

Avoiding Agility Trial Tribulations

Cara Armour put together some great tips for making your first or your 100th trial more enjoyable. Check out her Startline Podcast on Spotify. Here are my notes and additional comments from her talk:

Read the whole Premium when you are entering and the Confirmation email when you get it. It will include things like: what is the food situation, when can you setup, is there a special theme, what is the run order, when you can enter the building, do you need a mat under crates, can you use an X-pen, parking details, ...

Respect the facilities, don't let your dog pee or poop where they are not supposed to. Don't let them damage anything (digging, chewing, etc). If you wouldn't let them do it in your house or yard, don't let them do it at the facility.

Volunteer to work. The trial committee or club members cannot do it all. There are personal, social and communal benefits to working. You learn, you can meet other people (including the judge), your dog can rest while you are away. Everyone can work at least one class, even if you are running multiple dogs, even if you are physically challenged. You can pick a job that suits you if you sign up early. Want a sit-down position? Timer or scribe. Want to study how the courses are run? Ring crew. Need to keep moving? Leash runner. Everyone pays to enter the trial, so your entry fee doesn't excuse you from chipping in to make the trial run better and faster. If you teach classes, impress upon your students from the start of their trial career that volunteering is expected and appreciated.

Being in the right place at the right time makes things flow better. Park where you are allowed (not in the fire lane or on the grass if noted). Know where to line up to enter the ring.

Put your treats in the designated place or at least 10 feet from the ring. Don't use someone else's chair or leave empty wrappers around. Don't leave treats/toys where they will be distracting to other dogs entering/leaving the ring.

Always mind your dog when they are out of their crate. Not all dogs are friendly. Assume every dog is reactive, because one of them might be. Keep yours on a short leash and be aware of who is around you.

Understand and respect that exhibitors have 'rituals'. Be mindful that your pre/post run rituals don't impact others.



One person may be trying to amp up their dog while another is trying to calm theirs. If a team's activities are disrupting others, you can nicely ask them for some consideration or space.

Be on time. Be ready when you are asked to go in the ring. Everyone lined up is trying to judge their warm-up and treat supplies to match when they should be going in the ring. If there is a chance that you will be earning a championship with this run, let the gate steward and/or person behind you know they may have to wait for your victory

lap. (Also let the club / secretary know so they can have the ribbon/bar ready.)

If you hand the leash to the leash runner after you have set up your dog, it could be faulted as "training in the ring". Better to hand it to them as you walk in (before setting your dog before the first obstacle) or drop/toss after you set up the dog. If you toss it, plan to toss it where it won't be in your or your dog's path and in a location that makes it easy for the runner to retrieve and take to the exit. Also, don't hit the leash runner in the head with it.

Keep the entry/exit gate areas clear. Don't escort or greet a friend in those areas. Let them get out and away from the ring before you have any conversations.

Don't give unsolicited advice. Don't point out errors or failures. Especially when someone is just coming out of the ring. They either know or can find out after they've had time to relax. If it is not congratulatory, keep it to yourself.

If not using the Agility Gate application, you can grab a screen shot of the gate sheet instead of constantly bringing your dog over to check.

If you bring a dog or puppy just for the experience, keep them away from the ring or gates while dogs are running. Bring them around during course builds and course walks. Toys, treats, tug play or noises like squeakers and clickers are distracting for any dog and can ruin a run.

Double Handling is a no-no. This is when people outside the ring give helpful (or not so helpful) aid to the handler in the ring, like shouting out the next obstacle. It can mean a penalty or even elimination for the handler.

Crating should be set up for the dog to rest. It can be in a crate or the car. The goal is to keep the dog comfortable and quiet. Location, covers, rewards, temperature, etc are all important. (Have your phone number on the crate so if

you are away and the dog has any issues, you can be quickly contacted.)

See something that makes you uncomfortable? Say something to someone in a position to do something about it, like the trial chairperson.

Don't obsess about mistakes. There were undoubtedly lots of good things about your run. Rarely are you the only one that has ever made that mistake. Know that your bad feelings will always affect your dog. If the dog was not injured and fun was had, that's all that really matters.

"Go" or "Ready" will show on the timer display as "60". If there is no display and you didn't hear it, check with the timer or judge before starting your run.

Think twice before asking someone "How did your run go?". Most interpret that as "Did you Q?" Get creative about asking so the handler can feel good about what went right in the ring. Try things like: "Was Fido awesome?" "Where are the tricky parts?"

"Settling In" – allow your dog and yourself the time and space to settle in to the trial environment. For newbies, have all your preparations done early. Give yourself and dog time to explore before having to perform. Know the information from the premium/confirmation but ask someone if you have more questions. (Warning, just like dogs, not all people are friendly, so don't take it personally if you get a rude response.)

For old hands, you probably tend to settle into groups (with your friends) and exclude new people without really thinking about it. This leads to a cliquy feeling environment. So, make a point to search out and welcome new people and offer help.

Use these tips to make yours and everyone's trial experience better.

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