

## *So you want to train your dog for agility?*

### **Basic Considerations:**

**Your Goals** – Are you just going to do agility for fun and exercise once a week? Are you planning on competing on a regular basis? Are you going to do agility to develop a better relationship with your dog? How you train and get started may impact your decisions on whether you want to teach your dog speed, where you want to train, the experience levels of the trainers, etc. You may not know at first but you need to re-assess if your goals change.

**Obedience** – Your dog needs to know stay and/or wait, come, down and sit and be VERY trustworthy to stay by you and come when called prior to enrolling in an agility class or doing any serious training. Basic clicker training and motivation training may be helpful as well.

**Age** – It is recommended that full agility training should not be done until the dog's growth plates close. Often the age that is used as a guide line is 12 months. Before this time the basics can be taught with jumps very low, weaves in a channel and the A-Frame very low (lowering other contacts for very fast dogs that come down ramps with much impact to shoulders or back may be considered).

**Weight** – Excess weight on a dog will hurt it's joints and probably shorten it's life regardless of whether you do agility or not. If your dog is overweight (you can not see a defined waist from the top and a tuck from the sides or feel the ribs with a gentle touch) you could potentially hurt your dog doing agility at full heights and in a competitive manner. Get your dog in shape first with a diet and exercise program. Walking and swimming are the best exercises for an overweight dog.

**Health** – It is always best to consult with your vet about doing agility with your dog, however, many vets are not that familiar with the sport. Things like asthma and arthritis should be considered. Before competing or training in a place with many dogs you need to consider the pros and cons of vaccinations and whether you think you want to vaccinate. Please keep in mind however that just because a dog has arthritis that doesn't mean that you shouldn't do agility at all, it means that you need appropriate goals and a proper training program to build the muscles up before you put a lot of stress on the joints (I truly believe that my arthritic dog would be much less mobile if it wasn't for the muscle tone developed through agility).

### **Learning the Basics:**

If you are new to the sport you should probably do some reading prior to starting a class. Some excellent books are:

Agility Training – Jane Simmons Moake

Enjoying Dog Agility – Julie Daniels

Agility Training the Hobday Way – Ruth Hobday

Also Clean Run magazine is an excellent resource all levels of agility. Visit their website [www.cleanrun.com](http://www.cleanrun.com) for details.

Once you've read a bit about training on your own you might want to do a little work with your dog to make sure he is ready for the next step of taking a training class. You don't want to waste your fellow classmates and trainers time just trying to get you dog to stay by you and follow commands.

A couple of easy pieces of "equipment" you can use at home:

Make a jump using the cones that sporting goods or toy stores sell by children's bikes. Place a yardstick across the tops of the cones.

Make a tunnel by getting a large box and opening the tops and bottoms and laying it on the side.

Make a dogwalk by getting a 12" wide board and placing it on the floor or across two milk crates and see if your dog will walk across it. Use the board to make a ramp on to a piece of furniture or up the porch steps. Ask you dog to walk up and down it.

Make a table by getting your dog to jump up and lie down on an ottoman or the bed.

If your dog will do these things without avoiding, acting scared, or jumping off when you don't want them to you are probably ready for a beginner class.

### **Choosing a trainer and location:**

Your choices for training are dependent on your goals.

First, some thoughts about locations:

What is the training surface like? Grass is the best, concrete the worst (and those thin rubber mats don't do much).

Will the dog have a soft landing? If not you should jump very low heights and not let your dog go too fast.

Will she slip when it tries to run fast? You may need to try to keep your dog from running fast, slipping and pulling a muscle can keep your dog out of agility for a long time.

Second, some thoughts about trainers:

Does your trainer use positive motivation? Do they ever correct the dog? Many of the worlds best agility handlers forbid agility students to use the word "no" and/or to use any kind of correction. This is probably best if you want to develop the best possible working relationship with your dog. Correcting a dog on a particular piece of equipment or in the agility environment can cause unnecessary fear of the equipment or agility itself.

Does your trainer have agility titles? Have they competed? Do they keep up to date on their skills by attending seminars and reading Clean Run?

Other things to learn:

Proper Equipment Set Up – you owe it to your dog for its' safety to know how equipment is put together. In a class or trial when you walk around the equipment you should check that all equipment is stable and properly assembled and staked or weighted.

Jobs at an Agility Trial – a great way to get exposed to agility is to volunteer to work at a trial. You can learn all the jobs involved and see many dogs run.

Rules of the Organizations – Each organization publishes their own rule book. Current organizations doing agility are AKC, USDAA, NADAC, UKC, ASCA, and CPE. All of them except AKC allow mixed breed to compete (YEAH!).