

# Sudoku for dogs?

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**Games aren't just about physical exercise: these Swedish dog toys are part of the 'brain training' trend and help dogs to keep mentally active.**

We are all being told to keep our brains active by 'training' them with puzzles, play stations and electronic gizmos these days – but dog owners know this is nothing new! Active dogs need mental stimulation just as much as physical exercise – indeed it can sometimes be even more important.

Rather bizarrely, I first saw one of Nina Ottoson's puzzle toys when I was lecturing in Japan. A colleague of mine had ordered one and we spent a hilarious evening playing with it after lectures, and I was keen to see the whole range when I returned to the UK.

Puzzle toys are a great idea for keeping active dogs occupied, but they are by no means an alternative to spending time with them. Indeed, Nina's toys are not designed to be left alone with the dog. They all need a certain degree of human influence to be able to teach the dog how to use them, and they do involve gaining control over your dog's responses – preventing them from simply chewing or scrabbling their way into them to get the treats.

Unusually, the toys are made of wood, and while this makes them (in my opinion) more aesthetic, they are perhaps more likely to suffer from scratching and staining.

However, for a rainy day or for dogs that just need their brains occupied, they are a wonderful addition to the 'brain training' ideal. Our intrepid canine investigators tested them for you.

## **The inspiration**

Nina Ottoson lives in Sweden and owns a Bouvier des Flandres and a Bouvier-cross. I asked Nina what had been her inspiration for this range of toys.

“I had children in 1989 and 1990, this meant that I did not have the same amount of time to train and play with my dogs, the way that both they and I were used to. My conscience made me start to think what I could do to activate my dogs in a simple, fun and varied manner indoors, and since 1990 I have worked with the development and design of dog-activating toys and games that will mentally stimulate the dog in a fun and creative way. The toys are also easy to get out and use indoors.”

Of her own dogs, Nina says that Zigge (a 60kg Bouvier!) loves the DogBrick while Ville (her cross-breed) likes the DogTornado. Both the dogs love testing her new ideas too.

## **Dog Spinny**

Tao's favourite and definitely one for small, quick dogs. She caught on very quickly that she had to spin the top surface in order to reveal the treats hidden in the indents underneath it. She used both paws and nose to move the spinning part and was able to self-reward with ease. However, my Golden had trouble getting the treat out of the indent itself because his muzzle was too big, even though we were using the larger size toy! (The smaller could be used by cats – although mine was distinctly unimpressed!)

## **Dog Smart**

Milo the Boxer road-tested DogSmart and enjoyed it. Karen, his owner commented, “The first time we tried it wasn't successful, as Eleanor – our three-year-old daughter - insisted he couldn't do it and she had to help him (she thought it was great fun, and Milo just got treats handed to him!), so we tried again after she had gone to bed.

I found it a fine line between praising him for putting his mouth on the pegs (with a view to then lifting them out) and not letting him chew them (hard to tell the difference with a droopy-jowled Boxer!). However, once he had got the first couple out, he was away, and could do it very quickly. We left it a few days and then brought it out again. He remembered straight away what to do, and could lift all the pegs out very quickly. I also tried it without a treat under every peg, and he did it in the same way, without appearing too frustrated. Overall, a good game. It doesn't last very long once the dog understands, so you would need to repeat it again and again for it to last longer than a minute. I was worried about how the wood would stand up to the slobber, but it seems fine.”

#### Dog Twister

Jimi was initially quite intrigued by the production of this rather odd looking wooden contraption and was keen to investigate further. Sarah, his owner said, “We hid some of his quite un-exciting biscuits (he has a skin allergy and can't eat most treats) under the moveable plastic parts and he jumped into action, excitedly trying to get them out. I'm not sure he really caught on to what he was actually supposed to do to extract them, but he certainly enjoyed trying and I think he was pleased with all the noise he was making! We were all a little stumped about how to use the wooden pegs that were provided with the toy to make it harder, as they just seemed to separate the plastic parts enabling Jimi to lick the treats... which is exactly what he proceeded to do!” It also moves around if on a slippery surface – even carpet.

#### Dog Turbo

Jimi tested out three of toys: the Twister, the Spinny and the DogTurbo – which was definitely the most challenging. “After lots of aimlessly pawing at the toy, Jimi finally seemed to figure out what to do and became pretty good at it. Out of all the toys, this is the only one he actually seemed to genuinely figure out, although I don't think he enjoyed it as much as the Twister, as he seemed to like the noise of that one! Overall, he enjoyed the toys thoroughly and worked quite hard to get out his treats, even though they were of low value.”

#### Dog Box

Karen commented, “Overall, a good interactive toy. Dylan enjoyed playing the game and learning how to play. It held his attention well and he learnt how to play quicker than expected. The written directions on the box and leaflet were difficult to follow – perhaps because they had been translated – which meant there was a fair amount of trial and error at the start!”

“Dylan he is probably at an advantage as he already knows how to hold an item in his mouth and how to drop an item in a box. I would expect it would take longer to teach inexperienced dogs how to do it and some may even find it quite tricky. One down-side was that the treats didn't always fall out when they were meant to, as some would get stuck inside the box. This would obviously affect the learning process immensely. Being a trainer, I was aware of this and was able to get a treat to Dylan quickly - making it appear that it came from the box. I did enjoy the toy and Dylan did too.”

#### Dog Trigger

Tigger is used to puzzling out games and training exercises as her owners have used them from the start to keep her occupied.

Joan commented, “It took her a little while to work out what she had to do to get the treats out – and it took us a while to figure out too! I found the puzzle awkward to hold – you need to be seated and the toy needs to be tipped at a precise angle to prevent the treats falling out. This also happens if the dog goes

underneath to hunt for a treat and nudges the board by accident.” A fun game though and one that Tigger clearly really enjoyed learning and then showing off!

Nina Ottoson has a website at [www.nina-ottoson.com](http://www.nina-ottoson.com)