

Getting Distance in Agility

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Practice Makes Pawfect

Agility competitions are usually held in a ring that measures 100' x 100' or larger. The dog's path can be over 600' long. It makes sense for us humans to figure out how to avoid running that much. Since most dogs can run faster than most humans, it also benefits us time-wise to have the dog independently run the course without our having to keep up. How we do that is by training the dog to leave us and go take obstacles "way over there". That may be sending the dog forward ahead of you or sending them in one direction while we move away from their path or even in the opposite direction.

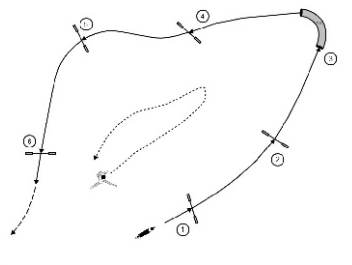
There are several facets to getting some distance between you and your dog. One influence is the dog's genetic make-up. Some breeds were explicitly bred to work at a distance from their handler. Examples are herding breeds or hunting dogs. Other breeds were bred for companionship and may need more training to be comfortable working away from their handler.

A key skill needed for distance work is having independent obstacle performance. This means that the dog fully understands

how they are supposed to perform each obstacle, without any help from the handler. The handler doesn't have to wave their arms in a certain way, point to the contact zone, be exactly X distance from the dog, or move/stop at a particular time. As the dog learns how they are supposed to do an obstacle, it becomes less relevant what the handler is doing.

Closely related to independent obstacle performance is obstacle commitment. Once the handler directs the dog to the next obstacle, the dog says "Got It" and will continue towards that obstacle and complete it fully, again regardless of what the handler is doing or which direction they are running or stopping.

All this sounds wonderful. Now how do we train it? First, we train the dog on all the different obstacles. To start with, we will be right beside them, directing and rewarding their efforts. Reward placement is a primary factor in developing the dog's understanding of obstacles and how we



want the dog to perform them. Looking ahead to distance work, we don't necessarily want the rewards to always come from our hand. We want the reward to come from the location we would like the dog to finish in.

One example is a forward send: sending the dog ahead of us over a jump or a series of jumps to their reward at the end of the line. That reward can be pre-placed, thrown ahead of us, or mechanically supplied with a remote treat dispenser. When the dog is driving ahead of us to get to the reward location, we can add a "Go On" or similar verbal cue. Another example of a forward send would be to direct the dog to a favorite obstacle, like a tunnel, and gradually increase the distance away from the obstacle. As we increase the distance from the obstacle, we can also add in some contrary movement, like sending the dog towards the obstacle while we start moving away from it. If the reward always happens at the completion of the obstacle, then the dog should happily move away

from us toward the reward location, even when we start moving in ways that don't support the dog's path forward.

The other type of distance in agility is lateral distance. This is when the handler and the dog are moving roughly parallel to each other, but there is a large distance between them. This is also trained gradually. Initially the handler would run a foot or so away from the dog, then repeat the exercise adding 1-2 feet more distance away from the dog on each repetition. As long as the dog's reward arrives on their own path, they become very comfortable working at greater distances from the handler. Eventually you can add a cue like "Go Out" and reward them for moving even further away from you to take an obstacle.

Notice in the diagram how much longer the dog's path is vs. the human's. Having the ability to start with some lateral distance, send your dog ahead of you to the tunnel, and push them out for that #5 jump, gives you a great head start for the rest of the course. Without those distance skills, you are stuck running alongside your dog, and your dog is stuck running at your speed. So, send them on and send them out. Better Practice!

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