



1

Getting Started

You've decided you want to try agility, but you're not sure how to get started. That's okay. In this chapter I'll help you decide if agility is the right activity for you and your dog. We'll go over your dog's basic fitness level, training, and age, as well as diet and exercise. In addition, we'll discuss your fitness level (don't worry!), what clothes will work for doing agility, and equipment requirements and training.

Deciding If Agility Is Right for You and Your Dog

You may be wondering if agility is something you'd like to commit to doing with your dog. Drop by a fun match or even an agility trial and watch what goes on. (Be aware that you may be watching competition, which is something I don't cover in this book. If you're interested in getting started in competition, check out the agility books in the reference list at the back of this book.)

Unless you're planning on participating, don't bring your dog just yet. Watch the dogs as they go through the course. Notice the teamwork between the handler and her dog. Both members of this partnership have a special bond of trust in each other.



Dogs love agility. This is JD, an Australian Shepherd owned by Margaret Meleski, performing the weave poles.

“My dog can’t do that!” you might say. “Look at all the work that went into training!” Yes, while training is part of agility, it’s not as hard as you think nor is it harsh or rigorous. The agility training in this book uses only positive methods that are fun for you and your dog.

So let’s look at possible reasons why you might think agility isn’t right for you:

- *My dog is a mixed breed.* Fact: Mixed breeds do very well in agility and all sanctioning organizations allow mixed breeds in competition, except AKC.
- *I’ve never trained my dog to do anything before.* Fact: It’s never too late to train a dog to do fun things.

When Can I Start My Puppy in Agility?

Wait until your puppy is about six months old before starting him in agility. There are a number of good reasons for this. First, he'll need to complete all his vaccinations to ensure that he's protected against deadly diseases like parvovirus and distemper. Second, your puppy needs six months for his muscles and tendons to strengthen, and to gain coordination. Your puppy risks serious injury if he jumps higher than his hock height before he is fully grown. Check with your veterinarian before starting your puppy on an agility training program.

- *My dog could never do that.* Fact: Unless your dog is older than eight years old, has hip dysplasia, or is incapacitated in some way, he can do agility. Don't limit your dog by your preconceived notions. Even dogs older than eight can do agility in a limited fashion if they are in good health.
- *My dog is too small (or too large) for agility.* Fact: Toy breeds and giant breeds all compete in agility. I've seen Chihuahuas, Great Danes, and Basset Hounds do agility successfully.
- *I don't have time to do anything with my dog.* Fact: Why do you have a dog in the first place? A dog is a commitment and a companion, not an animal to be relegated to the backyard. If you have a dog, part of that commitment is to exercise her.
- *Agility equipment costs too much.* Fact: You can put together some agility equipment with just basic hand tools, and you can purchase some very inexpensive pieces as well. Agility clubs and training centers often have drop-in classes that allow your dog to train on equipment for a few bucks.
- *I don't know where I could go to learn agility.* Fact: There are agility trainers, classes, and clubs throughout the United States including Alaska, Montana, and Hawaii. Internationally, there are clubs in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bermuda, Canada, Columbia, Croatia, England, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Portugal, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland, and more appear every day. If there isn't a club nearby, you can always get information, equipment, and support on the Internet.
- *I have a disability.* Fact: Many people with disabilities have trained and competed in agility. Since you're considering agility for fun and not for competition, this is a great way to interact with your dog.

My Newest Agility Dog

Sometimes choosing an agility dog is easy. Haegl, my youngest Malamute, climbs along the back of the couch and walks the edge like a circus acrobat. He opens crate doors to get at toys and closes them again. After a snowstorm, I caught him climbing the ladder that led to the roof (the snow had stabilized the ladder). One day, he leapt straight up on top of a crate. He became the obvious choice for my agility dog when Kiana passed on.

- *I'm out of shape (or overweight, or older, or can't run a lot).* Fact: While competitive teams may run around, agility is something you can do at your own pace and at your leisure. Some people who can't run much have taught their dogs to run the course without them by directing the dog toward the obstacles.

There are some legitimate reasons for not trying agility. These include:

- Your dog is too old and feeble or has an injury or medical condition that precludes him from doing agility without getting injured or harming his health.
- Your dog is aggressive toward people or other dogs. Work out the behavioral problems with an animal behaviorist before exposing your pet to others.
- Your dog is too young. Wait until your puppy is about six months old before starting agility. Then jump him only at heights below his hock and take extra precautions so he doesn't risk injury before he's fully grown.

Your Dog

Before you get started in agility, you need to evaluate your dog. If you have one dog, she is going to be your agility dog. If you have more than one dog, you can try doing agility with all of them, but it's better if you select one and focus on her. No doubt you have a

favorite dog among your gang or an idea of which dog would make the ideal agility dog. Trust your instincts because part of agility is that special bond between you and your pet. You can train the other dogs after you've had some success with your first agility dog.

Examining Your Dog

Before you get started in agility, your dog should be healthy and free from injuries and limps. Look at your dog as if seeing her for the first time and watch how she moves. Is she slow and glitchy or fast and fluid? Does she like chasing a tennis ball or prefer napping by the fire? Did she climb on the bed when young, but doesn't now? Watch for a hitch in her movement—a limp or perhaps a favoring to one side or the other. Some limps are subtle and hard for an owner to detect, so watch her carefully.

You can do a quick examination to determine the health of your dog. Look for anything abnormal; an underlying illness should be remedied before doing agility.

- Ears—should be clean and sweet smelling. Any foul odor or excessive buildup of wax indicates a potential ear problem.
- Eyes—should be clear and bright without excessive or puslike discharge. No redness or tearing.
- Legs—feel your dog's legs to check for any lumps or bumps. Inspect the footpads for cuts and foreign objects such as foxtails. Look at the toenails; they shouldn't be red or broken. If you find an unusual bump, check the other side to see if it is normal. If the bump is unilateral, then it might be a tumor. Check the legs for full range of motion, moving them slowly and gently. There should be no clicks or pops.

Mixed Breeds Allowed

Mixed breeds are encouraged in agility. In all forms of agility, except those run by the American Kennel Club, mixed breeds are allowed to participate. They do just as well as purebred dogs. The only advantage an AKC-registered, purebred dog has is that he can earn AKC titles. Mixed breeds earn their titles from other agility organizations.

- Reproductive organs—there should not be a discharge from the vagina or penis (except in intact female dogs where discharge is normal during estrus).
- Skin and fur—the skin should be free of any sores, bald patches, or redness and should not be dry or flaky. Are there dark grains through the fur that turn red when wet? This is a sign of fleas.
- Mouth—teeth should be white and clean, without a tartar buildup. Your dog's breath should not be foul smelling; if it is, it may suggest tooth or gum problems. Are the gums a healthy pink or are they red?
- Nose—should be cool to touch and moist. Hot and dry may indicate a fever. There should be no discharge or blood.
- Tail—should be healthy looking, not hanging limp. There may be a problem if your dog has been chewing on it.

Look at your dog's appetite and attitude. She should be happy, energetic, and eating well. Signs of illness or injury may include:

- Lack of appetite
- Diarrhea, vomiting, or dehydration
- Limping or swollen limbs
- Tenderness in a particular area or an area that is hot to the touch
- Bleeding or discharge; a wound or cut skin
- Unusual discharge coming from the nose, the eyes, the mouth, the anus, or the sexual organs
- Abnormal lumps or bumps
- Red, itchy skin; hair loss
- Red, swollen gums; bad breath; broken teeth
- Fever (temperature over 102.5°F)
- Unexplained tiredness, or listlessness
- Inability or reluctance to do things she used to do

Sometimes It's Not Obvious

Conan had been doing agility for a short while before we stopped. Something didn't seem right. He was an older Newfoundland-Samoyed mix with a funny gait. He had always had that funny gait and I never thought much of it because he was so enthusiastic. One day, when I was having him examined for a knee problem, my veterinarian made a casual remark about his elbow dysplasia.

I was stunned. Elbow dysplasia? I looked at Conan again, and sure enough, he had the signs: elbows that stuck out at the sides and a funny stance. With any other dog, it would've been obvious to me. I just never saw it because he had always had it and never showed any discomfort.

Visiting the Veterinarian

Before you start any training program, you should have your veterinarian examine your dog for potential health problems. He should check for joint problems, including congenital and hereditary hip and elbow dysplasia. Even if your dog is a mixed breed, he can still get hereditary hip dysplasia.

The only way to determine if your dog has hip dysplasia is through an X-ray at two or more years old. However, you can have preliminary X-rays done to determine if there might be a potential problem. Other problems to consider are joint malformations and arthritis.

Your vet may also be able to detect some forms of heart abnormalities and other conditions that would preclude your dog from doing strenuous exercise. Finally, he should evaluate your dog's weight to determine if she is too heavy for agility. Excessive weight will stress joints, which will cause injuries.

You may have to guide your veterinarian in what you're looking for. Discuss what activities you're going to do with your dog and ask him to look for anything unusual. Sometimes your vet can catch a problem you might not. If you have particular concerns, talk them over with your vet now. For example, if Shadow usually climbs on the couch but now refuses to hop up when you invite her, it may be a sign of arthritis or injury. Your vet may recommend a regiment of

rest and maybe some medications or nutritional supplements that will help your dog regain or add flexibility.

Fitness Level

Which brings us to your dog's fitness level. Although you're planning on doing agility for fun, your dog will need to be at the right weight and conditioning or he may injure himself. As I said earlier, if your dog is too heavy, his weight will put stress on his joints. But weight is not the only factor. Your dog should start a light exercise program to stretch and work his muscles and joints to avoid strain. Walking, playing ball, and other activities may be all that your dog needs before starting in agility.

Your veterinarian should examine your dog before your dog begins an exercise program. Be aware that your vet often sees couch-potato house pets (not athletes) and may erroneously think your dog is fit. A dog's weight is a good baseline for comparing her to the breed standard, but it isn't a good measure of your dog's fitness. Body structure varies from dog to dog, even within a breed, so weight is, at best, a rough guideline.

The easiest way to determine if your dog is fat is to look at your dog's shape. There should be a tuck where your dog's abdomen (waist) is, both in profile and looking from above. Place your thumbs on your dog's spine and feel her ribs. If you have an "amazing ribless dog" or if you can barely feel her ribs through the heavy padding, she is obese and needs to shed some pounds. You should also be able to feel your dog's hip bones and spine.

Sometimes cutting back on treats or switching to lower calorie food and snacks is all you need to do. But if your dog is truly obese and you're feeding her a bit less than the amount recommended on the package, talk with your vet. The problem might be medical, such as thyroid. Even if it's not, your vet can help you put your dog on a diet. There are specially formulated prescription diets that work well.

Fun Activities to Get Your Dog in Shape

- Long walks or hikes
- Running beside you on a bicycle
- Playing fetch
- Chasing a flying disc

Basics in the Home

"Watch me," "sit," "come," "down," and "stay" are commands your dog needs to know. If you haven't taught him the basics, start now. Chapter 2 covers how to teach "sit," "down," and a version of "come" called "here." You can teach these commands with positive reinforcement or clicker training.

As you begin teaching the basics and work in agility, your dog will become more fun to be around. A couple of other basic commands are included here.

"Watch me" can be done with or without a clicker. Say "Watch me!" and bring a piece of food to the bridge of your nose. When your dog makes eye contact, drop the food and praise him (or click and treat). Do this several times and your dog will be watching you in no time.

"Stay" is just an extension of "sit" or "down." When your dog is in the sit or down position, lengthen the time before you release him by saying "stay" and holding your hand out, palm down and flat. Wait a few moments and then release your dog with "okay." If your dog doesn't hold his stay, put him back into his stay and give him a few more seconds before releasing him and giving the treat. Gradually work your way up to five seconds or more.

Warming Up/Cooling Down

Before you begin exercising your dog, you'll need to learn how to warm up your dog and let her cool down, just as you would an athlete. Warming up allows the dog's muscles to become more flexible and less prone to tears and injury. Cooling down helps remove the lactic acid from the muscles and helps prevent soreness and stiffness the next day.

You can warm up your dog by walking her slowly at first and gradually increasing her speed to a slow trot for about ten minutes. Then, after she has been warmed up, you can help her stretch. If you've never helped your dog stretch, it might be a good idea to ask an experienced person to show you. Always follow these guidelines when helping your dog stretch:

- Any movement must be gentle, slow, and not forced.
- Only stretch the body in a position that's natural to your dog. Anything else could cause serious injury.
- If your dog shows pain at any time or if the stretch looks uncomfortable, stop immediately.

When you stretch your dog's legs, you must mimic the natural motion of the leg; namely, if the leg doesn't bend that way normally, you shouldn't do it. You'll work from front to back. Stand beside your dog next to the leg you're going to stretch and face the same direction as your dog. Support your dog's elbow underneath and hold your dog's front leg. Push gently upward on the elbow. Stretch the leg to its full extension so that you hold his leg in front. Then, put your hand on the front of his shoulder blade and bring the leg backward so that he has a slow stretch in the opposite direction. Release. Do this a few times. Then, work the opposite front leg.

Once you've stretched your dog's front legs, go to the back legs. Stand facing the opposite direction from your dog. Take one of the back legs and use your hand to support your dog's knee. Push gently on the hip so that your dog's leg flexes backward. Now, put your hand on your dog's rear and move the leg so that it is in a natural forward position. Don't force it; it won't have quite the same flexibility. Hold the leg and then release. Do this a few times and then work the opposite back leg. Once you have stretched your dog's legs, take her for a slow trot for a minute or so.



Stretch her leg out gently. This is the author's Alaskan Malamute Kira, or Belle's Kira of Sky Warrior.



While holding her leg against her chest, push on her shoulders gently.



Kira patiently enjoys a good warm-up. Bring her leg back for a nice stretch. Don't force it.

After exercising, your dog will need to cool down. Take her for a brisk walk and gradually slow it so that she's walking at a leisurely pace. The cool-down can take from five to ten minutes, depending on how hard she was working.

Preparing Yourself for Agility

Now you know how to prepare your dog, but what about you? While you don't have to be in athletic shape, it doesn't hurt if you're fit. Still, many agility competitors are overweight, have knee or other joint problems, or aren't very active.



Did someone say "teeter?" Gideon is very serious about the seesaw. He is a Brussels Griffon owned by Joyce Tessier.

Books with Agility Equipment Plans

Do-It-Yourself Agility Equipment: Constructing Agility Equipment for Training or Competition by Jim Hutchins (Clean Run Productions, 2002) www.cleanrun.com.

Introduction to Dog Agility by Margaret H. Bonham (Barron's Educational Series, 2000).

Agility Training: The Fun Sport for All Dogs by Jane Simmons-Moake (Howell Book House, 1992).

Exercise

If you're not used to physical activity, you might want to start a walking program or something that gives you some exercise at least three times a week. (Caveat: Before beginning any exercise program, consult with your doctor first.) Even a light walking program will help improve your cardiovascular system. If you're physically active, doing agility shouldn't be difficult. If you have a disability, consult with your doctor for the best exercises for your situation.

Clothing

Dressing for agility is simply wearing the most comfortable clothing for movement. If a T-shirt and jeans are the most comfortable, wear them!

One caveat is footwear. You need to wear sneakers with good treads and proper support. It doesn't matter whether they're for cross-training, running, or walking. If you have ankle problems (like I do) you may want a sneaker specially designed to support the ankle and prevent it from rolling. I have a tall pair of light hiking boots (similar to sneakers) that I wear all the time, especially for agility. This way, I won't accidentally turn an ankle while running a course.

Equipment

So, now you know the basics for getting you and your dog ready. But what about agility equipment? Agility equipment is very bulky and can be expensive, so before you commit to building or buying



The tire is a fun obstacle. This is Demi, owned by Jeanne S. Grim, D.V.M.



Flying across a dog walk with confidence. This is Sableman, a Cocker Spaniel owned by Pam Metzger.



Through the tire and on to the next obstacle. This is Rush, a Border Collie owned by Lisa Dewey.

anything, you may want to try agility first. Most training facilities and agility clubs have drop-in days when you can try out agility and see if this is something for you. You may wish to take a basic agility class as well to become familiar with the obstacles in a controlled environment.

Building Your Own

If you're handy or if you have a friend, spouse, or relative who can build agility equipment for you, consider yourself lucky. There are many good plans for building agility equipment, including some low-cost options. See the sidebar for books on agility equipment.

Buying

Another option for obtaining agility equipment is to buy it. This is usually much more expensive than building your own; however, if you're not handy and you make frequent trips to the emergency room after your spouse picks up a hammer, then this is your only option.



Mutts like Robyn excel in agility. She is owned by Jim and Kathy Stabler.

If you can find someone local who builds and sells agility equipment, sometimes you can get a discount if you buy more than one piece. Or you can ask around to see if anyone is getting out of agility or upgrading and would like to sell their equipment. You can sometimes get a good deal there. Looking on ebay.com or searching the Internet is another way to find low-cost equipment.

Summary

- Agility is great fun for you and your dog.
- Agility isn't right for dogs who have severe joint problems, are too young, or have medical conditions that would preclude doing agility in a safe manner.
- Agility is an international activity with clubs or training facilities in all fifty states and over twenty countries.
- Before beginning any exercise activity, have your veterinarian examine your dog for potential health problems.
- If your dog is overweight, you may have to put him on a diet and exercise program. Your veterinarian can help.

Agility Equipment on the Web

The following are agility equipment suppliers on the Web. This list is not all-inclusive nor do I endorse any of these suppliers. They are here simply for informational purposes:

Affordable Agility—<http://www.affordableagility.com>

Agility Ability—<http://www.agilityability.com>

Agility for Less—<http://www.agilityforless.com>

Champion Tunnels—<http://www.championtunnels.com>

Dog Equipment.com—<http://www.dogequipment.com>

eBay—<http://www.ebay.com>

J and J Dog Supply—<http://www.jjdog.com>

Max 200—<http://www.max200.com>

Northwest Agility Products—<http://www.nwagility.com>

Weave Poles.com—<http://www.weave-poles.com>

- Know how to warm up and stretch your dog to prevent injury. A cool-down period will help your dog's body remove lactic acid in your dog's muscles.
- You may want to increase your own exercise before starting agility. Go slow and consult a doctor before starting any exercise program.
- You can wear anything you like for agility as long as it's comfortable. Wear sneakers with good treads when doing agility.
- Decide whether agility is a good activity for you and your dog before committing to the expense of buying or building equipment.

