

# *Dog Agility for Dummies*

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Welcome to the sport of dog agility. Many of you were probably introduced to the sport through your local Parks and Recreation Department, watching an event on television or hearing a fellow dog owner talking about it. It is a fast-paced fun sport for dogs and their owners looking for challenges beyond sit, stay and rollover (and those aren't even the dog's tricks). This article is strictly limited to the agility sport, where obstacles are placed in an open area and the handlers direct their dogs through the course via verbal and physical commands. There are many other new K-9 sports like Flyball, Lure coursing, and Herding and you will need to go elsewhere for that information.

The dog agility sport is sanctioned by a number of independent organizations like American Kennel Club (AKC), United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA), North America Dog Agility Council (NADAC), Canine Performance Events (CPE) and in some cases, breed-specific organizations like Australian Shepherd Club of America (ASCA). DOCNA (Dogs on course in North America) and Teacup Agility are designed for, and only allow, small dogs. Each has its own set of rules, equipment standards and title or award requirements. You will need to look up each organization's rules and details on their websites to make sure you comply for each trial. There are also local clubs that specialize in dog agility. Dog Agility Sport Handlers (DASH) is one of those, and is a great resource of fellow enthusiasts that can answer your questions, or point you in the right direction, sometimes literally. You will also need to be registered in most of the organizations so you can compete (AKC and CPE are two that have forms on their own websites).

As with most things in life, the sport is full of acronyms, abbreviations and terminology that were probably made by using leftover Scrabble pieces. Don't panic, we'll try to lead you through them. A "trial" is a competition. Though there is a judge, it has nothing to do with lawyers or your guilt and innocence. There are generally multiple classes of competitors: in AKC they are Excellent, Open and Novice, and in USDAA they are Masters, Advanced, Starters, (a club may offer Novice as well as Starters for individuals who have earned titles in another organization), and in CPE you have Levels 1-5 and Champion. If you don't know which one you are, you are a Novice -- trust me! Within each sanctioning organization, there are specific requirements to be met to move up through each classification and attain various titles and awards.

There are different types of courses and games that provide a variety of challenges for the handlers and their dogs. The most basic is the Jumpers With Weaves (JWW) course that, as the name implies, has jumps, weave poles and optional tunnels, but no contact equipment (a-frame, dog-walk, teeter-totter and table). (Some organizations simply refer to this as a "Jumpers" course) The Standard course includes the contact equipment plus the jumps, weave poles and tunnels. Recent additions to AKC agility include Fifteen and Send Time (FAST) that utilizes standard equipment but requires

more free-style capabilities to obtain points or complete the course in the prescribed manner. It is similar to a Gamblers or Jackpot class offered in other sanctioning organizations, like USDAA or Canine Performance Events (CPE) respectively.

### **Preparing for the sport**

Hopefully you already have a fun and energetic dog. Many breeds, large and small, are very successful in the sport. Don't be intimidated by the Border Collies and Shetland Sheepdogs that tend to excel; a well-trained mixed-breed can be very successful. If you are coming from a Parks and Recreation 6-week class, you have been introduced to the sport but you now need to learn the techniques and skills necessary to compete effectively. Your dog and more importantly, you the handler, need to be coached and both in good physical condition. Training facilities can be difficult to find, depending on where you live. (See last page for links to trainers in Southern California.) You will find training classes come in two types. First, there is the group class that meets weekly, and each week a specific skill is taught and practiced, one dog/handler at a time for about 5 minutes each, rotating until each handler/dog team has practiced. Progress is slow and steady, and as with all group learning, everyone is expected to stay on the same pace of learning. The second type of class is the individual lesson (you, your dog and the trainer). The pace and topics can be customized for you, but it can be overwhelming initially since you are starting with a "blank sheet of paper". Many folks begin with the structured group classes until they need specific skills and advanced training. Speak with potential trainers about your dog (what he/she knows), what you know, and ask them for their recommendation for the type of training that will work best for you. If you're interested in doing privates but think that an hour will either burn you or your dog out, ask trainer if he/she will accept a shared "private" lesson with another dog/handler team. Some trainers will allow you to apply remaining fee credit from a group lesson to an individual lesson. Be sure to ask ahead of time what flexibilities exist.

Once you begin your training, it is imperative that you practice, practice, practice! Not only does your dog need to build its confidence around the equipment and following your directions and cues, you need to develop and reinforce your handling skills. You'll also enjoy having fun with your dog, and getting great exercise, too.

A terrific place to practice and gain ring experience are "Show and Go" events. These are typically put together by a club and run nearly like a trial, but it is as the name implies -- you show up, pay for each run and go. There is no need to sign up early (but many allow you to sign up early to guarantee a spot or be given priority), and you pay for only the number of runs you do. You can also run the offered courses multiple times. (Note – take care not to wear you or the dog out. A tired dog is prone to injury – have fun and always end on a good run.) Occasionally, there will be unofficial judging and timing available so you can gain feedback on each run. In most cases, treats and toys are allowed in the rings too. Look for event fliers at trial check-in tables.

As with any sport, after learning the appropriate and necessary skills and training techniques, you need to get equipment to play. You can purchase or make some of the

basic items using PVC pipe for jumps and weave poles. If you are planning on building any of the larger equipment (a-frame, dog-walk, teeter) make sure you follow the standard equipment specifications to ensure the equipment is stable and safe to work with. (Having your dog experience equipment failure can be traumatic and may take months of retraining to get over their fears.) You can find standard equipment for sale on the Internet. You also will need a sturdy crate to transport and hold your dog in during the competitions. Depending on your dog's excitability, you may need a wire-only crate; otherwise a lightweight fabric PVC pipe style is fine. Make sure the dog can lie down and sit up comfortably in it. Good airflow is mandatory, so make sure window panels can zip open as needed. You will most likely need an "easy-up" canopy to cover you and your dog during trials. Many of the locations have trees around the edges, but you can't count on shade to be available. A tarp is also handy so the ground elements (dirt, mud, etc.) are kept off you and your dog. To get the crate, canopy, tarp, chair and cooler (packed with liquids for you and dog, treats, toys, food) to your set-up area, you will most likely need a pull-cart. Many of the trials do have a drop-off area, but your set-up area is likely 100's of feet away.

Note -- If your dog is unfamiliar with crating, do not use it for the first time at a trial. Make sure they have been acclimated to it beforehand so that they can comfortably stay in it 2-4 hours or more.

It is strongly suggested you attend and perhaps volunteer at a trial without running your dog. This will give you the ability to check out the canopies, carts and equipment in use by others. Volunteering is easy and fun, and is a terrific way to learn what goes on at a trial, without the pressures of competition.

### **Ready to Compete?**

Now the fun really begins. All that hard work, training, practice – let's go to a trial! So how do you do that? Here's the step-by-step. All trials in the CA-AZ-NV region can be found on the web ([www.agilek9s.net/calendar](http://www.agilek9s.net/calendar)). The sign-up application or "premium" as it is called, will be linked to and available about 60 days prior to the trial date. You must complete the application and submit a check (for an additional fee you can also pay online for some trials) before the deadline, usually about two weeks prior to event. (Don't forget to register with the sanctioning bodies as well: AKC, CPE, USDAA, etc.) There are usually a limited number of runs per day (about 300) and some trials do fill up, so don't delay if you are interested. Be sure to give all the information required legibly, including your signature, payment, and email address. Your email address will enable the trial secretary to send you your confirmation and then the judging schedules later.

Your first premium form can be intimidating and confusing so let's break it down. Dog height is determined based upon how high your dog stands at the withers (shoulder blade area). This allows your dog to compete with dogs its own size. Ask your trainer to measure your dog and let you know what to put in the space on the premium. Until you obtain a permanent height card, your dog must be officially measured by the judge prior to running at the trial. (There is usually a set time before the first run of the day,

and perhaps between classes. Check with the folks running the event to make sure you don't miss your measurement.) Each sanctioning organization has its own permanent height card requirements, so be sure to check the rules. (Most trial secretaries keep permanent records of AKC height cards and usually won't need copies mailed again after the first trial with them. Conversely, you must show your permanent height card at every USDAA trial you enter.) Next, you need to determine what events you are participating in at a trial: i.e., for AKC: Standard, Jumpers, FAST and for all others, which games in addition to Standard, etc. Chances are you are a Novice, so circle "Novice A" where applicable. (In AKC, Novice B is for either dogs or their handlers who have titled before – probably not you, otherwise you wouldn't be reading this, right?) Then you need to circle the height you are running at. Each sanctioning organization has its own criteria (see their rule books), but for example, if your dog is taller than 12" and shorter than 16", you run in the 16" height under AKC rules. (Your dog height is the same for all games and events you enter.) The AKC "Preferred" category allows a dog with limitations (usually from age or injury) to run a course lower than their usual height and compete against dogs with limitations too. If you think this applies to you, talk to the trial secretary before submitting the premium. The rest of the form is basic info on the breeder, the dog handler and owner – EASY!

Shortly after the trial closes, you will receive a "Confirmation" from the trial secretary. It will show you what events you are entered in, class and height. If any of the information is incorrect, contact the secretary immediately. They can then fix it in the computer.

A few days prior to the event (as the panic begins to sweep over you), you will receive a "Judging Schedule" from the secretary. This will show you how many dogs are running at each event, height and class, and the sequence of the runs on each ring. Pay particular attention to the number of dogs ahead of your class and height. If they are running Excellent, then Open and then Novice, knowing the number of dogs ahead of you will give you a good idea of when you will run during the day. A good average to use is about one minute per dog. This allows for course re-set between classes, walking of course and breaks to allow judges to finalize paperwork and take care of business. The premium details should have also given you a time to "check-in" for your class. **Do not be late!** Be forewarned - the "check-in" time is only an approximate and trials sometimes run faster than expected. If you are not there for height measurement, check-in and walking the course – you are out of luck and no money is refunded. Also note special requirements by each club at each site. They may specify no dogs in bathrooms, in flowerbeds, no dogs off leash, etc. If a dog/handler team is in violation of specific published requirements, they can be eliminated from further competition at that trial and have to forfeit any awards already earned. A club trial committee has the authority to file formal complaints with the sanctioning organization regarding the violation of their rules. It would be terribly embarrassing to know that a club lost a valuable site for future events just because one person decided the rules didn't apply to them.

The day of the trial is here, and you slept like a baby last night right? In other words, you are in full panic mode! Relax and have fun, that's why you chose this sport -

remember? Besides, your dog will pick up on your anxiety, and your performance will suffer. Hopefully you have attended a trial already, so you know what to expect. Load the car up and let's go -- Good Luck!

After getting your canopy up, the dog settled in its crate, be sure to check in, obtain your "armband" (participant sticker), pick up course maps and running order lists, get dog height verified (if necessary) and go by each Gate Steward to determine which class and height is currently running. Compare this to the judging schedule to see how long you have before you have to run. Make sure your dog has had time to walk around to get acquainted to the smells and sights of the area. In case of escape from what you thought was secure confinement, keep your dogs' tags and ID on at all times outside of the show ring! If this is their first trial, they may be apprehensive with all the other dogs in close proximity. If you have the time beforehand, take them to a trial that you have not entered so they can get accustomed to the noise and activities.

Once the course has been set up for your class, there will be a short briefing by the judge to give final instructions and you can ask questions. You will then be able to walk the course to prepare for your run. (Tip: Not only walk the course, but also try to run it at the speed you will compete at. The courses feel vastly different at full-speed and you can become "lost" or disoriented if you have only "walked" it.) It is also a good idea to watch the more advanced teams before you maneuver similar courses even though they have more complicated turns and more equipment. Things to look for include what side they have the dog on and where they make their crosses. You may also see a pattern of failure, if more than one team does something different but fails to make a turn or complete an obstacle correctly, maybe you don't want to do that either. Be sure to take into account your dog's tendencies to like certain obstacles more than some, be more comfortable on your right or left side and how well they manage front and rear crosses. You will be given about 5-8 minutes to walk the course.

Warming up is important for both you and your dog. There are practice jump areas that allow for this. Make sure you give your dog ample time to relax before the actual run. It is also good practice to make sure your dog has an empty bladder and bowel before entering the ring. Any soiling is instant disqualification. Be sure to do some warm-ups and stretches for your body as well. One need only look around at the number of knee braces and limps to see this sport is tough on the knees and ankles of the handlers.

Each ring has a staging area run by the Gate Steward. They are your friends, listen to them and no one gets hurt. Do not take treats or anything resembling a toy into the ring area. AKC is also specific to the type of lead that can be used. Be sure you know the rules. CPE requires "naked" dogs (no collars of any kind). (If you have any rule or procedure questions, ask the judge during the course briefing.) The Gate Steward will guide you into the proper running order as you stage, go into the "on deck" area and then finally to the start line and you are ready to go. It's always a good idea to tell the Scribe (one of the two people sitting at a table inside the ring) your dog's name so they have the correct scoring sheet. "This is Jewel" is sufficient. Wait to hear an audible "Go" and you can begin your run.

Sometimes, things just go wrong during the run – an off course or even the “zoomies”, it just happens. Treat it as a learning experience, whether first-run nerves, or maybe “I shouldn’t have had that 5<sup>th</sup> martini last night”. If you’ve struggled and the run is going nowhere, be sure to do two things. One, end on a positive – take a few obstacles successfully and celebrate the run – never let your dog know a mistake was made or you are disappointed. Secondly, thank the judge for letting you compete, a simple “thank you” is sufficient while gathering the attention of your dog, getting him/her back on leash and leaving the ring. The judge will then signal the Scribe to notate a “no time” for the run. This etiquette is appreciated by all.

No matter how the run goes, FINISH WITH A SMILE! This is so IMPORTANT.

If you have successfully finished the course and met the criteria for course time with faults (those would be the “oopsies” during your run), you have then “qualified”. After your class has run, it takes about 20-30 minutes to post the results by the secretary near the scoring table. Depending on the number of dogs in your class/height that also qualified (also known as Q’d), you are then ranked to determine first place, second place and so on. Ribbons are made available at the site for Q’s, placements and sometimes, titles earned. The secretary can assist you.

### **What next? – Titles, Awards**

So you’ve competed and now able to finish smiling and standing upright (the scabby knees healed didn’t they?). Progressing into events with more obstacles, wicked turns and maneuvers is a heck of a lot of fun. Each sanctioning body has its own requirements for moving from beginner and beyond. You should be tracking your performance, perhaps in a diary, so you can determine when you are able to move up. (Almost all venues or organizations have forms available on the web to print out and track your progress) In some cases you are not required to move up, and in other cases it is required. (In AKC for example, once you have “qualified” three times as a “Novice A”, you are titled and then you can move to Open. You may choose to remain in Novice until you gain more experience; however, you must then enter as a “Novice B” competitor for all events and courses. Three more Q’s in Open and you can then move up to Excellent.) Many Novices hold back on moving into the Open class until they and their dogs have achieved a higher level of confidence and skills. Refer to each sanctioning body for their particular titles and requirements.

A “move up” is simply a request to a Trial Secretary that you have obtained a title after you submitted the premium for their trial and need to be “moved” to a new class. This can also occur between Saturday and Sunday within the same event.

**Run Fast, Run Clean!**

**HAVE FUN**

## Helpful Tips

- Take a video camera and ask someone to record your runs. You can use this to do your own critique afterwards and look for improvements. Besides that, when your friends come over and force you to watch a DVD of their five-year old's first soccer game, you can whip these babies out. Now tell me, who's cuter!
- Build a routine. Most animals like a common or regular routine, like getting fed first thing in the morning, a walk just before bedtime, etc. The same goes for agility. Develop a set-up, get settled, warm-up and run routine that is comfortable for you and your dog that establishes a pattern throughout the trial. You'll probably find that this also lowers your anxiety level too. Look at the run list used by the Gate Steward to determine when to gather your dog from crate, do warm-ups, potty and gain their focus and head to the gate area. A good starting point is about 5-7 minutes.
- Make friends and join a club of agility enthusiasts. Don't forget you are surrounded by fellow dog lovers and sport enthusiasts at the trials. Though they are fellow competitors, they want to see your team perform well. Don't be bashful, ask lots of questions.
- Remember those course maps you picked up during check-in? Take a pen or pencil and mark the route the dog will take for each course. Try to visualize where you want to be in relation to the dog (right or left side). It helps to visualize where you need to perform a cross (front or rear). Later when you walk the course, you can confirm or change those crosses as needed. The judge is only watching the dog, not the handler, so your position in relation to the dog is not judged.
- After each run, write down some notes on what worked or didn't go too well. This will give you a source of what to work on in training for both the dog and the handler (that would be you).
- Don't give up. Depending on the amount and frequency of training, it may take a number of trials for you and your dog to put it together and get a "Q". There may also be times where the dog just stops performing something they learned previously and was flawless doing in trials. Talk to your trainer about performance issues – they will have a solution for you.
- Your dog will be looking for and taking cues from you to complete the course correctly. Loose or baggy clothing minimizes the directional movements you make with your arms or body. Make sure your arm, shoulder and hip movements can be readily distinguishable and observed by your dog. (In other words, take the parka or over-sized sweatshirt off before running.) Removing sunglasses and hats for the run will let them see your face and eyes easier too.

**Additional resources**

[www.DASHagility.com](http://www.DASHagility.com)

[www.agilek9s.net/calendar](http://www.agilek9s.net/calendar)

[www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)

[www.nadac.com](http://www.nadac.com)

[www.usdaa.com](http://www.usdaa.com)

[www.k9cpe.com](http://www.k9cpe.com)

[www.jumpnfunagility.net](http://www.jumpnfunagility.net)

[www.akc.org/pdfs/rulebooks/REAGIL\\_9-06.pdf](http://www.akc.org/pdfs/rulebooks/REAGIL_9-06.pdf)

[www.cleanrun.com/infocenter.cfm](http://www.cleanrun.com/infocenter.cfm)

[www.agilitynerd.com](http://www.agilitynerd.com)

[www.temeculavalleyagilityclub.com](http://www.temeculavalleyagilityclub.com)

**Potential Training facilities**

[www.jumpstartdogsports.com](http://www.jumpstartdogsports.com)

[www.starsandstripesagility.com](http://www.starsandstripesagility.com)

[www.wagsandwiggles.com](http://www.wagsandwiggles.com)

[www.jumpink9s.com](http://www.jumpink9s.com)