

Training for Agility

Expert advice on how to get involved in agility.

By Audrey Pavia

You've seen them in action: dogs running up A-frames and through tunnels, clearing tire jumps and racing through weave poles. These amazing canine athletes are completely focused on their handlers, and at the same time, can negotiate just about any obstacle placed in their way. These are, of course, agility dogs, which have been trained to hurdle, traverse and run through a variety of impediments laid out in a prescribed course, all in the fastest time. Have you wondered if your dog has what it takes to compete with some of these gifted four-legged athletes? Is your dog obedient enough, fast enough and agile enough to pull it off?

According to agility experts, your dog needs certain skills and personality traits in order to become a contender in this exciting canine diversion. Then, once you have determined that your dog has what it takes, you need to provide it with the training that will help it become a tried and true agility dog.

Sizing Up Your Dog

The first step in determining if you have a future agility dog on your hands is to take a look at your dog's breed and personality. All breeds can compete in agility, but some are more likely to succeed than others. Likewise, all successful agility dogs have particular personality traits in common.

According to Donna D'Amico, president of Haute Dawgs Agility Group in Sacramento, California, any breed of dog can participate in agility competition. However, a dog must have a certain type of temperament to really be suited to competition. "The most successful dogs in agility competition have a great deal of drive, love to work, take direction well and enjoy pleasing their handlers," D'Amico says.

Self-confidence: D'Amico also notes that dogs with a high level of self-confidence do well in agility. "Self-confidence is a plus," she says. "A dog should be able to handle change and unique situations calmly. A dog that is shy or afraid may gain self-confidence from learning agility, but these dogs often take longer to train and may never conquer all of their fears. This may limit their future in competition, but not their ability to have fun and enjoy the sport."

Motivation and drive: In order for a dog to be successfully trained in agility, it must also have drive, a willingness to work and be easy to motivate. "A dog with a high degree of motivation is a must in agility," says Cathie Sabin, a trainer at B.C. Dog Training in Mundelein, Illinois. "Motivators can be anything the dog really likes, such as food, toys or vocal praise," D'Amico agrees. "Those dogs easiest to work with in agility are often food or toy motivated," she says.

High energy: A high energy level comes in handy when doing agility, too. In fact, dogs that often get into trouble at home when left to their own devices can make the best agility dogs. "A dog that has a lot of energy or one that gets bored easily—like a destructive dog—is often a good candidate for agility," says Valerie Masi, a trainer at Doggy Manners in Ventura, California.

Focus: A good agility dog needs to focus on the person giving the commands. "Dogs that can focus and are not easily distracted earn a plus when it comes to learning agility," says D'Amico. This isn't to say that dogs with an independent streak can't do well in agility, however. "An independent attitude may or may not be a plus," D'Amico adds. "In agility, a dog needs to be able to work away from its handler, so some independence is positive. At the same time, the dog must be willing to check in with its handler and follow commands. If the dog is so independent that it won't take direction, that is a negative."

Athletic ability: In order to negotiate the obstacles on an agility course, a dog needs a certain amount of

athleticism—especially if you plan to compete. Because speed is crucial in agility competition, the more athletic your dog, the better. Stamina is also a factor, as well as overall good health. “Have your dog checked by a veterinarian and make sure it is physically up to agility before you begin,” says Masi.

Take some time and determine if your dog has the qualities needed in agility. That doesn’t mean your pooch needs to be destined for agility stardom; an in-shape Basset Hound can have as much fun training and competing in agility as a speed-demon Border Collie. This does, however, mean that your dog must be in good health, at least moderately conditioned and interested in agility. If your dog doesn’t enjoy agility, try something else instead. You’ll both be happier.

Training to Train

Once you’ve determined your dog has the right temperament and physical prowess for agility, it’s time to move on to actually training your dog to handle the obstacles in the sport. But before you do, you must be certain that your canine companion knows good behavior and obedience basics. “In order to participate in the sport of agility, a dog must be under control,” says D’Amico. “It’s a big plus if the dog is able to walk close to the handler on a loose leash. Dogs should not lunge at other dogs or people and should submit to being gently handled by the instructors.”

Agility dogs work off leash and at their handler’s beck and call, so it certainly helps to have a dog that knows all its obedience commands and has them down pat. “A lot of dogs go into agility with no training at all,” says Masi. “However, it is helpful for your dog to know the basic obedience commands—sit, down, come and heel. It also depends on what your agility instructor requires. If an instructor does require anything before the dog can enroll in the class, it will usually be the basic commands.”

A good way to introduce your dog to basic obedience is through an obedience class where other dogs are present. Your dog will not only learn the sit, down, come, stay and heel commands here, but will also gain experience in focusing and listening to you while there are other dogs and distractions around.

Before enrolling your dog in agility training, practice its obedience lessons at home, at the park, on walks, and in any other place you can think of that will provide plenty of distractions. If your dog reliably obeys you under all these circumstances, it is ready for agility training.