

Difficult to Train Agility Dog Breeds

Some dogs' instincts make agility training difficult but not impossible.

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Do you have a dog you think isn't cut out for agility? Has someone convinced you that you need a specific breed of dog in order to be successful in agility? Oh contraire! Although a dog's structure might legitimately affect his agility career, only your ability to motivate your dog will limit your dog's enjoyment – and ultimately his success – at this fun and exciting sport.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when working with dogs that are not considered the “typical” breed seen in the agility ring these days (herding dogs and terriers).

Positive association: Discover what your dog loves (treats, toys, and so on) and associate all of those things with agility training. Convince your dog that you would rather be doing nothing else than playing this fun game with her. Keep it fun, laugh a lot, and quit with her wanting more. She'll love agility games because they are associated with having fun with you.

Positive reinforcement: Learn about positive reinforcement (e.g., clicker training) and how to use it most effectively. Break down each skill into several separate components so that your dog can be successful, and be generous with your rewards. For example, if she takes even a step on her own toward a jump, whoop it up and toss her toy to the other side of the jump. **Start young:** If you have a new puppy, don't wait. Start play-training early, using toys, as well as treats, from a young age. Use your puppy's mealtime food as training rewards. Read about current thinking about the benefits of early socialization (7–12 weeks of age) and get started!

Find a qualified trainer: Find a positive reinforcement trainer with canine sports experience to help you focus early training on the skills needed for a career in sports. Family dog training typically focuses all on control (sit, stay, leash walking, and so on) behaviors. You will need those, but you also need to learn how to build drive and how to teach your dog more complex behaviors. Get help if you've never done this before.

Reading suggestion: *When Pigs Fly: Training Success with Impossible Dogs* by Jane Killion (Dogwise Publishing, 2007).

With these steps, you will be well on your way to a successful agility career with your “non-agility” dog. Keep it fun!

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