

# This Agility Q Is Not Important

By Christy Gammage Practice Makes Pawfect

Dog Agility is a competition. The objective is to do well enough to win or to at least get a 'Qualifying' score (a 'Q') so you can get titles and move up in the levels. Whether your goal is to stand on the top podium at the world championships or just get out of Novice level, I'm here to tell you that getting a qualifying score in your next class should not necessarily be your goal.

What?!? Shouldn't I want to do well and win? Yes, but to advance quickly and win consistently you really need to take the long view. And that long view should start with how does your dog feel coming out of the ring and what did they learn in there? Because dogs (and people) are learning all the time. And how they feel will influence everything they do from here on out.

Novice dog Scenario 1: The handler does a long lead out (that they've practiced before), looking around trying to remember the course (and the dog feels a little deserted in a strange environment). The first line of jumps goes OK. The next turn is smooth to a tunnel. Coming out of the tunnel, the dog looks around for the handler and spots the friendly looking jump crew sitting by the fence. HI! Oh wait, my handler looks mad. Guess I'll go back to them. Now the handler is embarrassed, frazzled and cues the next obstacle poorly. The dog heads for what they think the handler wanted. The handler screams "NO!" and the dog pulls off looking at the handler for clarification. The rest of the run the handler is very clear about what is next, the dog hesitantly complies. The run ends without any actual



faults. A Q! Maybe a placement! The dog just wants to get out of the ring where his handler was so stressed and he got yelled at twice.

Novice dog Scenario 2: The handler expects the young dog to make mistakes and considers this a training run, even if they did not enter the class as NFC/FEO/DTIR, where no actual judging is done. The handler has already studied the course before getting the dog out and can concentrate entirely on the dog from crate to ring. The handler does a short lead out keeping the dog's focus (even though really long lead outs have been done before in practice). The first line of jumps and tunnel entrance go well. Coming out of the tunnel, the dog spots the jump crew sitting by the fence. HI! Oh wait, my handler is calling me in a happy voice. They look like fun. I'll go back to them where they praise me for coming. Later in the run, the handler cues an obstacle indecisively. The dog heads for what they think the handler wanted. The handler accepts that the dog could have misunderstood and just allows the off-course to happen. Then they happily call the dog back and continue as if that was all just part of the course. The rest of the run goes well. No Q. The dog is happy. He had fun with his handler and got praised for doing the right things. Trialing is fun!

Novice (or experienced) dog Scenario 3: The handler is always positive with the dog. They accept

that sometimes they haven't trained a skill or the dog can misunderstand, but in general they make a good team. Off-courses are rare and the dog ignores distractions. Now they want to start pushing for the Q or the win. They've trained a 2-on-2-off (2o2o) stopped contact and the dog is solid in training. But with the exciting environment the dog is going faster than in practice or is distracted by the tunnel after the A-Frame. The dog hits the yellow contact zone, but doesn't even try to stop. Should the handler ... A) continue on, happy that the dog hit the contact zone and is going fast or ... B) call the dog

back and emphasis that wasn't the correct A-Frame performance, sacrificing the Q with an intentional off-course?

Here is where your dog's temperament and feelings come into play. If it is a one-off, or with a 'soft' dog who would feel badly about being brought back to do the A-Frame again, maybe you keep going and just plan on more training at home. However, if this is not the first time or your dog can happily accept corrections, then you have 2 choices. Both choices sacrifice the Q in the name of training. You could just hop the dog back up into the 2o2o position, reinforcing to the dog that this is what must be done before you get to continue to play the game. But if your dog does this a lot in training, they may think the correction is part of the behavior. In which case you could try "Fix and Go" where you get to go back an obstacle or two and try the problem area again, maybe with stronger deceleration cues. (Note: you only get to try the fix one time, for one thing. If they still don't perform to your criteria, then you either can continue or leave the ring.) With any of these choices, keep in mind what you want the dog to feel or have learned when coming out of the ring.

Now we get to the hardest part. The handler's feelings. It is HARD to not care about the Q, or how your dog performs, or how it makes you look to the hordes of people watching (just kidding here). But, I'll tell you this, you will look like a more experienced and effective trainer giving your dog a good experience in the ring, rather than yelling at your dog to save the Q. People who focus on getting the Q to the detriment of their dog will struggle with motivation and speed as they progress up in the levels.

So remember, it IS all about the journey. Keep the dog thinking they are awesome. When your dog enjoys agility trialing, success will come more quickly and easily. They will stay connected with you and run faster with more confidence. And that leads to more Qs in the future. Better Practice!

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