

Shade, Shoes and Potty Breaks – Things They Didn't Teach in Agility Classes

by Lynn Henderson July 6, 2005

Congratulations! Your dog has mastered each obstacle, you have perfected all your commands and signals...you have even learned to read a course map and plot your strategy. Now it's time to step to the line as a first time agility competitor, and you're starting to wonder if you really understand how this all works! You're not alone. Many beginners find there is nearly as much to learn about participating in trials as there is in training for them! Here are some tips I've picked up in my four years of competing that I hope will be of help to first-timers. (Most I learned by "trial" and error!)

Arriving at the site

What time(s) during the trial you and your dog will actually run is determined by many factors; including number of entries, your level of competition, how many rings are operating in the trial. Your first run might not be until mid-afternoon, based upon the schedule set for competition, or it might be expected to be mid-morning. First, determine in what order your competition level will run; will Excellent Standard run first, followed by Open and then Novice? Once that is known, you'll be able to plan when you need to be prepared to run. Many competitors "set up camp" and remain at the trial all day each day. If you're unable to stay all day, or if your dog doesn't do well waiting at the site for that many hours, you'll have to decide what is the optimum time for arrival. If you know the number of dogs entered in the groups before you, allow at least one minute per dog, as you count from the start of the trial to your most likely run time. Decide what time you must be on site, and then add at least one hour to that. This will give you enough time to set up, get registered, and relax a minute before being called to the ring.

Gimme shelter!

Unless the trial is held indoors, no agility site has significant shade or shelter from the elements. Providing shade for yourself and your dog is immensely important, and something many first-timers don't do well. If you are traveling by RV or in a large van, the need will be met. Otherwise, invest in a pop-up shelter of some type before you begin to compete. Choose one that can be easily and quickly set up and taken down by one or two people, and that has enough coverage for yourself and your dog (crate, x-pen, folding chair, cooler—all might have to go under your tent). Consider bringing a tarp or sidewall with fasteners, so you may move additional shade from side to side of your tent as the sun changes position. Crate fans can be helpful, too, as well as any of the new "cool down" products for dogs. Agility can go on rain or shine, so remember that your tent may need to keep you dry as well.

Run clean, run fashionable

Be sure to choose comfortable clothing to wear to the trial, and be prepared for extremes of weather. Dress as if planning to hike. Wear layers that wick away moisture, bring a hat and sunscreen...and no new shoes! The day of a trial is not the time to break in that new pair. Choose instead shoes you have worn to practice and that you are confident will not be a source of irritation by the end of the day!

Gearing up for the run

You will soon develop a routine that helps both you and your dog get ready to step into the ring. Be sure to allow sufficient warm up time for your dog—go over the practice jump in a variety of ways. Make certain you have no tags on your dog's collar and no forgotten treats in your pocket. (I have a collar my dogs only wear when it's time to do agility. When I take off the regular collar and put on the "running collar", it signals it's time to work.) Plan time for a potty break for you and one for your dog. After checking the running order posted by the gate steward, choose a "marker dog" to watch for. This should be a dog that will run at least 5 ahead of you. When you see that dog in the ring, it's time to take your place near the gate to await the steward's call.

Walking that imaginary dog

Observers new to the sport are often amused by watching handlers, in the walk-through for their course, signal and gesture to "an imaginary dog." Don't be embarrassed to call your dog, use the hand signals you'll use in competition, and work that course with your own imaginary dog! To make the most of your walk-through time, you should have studied the course map hand-out thoroughly and planned a preliminary strategy. Try not to be unduly influenced by what your fellow handlers are planning to do; you know your dog better than anyone else, and should be able to predict how s/he will react to the course. Once you have decided how you will run the course, be sure to actually run it as well as walking it! The smooth handling moves you have just practiced will look and feel much differently with a fast dog at your side!

Above all, of course, you should try to relax and have fun. That can be easier said than done! But whether you "Q" or not—be proud that you and your dog have achieved the communication and teamwork needed to be ready to step to the line.

Lynn is the proud mom of two Shelties and two Australian Shepherds. Her oldest Aussie, Zelda, retired from AKC Agility competition a little over a year ago, after completing both Open titles and with 2 legs towards Excellent Jumpers. Zelda was Lynn's first agility dog, and they are very proud of the 3 firsts, 6 seconds, and 3 third place ribbons they earned.