bring your dog towards and away from you it might be easier. Ultimately these courses will be a test of your dogs total understanding of their verbal cues regardless of where you stand and the partnership to deliver such.

As may or may not be necessary, you can learn a new handling style built on what you and your dog already understands but this, of course, is going to be part of training. If for the past 5 years you handled a certain way and it was successful it is not easy making a change. If you do make that change, how will it affect how you then handle in UK competitions? Maybe it will make your success at UK competitions even greater! How will it affect your dog when you compete again in UK competitions? Some of us experienced our dogs looking much further ahead for obstacles. What had previously been an obstacle not even considered by the dog now was one they considered was on their line. You need to be prepared to adapt how you current walk your UK courses based on the WHOC training you will be doing and for some you might find you need to adapt your cues.

If you decide European style hoopers is for you and/or have aspirations for Team GB we recommend that you seize every opportunity on your UK courses to distance handle as much as you can. In the build-up to WHOC many of the team handled from the most extreme positions when competing in their local competitions, even if it meant that we didn't get distance points because the distance handling boxes/zones were too close or in relatively easy handling position, thus choosing to take the hit on points in our UK courses for the greater goal of training for WHOC.

Training

Around the country there are a few trainers offering European style courses and training days, consider attending to get an introduction to what is involved. They may not be true WHOC style courses but there will be similarities such as handling from a small circle, or bigger distances.

Within Canine Hoopers UK there are shows being provided which include European-style classes, graded to welcome new beginners in addition to those more advanced. Have a go!

There are a number of skills you will need to train:

- 1) Startline – You will need a solid startline wait while you walk away 25m in any direction. Try this - set up a hoop in a field or park. Put your dog in a wait 5m in front of the hoop. Walk 25m away from the hoop in any direction you like. Stop, release your dog. First will your dog wait until you have walked the 25m, turned and faced it? Then when you release will your dog take the hoop? Do they have enough kit value? Assuming you initially walked straight ahead of your dog and succeeded, how far round can you stand to the left or right of your dog? Can you go round 90 degrees to be fully side on? Can you even stand somewhat behind your dog and when you release will they take the hoop?

Another skill regarding the startline is being able to send your dog back to the starting obstacle, from a distance without leaving the distance handling area.

- 2) Holding the outer line – If you set up an enormous pinwheel covering a 50mx50m arena will your dog willingly run this by themselves without a million cues from you? Does your dog seek out the kit? What if there is an inner layer of obstacles would your dog wrongly try to take those obstacles instead? This is much bigger than we're used to in the UK so you will need to steadily grow your distance week by week. Ensuring you reward at a distance will be vital to helping achieve distance.
- 3) Barrels may be 'on' the dogs path – typically on UK courses judges put the barrels on the inside of the dogs natural path from one obstacle to the next obstacle. The preceding obstacle sets the dog up naturally for the side of the barrel we want them to take. Within European hoopers this doesn't always happen and so the dog will need to have total understanding of what side of the barrel they need to take based on your verbal cue.
- 4) Angles on all obstacles isn't restricted – in the UK great emphasis is placed on gentle angles between obstacles but in Europe these are less rigidly defined. For those who might have done agility you might be familiar with slightly sharper angles into and out of obstacles but for others this is something that dogs may need to get used to. We don't mean to suggest they are as sharp as agility, but by comparison you might find them slightly sharper than might be seen on UK courses.
- 5) New skills – there are a handful of new skills that you won't see on UK courses that you will need to train. These are 360-degree barrel wraps where a dog does a complete rotation on a barrel returning to the preceding obstacle. Barrel slaloms where the dog needs to traverse a line of 3 barrels taking them sequentially on the backside, frontside, backside (or vice versa). The "wave" whereby they complete 3 parallel hoops in a serpentine manner. Finding a good trainer can help you understand how these can be taught. It will take time to teach and for competency to be established and so start training these skills early.
- 6) Skills at a distance – At WHOC skills will be tested at the extreme of the ring so you will need to practice to achieve confidence in your dog to deliver such.

Another useful training tip is to take your dog into the ring without wearing a collar or being on a lead. This is not essential but well worth practising. Although at WHOC you can walk into the ring with your dog on a lead, they will need to run naked.

Whilst there will be a ring boundary, in 2024 this was only a rope and in 2025 this was a low 2ft advertising board. Will your dog stay in the ring?

Whilst in the ring you cannot have food or a toy on your person. Ensuring your dog is willing to work and complete the test with or without knowing you don't have their favourite toy is something to check.

If you make the team there is a team coach who will provide monthly training which you are expected to attend the majority of. This will help you to fill in gaps in your skills and will give you the opportunity to practice running courses. In 2025 this training was £100 per day to cover venue hire, coach fees and contribution towards team fundraising. If you are selected for the team then there's an expectation you will attend a minimum of 3 sessions between tryout in March and competition in September. Attending the training is well worth it, not only do you learn skills and get exposure to international style courses, its also a great opportunity to get to know your teammates and informally chat.

If you take part in multiple dog sports you may wish to consider the potential of injury from those other sports in the build-up to WHOC.

In summary, finding a good trainer who appreciates the differences between UK and international courses and can support you with your necessary training is extremely helpful. Some instructors might be prepared to support you remotely if you ask. Either way, given European style hoopers currently isn't the norm in the UK, you will need to be committed to independent training and have the means to do such. It can be lonely, so finding others who have a similar aspirations towards Team GB or a supportive instructor is a lifeline. You will need to be proactive in asking for help.

Finally, become a follower of social media international hoopers sites. Watch videos of European style hoopers to gain a deeper understanding of the style. Study and have a go at a variety of international courses, some will be more difficult than others and so be realistic and build up your competency.

Try Outs

The tryouts are a critical and substantial component of team selection. The intention is to replicate as far as is reasonable the conditions you may experience at the WHOC competition. This is no easy challenge for the organisers.

Familiarise yourself with the team selection criteria and work on each requirement. Cross check you have done your best to meet each of the selection criteria but even if you believe you fall short with some criteria do give the tryouts a go and put down a benchmark for future years. From our experience, we found that being a 'finished article' wasn't critical, for many of us training was still ongoing with a handful of skills. But rather demonstrating confidence and competency in most skills, balanced with willingness and capability to learn skills were considered. Having independent judges who also gave their view on team selection was also helpful.

The 2025 try-outs were in March, indoors in cool/cold conditions. The 2026 WHOC competition will be outside in September but in southern Europe. Almost surely it will be several degrees

warmer. WHOC will be many times busier, if Slovenia has anything like Italian hospitality there will be loud music, though unlikely whilst the dogs run. Whilst the music is not a given expect it. The Team GB 2026 tryouts may have music to simulate the experience, the rules will be the 2026 WHOC rules. Make sure you have read and understood the rules and you have worked with them as part of your training.

Pre-Try Outs, check the venue location and allow plenty of time to get there so you're not rushed or stressed. For some, you may need to plan accommodation the night before if required, find out if camping on site is available. Check what refreshments are available else bring your own, remember food for your dog as necessary.

Prior to course walking ensure your dog is comfortable as regards whether to feed, toileting, warming up etc.

Briefing - be there! They will go through the format of the day so you know what to expect and often recap on the rules. If you're unsure of anything ask!

Course walking - ensure you're conscious of how long you have and how you will split walking the course verses practicing how you will handle from the distance handling area. As well as learning the course, decide how you will handle, what cues and your timing. Give consideration to likely traps and how you can get back on track whilst incurring the fewest penalties. Consider significant traps that will cause you to be eliminated. Remember you have an allocated point score of 200 and you are aiming to hold onto as much of that as possible!

Your dog must compete without wearing any equipment. Consider how you will enter the ring. It is acceptable to take the dog into the ring on a lead. Any rewards/toys etc cannot be taken into the ring. You might find a slip lead and no collar the best equipment to use on the way to the ring! Unbuckling a collar whilst in the ring, when nerves maybe high might not be ideal and might effect your dog. Practice your entering the ring routing.

Probably there will be four runs. Treat each run as if it is the only run. Regardless of how previous runs go treat runs 2, 3 and 4 as if previous runs hadn't happened. By this I mean don't let your mind dwell on issues you had in a previous run. OK so be aware of those issues but don't let a less than perfect run influence your mind negatively. There is time after the tryouts for that!

Until you are eliminated keep trying everything in your arsenal of handling techniques. You can take a brief 'stop the dog' and reset (there are rules around this subject) mid-course if you need to. You are aiming to get your dog through the finish hoop and until you're stopped by the judge, persist! However constantly repeating obstacles or going back to missed obstacles will erode your score. Eg if you miss out obstacles 4, 5, 6, 7 then take obstacle 8 you must carry on to 9, 10 etc. don't fall into the trap of going back to do 4, 5, 6, 7. In other words, even if you think you're doing terribly, keep going and do your best.

Always reward your dog after every run. It's a big ask for them.

Almost surely your runs will be recorded so the Team GB panel can view later to aid in making their selection.

Applaud fellow competitors and be supportive. It's all part of being a good team member and an ambassador for Great Britain. Your attitude is important.

Make sure to have a photo of you and your dog by the WHOC banner. It's uplifting and part of the journey.

Everyone is supportive and wanting you to do well. Try to remember to enjoy yourself and the time you have with your dog doing this sport you love!

Fundraising & Costs

If you want to attend WHOC there will be financial costs. Whilst Team GB management will run a number of initiatives to raise funds for team members ultimately you will need to have the means to cover the majority of the trip.

Sponsorship is hard to come by. Despite many attempts we received donations from only 5 companies amounting to approx. £3k. Other initiatives rely on the good will of others to donate. Team members try to run fundraising initiatives to raise funds to supplement the kitty.

Expenses will be incurred from: attending try outs, attending team training, physiotherapy sessions, vaccinations, Eurotunnel, petrol, accommodation and food.

Competition entry fees and your team kit are covered from the team funds.

Travel and Accommodation

The team established a WhatsApp group after the team had been announced. This chat was a great source of support for everything going forward. Different options were discussed regarding travel and groups formed to share travel or accommodation. If anyone had any questions about absolutely anything the chat was used and we all chipped in to discussions.

Clearly this very much depends where the competition will be held. The following points relate principally to travel and accommodation in Europe.

There are a great many options and variations of those options but a good starting point is to decide if you are going to be self supported in some sort of vehicle you can camp in or if you are looking to use rented accommodation.

Before looking at those two options there are common requirements to be met by all.

All dogs travelling to Europe must have been inoculated for Rabies. This must be done at least 21 days (that is 21 full days not including the day they were vaccinated) before the obligatory Animal Health Certificate (AHC) is obtained. The AHC must be obtained no early than 10 days before your departure date and before you depart. Use these key facts to plan when to fix a date for both the Rabies vaccinations and the AHC. In consideration of those dates you need to have decided what will be your departure date and to make that decision you need to decide how you will cross into Europe. It will also be key to decide how long you have allowed yourself to travel to the WHOC venue to be there in time for the initial registration and vet checks. So a good idea is

to start with the day you must be at the WHOC venue and work backwards noting each key date until you have a last day for the Rabies inoculations which will allow all the other dates to be met.

The Rabies inoculation lasts between 1 and 3 years depending on the vaccine but certainly you don't need to wait until the last date possible to have your dog inoculated.

One further point is that all dogs travelling must have a microchip. If you haven't had your dog's microchip checked for a while it's well worth asking your vet to confirm all is well.

Looking at rented accommodation. Options to consider are will you travel on your own and rent just for you through to will you travel with someone else and share accommodation. If the former, then you can get on with making all your own arrangements right from the start.

If some sort of sharing is an option for you it can have the advantages of sharing all aspects of the journey/accommodation/cooking/company etc and so have potential savings. One caveat is to check what your dog's think of sharing with other dogs and be sure that will be OK with them. Another option is to ask a very good friend/relative to be a 'groom' for you, to help with driving, admin tasks etc despite not being an actual competitor themselves.

So, if you decide to share its worth setting up some sort of online media sharing group, for example WhatsApp. Everyone is kept in the loop. You can decide on division of labour and make decisions quickly if required. Consider if you are going to have a money pool and how it is going to be accessed. How bookings are paid for etc.

With car sharing consider if you are also going to share the driving in which case check insurance.

The cost of Eurotunnel will be cheaper if booked early and will depend on the number of dogs you take.

Check what food can be taken across borders.

Check what road passes you need may need for different countries.

Some road have more tolls than other which may incur significant costs and so you may wish to consider this when plotting your route. Equally some tolls can only be paid online through websites or apps and so you'll want to research accordingly.

Whilst some of the team preferred having a flexible plan for accommodation, others opted to pre-book accommodation. Everyone also has different driving capacity regarding mileage per day and if you're on your own you'll want to be realistic about such. The Team had a whatsapp group so no one ever felt that they were alone on the journey should an emergency arise.

Tapeworm

For most European countries you can enter without having had your dog treated for Tapeworm. I believe Norway is an example of a country whereby you must have your dog treated before entering the country.

On return to the UK you are required to have proof that your dog has been treated for tapeworm. Specifically the treatment must include an active ingredient against Echinococcus multilocularis such as praziquantel. Normal worming tablets available in stores may not contain this ingredient.

Some vets may prefer to provide the worming tablet, others prefer you to supply your own tablets and if that's you be sure you have approval. Treatment must be administered by a vet or in some cases a vet will provide proof that you gave your dog the tablet. This must be done no less than 24 hours and no more than 120 hours (five days) before your dog's arrival time in Great Britain. It is imperative you check the treatment. It is also imperative that along with the date the time is recorded. The recording is carried out on the Animal Health Certificate so take this with you to the clinic. Consider your depart time and when the 120 hours is up. Any delay in departure may make the treatment invalid. Strictly speaking it is arrival time in the UK.

If you are looking for a Veterinary Clinic the following FB group is helpful for recommendations. 'Map of recommended vets for Tapeworm Treatment'.

Some vets can be phoned, some emailed. Some the vet speaks English but the receptionist may not. However, you approach the task it is definitely worth having a few possibles ready to contact. If you are concerned that language may be an issue, if you are staying on a campsite consider asking a member of staff to ring for you.

At WHOC

Half the team camped onsite in an area designated for our team. Whilst the others rented a local villa. Each option has its pros and cons.

Camping onsite means that you have everything you need with you when you are competing. You don't have to get up extra early to travel to the venue in the morning and you don't have to drive back to your accommodation at the end of each day which can be tiring. Being off site though can give you the opportunity to get away from the competitive environment. If you choose to stay off site it might be that day camping is located in a neighbouring field and not as part of your team camp. Instead, you will bring your chair and items for your day into the team camp each day.

Official WHOC vet checks took place the day before the competition started. We provided our health certificates and the onsite WHOC vet checked over each dog carefully. We also had a team GB vet physiotherapist who came with us from the UK and could provide regular sessions for our dogs. She had met the dogs beforehand at a training session and so they were all comfortable with her before the journey.

It can be a long day, there are many competitors. So if you have 1 dog competing in the large height category you may need to wait until the afternoon for your run. Whilst waiting everyone helps and supports each other.

It can have a more celebratory, carnival atmosphere than might be experienced at local hoopers shows. Music will be playing between each dog's test. There may be flags and banners. Teams chant and cheer on team mates as they enter the ring. There might be other distractions eg. planes if the location is a near a flight path which may be relevant for nervous or anxious dogs.

There are many spectators and nerves will be high, akin to stepping out onto a stage with a mass audience. Everyone will have their own mechanism for dealing with these kind of scenarios.

WHOC can be an emotional rollercoaster! You will have trained for many months. You will have diligently prepared for Try Outs and subsequently been selected or not. You will have travelled the country to attend Team training, worked tirelessly on your homework. Become an avid follower of all things hoopers and practiced as many courses as you can. After travelling across many countries you arrive at a festival style environment that is unfamiliar and step foot into an arena where many are watching you. For some, despite all efforts, it is conceivable that dogs may then falter on the startline, you might not make it into the distance handling zone, the verbal cues just don't come out correctly or in time, you face the wrong way or start doing the oddest of things that you've never done in your life. Needless to say, you need to be prepared for the fact that that despite all best efforts on the day things may just not work out as planned. The pressure can get to you or your dog who is doing their utmost to be amazing for you. The emotional rollercoaster can be immense.

The opening and closing ceremonies can be great fun to take part in. If your dog isn't good with crowds and loads of other dogs in close proximity then you can choose to take another dog or go without one. We all embraced the occasion wearing union jack hats, flags, tshirts etc as we paraded in.

There is a strict running order and so you will need to ensure you are ready in time and checked in the queue. This year there was a conveyor belt of 5 warm up bays before you entered the ring with a small amount of kit in the last bay. One of team management acts as groom and helped us with water bowls, to take leads and toys off us as we entered the ring. Management kept an eye on the running orders to ensure we had adequate time to prepare and go to the ring.

Everyone was so very friendly. A great opportunity to meet other people who also enjoy hoopers from all across the world. It's fascinating to see all the different styles of handling and the various levels of ability between countries. Be prepared to swap your team shirt with competitors from other countries as souvenirs of the event and friendships made.

Summary:

- 1- be prepared to keep an open mind to WHOC rules
- 2- be positive and realistic about what you can achieve in any single training session, allow enough time to train new things
- 3 - embrace failure as a positive opportunity and always, always praise your dog as they are having to deal with a lot more as well. Ensure you train your weaknesses not ignore them and keep checking in with the skills required to stay on track.
- 4- get your dog fit as they will be running a course for a lot longer than they may do on a typical UK course.
- 5- be open to ways to change your handling to suit a 2m distance handling circle, bigger rings, bigger course spacing and needing to execute skills at greater distances than usual
- 6 – get help with your training from someone knowledgeable, find others with similar aspirations, seize every opportunity to practice European style
- 7 - consider the costs, these are likely to include:
 - financial both in the months before and during the event
 - impact on your local competitions to you and your dog (handling style or

- psysiological impact of dealing with failure but the positive emotional feelings of making progress.
- 8 - WHOC can be an emotional rollercoaster!

Alan Jackson has agreed to be contactable for anyone that wishes to his WHOC experience.
Contactable through Facebook messenger.