

Agility Volunteers Run the Ring

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect



As a sports competition, dog Agility relies on the participants helping out. If every job was a paid position, many people could not afford the entry fees needed for the trial to be financially viable. While some positions require some knowledge

and experience, many worker positions are great for new agility folks because they give you the best seat in the house. Let's look at who it takes to run a trial ring.

The most numerous volunteer positions are the Ring Crew. Every class needs 3-4 people in the ring to reset knocked bars and displaced tunnels, and to change the obstacles from one height to the next. At the start of the class or between jump height groupings, the Ring Crew should quickly take positions around the ring. The ideal positions are near the obstacles that will require the most adjustment, but still out of the way of the dogs and handlers. The judge may indicate where they would like Ring Crew stationed. While in the ring, a dog may get distracted and come over to check out the Ring Crew. You should turn your head away from the dog, giving them no attention. If needed, stand up and turn away. The dog will lose interest and hopefully go back to their handler to complete the course. Between each dog, the Ring Crew should reset any knocked bars or other obstacles that may have moved, ensuring each team is presented with the same course and protecting the safety of the dogs. As Ring Crew, you have 'ringside' seating and get to see the good, the bad and the ugly, right up close. Since mainly seated, it is good for tired feet.

Some challenging obstacles for the ring crew are the specialty jumps. For the panel, you must add or subtract individual panels. For the double jump, you set the back bar at regulation height and the front bar at either the regulation height or one jump height lower, depending on if it should be a square or an ascending jump. At heights greater than 4", there is usually an additional bar at an angle on the back set of jump cups, to indicate to the dog that this is a spread and not just a normal bar jump. For the triple jump, each of the 3 bars is always ascending by jump heights to the full height bar at the back. The broad jump requires a measuring device to ensure the length of the obstacle is correct to the jump height. The tire jump usually has marks for each height. Some organizations also need the A-Frame and Table heights changed according to the jump height. If the timer eyes adjust by height that is also a task for the ring crew.

Also in the ring is the Leash Runner. This person waits until the handler places or tosses their leash aside and the dog starts the course. Wait to get the leash until the dog has started the course so you do not distract them. The Leash Runner then takes the leash to the exit area and places it in a designated spot for the handler to retrieve after their run. Like the ring crew, if the dog does get distracted and comes up to you, just turn away and ignore the dog. This is

a great position for checking out everybody's gear. Seeing how things look and feel may give you ideas about what kind of equipment you want for your dog. The Leash Runner should also help when resetting jump heights. This position keeps you moving if you are the type that gets bored or stiff. The most challenging part of this job is not to get distracted and forget to go get the leash.

Outside the ring, and keeping the trial moving along, is the Gate Steward, one of the more multifaceted positions. The Gate Steward has many job requirements:

- Having the next 3-4 dogs ready to go.
- Sending the next person into the ring when the judge has indicated.
- Dealing with changes in the run-order. Valid reasons for changes are: to facilitate people working in other jump heights and running their own dog, unexpected pooping :) by the next dog, etc. Non-valid reasons are: "I don't want to be first", "I like running Fido before Fifi".
- Informing the Scribe when a dog needs to be moved in the run-order, so the correct score sheet is used and people's scores don't get mixed up.
- Indicating when the last dog of a particular jump height is going into the ring, so the ring crew knows to be ready to change jump heights.
- As Gate Steward, you must be heard by the competitors waiting for their turn, the scribe, the judge and the ring crew. Even competitors who are further down the list benefit by hearing the run-order so they can plan to be at the ring when needed. Good Gate Stewards are constantly reading out the next 4-8 dogs, turning to project their voice to the appropriate parties.

The most challenging part of this position is being loud enough to be heard and efficient at getting people into the ring; without making people feel yelled at, rushed or bullied. It takes some finesse.

Since agility is a timed event, there is a Timer. This person uses a timing control box or stopwatch and tells the scribe what the dog's run time was. When using electronic timers, the judge will program the control box with the maximum course time, any game buzzers and whether the dog's path may take them through the timers more than once. The control box should show if the electronic eyes are functioning. Once the judge and the scribe are ready, the Timer then pushes a button to give the handler a "Go" or "Ready". When the dog takes the first obstacle the time automatically starts and, as they take the last obstacle, the time ends. If everything goes to plan, it is an easy job. But there are often hiccups. The Timer must ensure that the time starts as the dog takes the first obstacle and ends when they take the last obstacle. If it does not, or if the table is the last obstacle, they must push a Start/Stop button. If the dog goes through the timer eyes unexpectedly which stops the time, the Timer must push a Restart button. The challenge of this job is to be constantly alert and react correctly and swiftly to any timing malfunctions.

The Scribe is tasked with watching the judge and writing down any faults or points they call or signal on the correct score sheet. Their job starts even before the class starts.



While the handlers are walking the course, they should check the run-order for any early changes and arrange the scribe sheets to match. In multi-ring trials, participants may mark their dog with a "C" indicating they may have a conflicting run in another ring. The Scribe usually just turn those scribe sheets horizontally in the stack as an indicator. When a handler enters the ring, confirm that the sheet you are writing on is for that team (either because you hear the Gate Steward or handler announce their dog). Let the Timer know you are ready. When the run starts the scribe should be

only watching the judge, not the dog. The judge will use hand signals (often there is a cheat sheet or description of the hand signals) or their voice to call out faults and points. The scribe should write down things exactly as the judge signals/calls them. Writing down the points or faults in the order the judge calls them is important if people come back later with questions. At the end of the run, write down the time as told to you by Timer. This position takes a lot of sustained concentration. It is crucial that you do not get distracted and miss a call from the judge, making that team's run or the overall results invalid.

Ring Crew, Leash Runner, Gate Steward, Timer and Scribe are the lifeblood of the Agility Ring. Without them, trials could not be held. While these are volunteer positions, most organizations give some sort of compensation like coupons, raffle chances, refreshments/lunch. If you've never done a position, there is always someone who can give you on-the-job training or let you shadow them. Don't worry about being perfect at a job. Everyone is human and makes mistakes. And just like agility, you'll get better if you practice, so Better Practice!

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