

Consider Dog Agility

This fast-paced sport is fun for dogs, dog owners and audience.

Liz Palika

Dog agility combines attributes from obstacle courses, sprints and grand prix jumping. Dogs dash through tunnels, leap hurdles, walk carefully across elevated balance beams and climb tall A-frames. The various obstacles require body awareness, balance, coordination, agility and athleticism. The dog owner must be calm, cool and able to think quickly and sprint as fast as his or her dog works. This fast-paced sport has increased steadily in popularity through the years, primarily because it's fun for the dogs, dog owners and audience.

Agility training is open to dogs of any size, shape, breed or mixture of breeds. Many dog training clubs maintain agility courses, and members can take agility classes. Dog trainers often incorporate agility as part of their training classes because it's a wonderful tool for dogs and owners.

The process of teaching a dog to jump over hurdles or through tires also teaches owners a lot about training in general. Dogs also learn a lot, including body awareness, where their feet are positioned and how to balance themselves. The dogs and owners also build trust and confidence in themselves and in each other. Because agility is often more like play for the dog and owner, it makes training fun.

Competition is open to all dogs, depending on the sponsoring organization. The United States Dog Agility Association encourages dogs of all breeds or mixes of breeds to participate in its program. The American Kennel Club, however, allows only purebred dogs registered with the AKC to compete. However the AKC is currently considering hosting Mixed Breed events. Both organizations offer titles that the dogs can earn through competition. Through the AKC's program, dogs can earn the following titles: Novice Agility (NA), Open Agility (OA), Agility Excellent (AX) and Master Agility Excellent (MX).

Not all dogs are created equal in agility competition. Obviously the more athletic dogs will have an advantage jumping and the dogs that can sprint will be faster on the course. Border Collies, for example, will have a distinct advantage over Basset Hounds!

Competing well, however, involves more than the ability to jump or run fast. The dogs must have a good background in obedience training, because they compete off-leash, often in front of a crowd of clapping people and barking dogs. The owner will also give directions about which route to take and which obstacle to do next; the dog must listen to those commands. Many athletic dogs have lost in competition to less athletic dogs who were just a little more focused and slightly better trained.

If you would like to get involved in agility with your dog, start with a local trainer or dog training club. Remember to brush up on your dog's obedience skills. You will need good off-leash control because your dog will compete off-leash. Make sure your dog comes to you when you call, no matter what the distractions. When your dog's obedience skills progress, ask your obedience instructor about a local agility training club.

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