

Little Things in Agility for Big Results

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Little things can make a big difference in Agility. These “little” things are not easy. Some of them are quite hard to do and do consistently. But they can be the difference between a great agility dog and a so-so agility dog, or between an injury and a long career.

The first ‘little’ thing should be how long you train your dog. Having little (3-5 minute), snappy training sessions will keep the dog engaged with you and make your training more effective. Anything longer than that can start to feel like work to the dog. You can, and should, have multiple of these mini sessions in a set time period. Just break them up with either a great play session (tugging, sniffy walk, water play in the summer) or actual down time with the dog in a crate or on a mat relaxing. You should not let the dog roam around on their own. Not only because they might get into trouble, but because it teaches them to disconnect from you when something more interesting comes along. If your attention is not on your dog, put them away, on a leash or in a stay while you reset equipment or talk with your instructor or friends.

Within your 3-5 minute training session, minimize inefficiencies by planning your sequence and/or reward method to set you up for the next repetition (Loopy Training). An example would be for the sequence to end near where it starts. Or throw the reward back towards the start. If tugging is their reward, tug your way back to the start. If your start line stay needs work, then work on Stay everywhere else in the dog’s life. Use slingshot starts around a cone/wing or just running with the dog until that Stay is rock solid everywhere else. Otherwise, you could spend every training session working on your startline.



Reward Location and Type is Huge. Think hard about where and how you reward each different thing. Something as simple as always rewarding near the ground on your stopped contacts can keep the dog’s focus down. Holding the reward up so the dog must lift their head could lead to jumping up / off the contact or stopping part way down so it is easier to eat the treat without craning your neck. Do you want the dog focused on you? Reward from your hand. Do you want the dog driving ahead through the obstacles? Use a pre-placed or thrown reward so the dog isn’t looking at you. Want more speed or enthusiasm? Use toys and motion. Want more thoughtfulness? Use food. Let your training goal determine your reward mode.

Have Criteria, Enforce It ALWAYS. You want your dog to perform an obstacle in a certain way. That is your criteria. (Defining those criteria is a whole ‘nother article.) Once we’ve trained the dog to that criterion, it is easy during training for us to ‘enforce’ it with rewards or lack

thereof and having the dog repeat the obstacle. A common example is hopping the dog back into the 2-on-2-off position if they miss the contact or leave early. In trials, good trainers will forfeit a qualifying run if the dog breaks criteria. Most people just tell themselves they will fix that later. This leads to the dog knowing they don’t have to perform to criteria in a trial setting and their performance will tend to degrade even more.

Warm Up and Cool Down. Give your dog (and yourself) enough time and movement before trying to do ‘athletic’ things. Easy walking should progress to more sport specific movements, stretching and speed. After exertion, walk around until respiration has returned to normal. Don’t let that lactic acid stagnate in their muscles. It will cost you (and the dog) when you bring them out again. Keeping everyone hydrated will also help.

Dogs and people work best when they have normal, expected routines. At a trial, have a known Crate-to-Ring and Ring-to-Crate routine (which should include that warm up / cool down). It may involve hanging out ringside or staying away from the ring until right before your run. Test a couple of different methods for getting you and your dog into their optimal head space. Whatever it is, the dog will be more comfortable knowing what is going to happen. Design in some flexibility and a known “Plan B” for when the timeline changes unexpectedly due to equipment or scheduling.

Be aware of which little details can make your training and trialing better. The big thing is to always make it fun for your dog. Because having a little fun everywhere can lead to great fun in your life. Better Practice!

Tips To Keep Your Dog Safe And Comfortable In Extreme Heat

By Fritz Shultz Monfiston

1. Watch out for hot pavement: Limit walks with your dog and do not walk your dog for more than 10-15 minutes. It’s also smart to walk your dog during the cooler early morning or evening hours, in part because hot asphalt can put dogs at risk for burned paw pads. If you aren’t sure how hot the pavement is, Fritz recommends feeling it with the back of your hand to see whether it’s tolerable for dogs. If you are still unsure, walk your dog on grass or use dog booties to help prevent injury.



2. Make sure to give your pet access to shade and cold water while outside: Fritz recommends adding ice to water when possible, and says tree shade and tarps are ideal because they don’t obstruct air flow. A dog house does not provide relief from heat and can actually make it worse.

3. Pets can get sunburns, too: Sunburn is another safety risk that many dog owners may not be aware of. All dogs are susceptible to getting sunburns, however dogs that are hairless, have white or thin coats or light-pigmented noses and eyelids, are at higher risk. There are special sunscreens available to protect pets from sunburn, however it’s important that you only use formulas that are specifically intended as sunscreen for your dog.

4. Optimize your indoor spaces: Fritz recommends leaving your pet at home if you’re planning to go out for the day. He recommends keeping all of your doors and

unscreened windows closed, and using your air conditioner, to keep the house as cool as possible. He also recommends providing different “temperature zones” throughout the house for your pet’s comfort. It’s also important to make sure to provide them with plenty of water, and consider whipping up pet-friendly “pupsicles” as a refreshing treat or buying a cooling body wrap, vest or mat. Never leave your pet in a parked car, since temperatures can quickly rise to dangerous levels even in the shade or with the windows

down.

5. Keep them busy with other activities: Even if it’s too hot for your pet’s regular outdoor activities, it’s still important that they get some kind of mental and physical stimulation to keep them happy and healthy. If you have a yard, consider setting up a kiddie pool in a shady spot or a sprinkler your pet can run through. You can also splash your dog with a garden hose — just make sure the water is cool. When inside you can also hide treats or food around the house to let your pet practice their foraging skills or build your own obstacle course for them using pillows, boxes and other household items.

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