

# Agility; the Big Contacts

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Practice Makes Pawfect

Today let's take a detailed look at the two largest pieces of agility equipment; the A-Frame and the Dog Walk. We will start with their physical appearance.



**Dog Walk in front & A Frame in back**

The A-Frame consists of 2 large pieces each normally 3' wide by 9' tall, hinged together at the top and connected midway by an adjustable chain so the height can be modified. The Dog Walk is composed of 3 planks, normally 12 inches wide by 12 feet long. The middle plank is supported horizontally at 4 feet high with the other two planks functioning as ramps. Newer A-Frames and Dog Walks have a rubberized surface for grip while older or training versions may have a painted surface with sand mixed in. Both obstacles may have slats on the ramps for additional climbing traction. Versions for training and small dog may also be shorter lengths, but traction is always essential.

Both A-Frame and Dog Walk have short yellow sections from the ground up indicating where the dog should make contact as they run over the ramp sections. For the A-Frame the yellow contact zone is usually 42" high. For the Dog Walk the contact zone may be 36" or 42" depending on which organization's rules are being used.

The A-Frame is wide and tall, with a steeper angle. While the overall competition height of the obstacle depends on the organizations' rules and often the size of the dogs, most are set from 5' to 5'6" tall.



**The Dog Walk also has contact zones**

The Dog Walk is long and narrow, with a much shallower angle since the 12' ramp only goes up 4' to the bridge section. The challenge here is to stay on the narrow plank at speed, especially if turning to or from another obstacle.

Because of their size and cost, most people don't have these obstacles at home to practice on. However, training

equipment is available that is suitable for a backyard. Check Google for a 'contact trainer' or 'agility travel plank'.

Now let's talk about how they are performed.

The dog's job is to run over these obstacles as quickly as possible, while still putting at least one part of one paw in the yellow contact zone. As most dog handlers find out, these two goals (speed and touching the contact zone) are very hard to get at the same time. Which is more important? Touching the contact zone is most important. Primarily because of safety for the dog. You don't want your dog leaping from high off of the equipment and getting hurt. Because of this possibility, all organizations consider missing the contact zone to be a 'fault' in competition and you will not place well in your class.

But agility is also a timed event. The dog and handler team that gets around the course fastest without any mistakes (cleanly) wins. As you can see on the big televised competitions, those dogs are fast!

There are two basic strategies for how you want your dog to perform these obstacles. The first one is a "running" contact. The dog runs over the obstacle and either naturally or is trained to step into the contact zones without slowing down or stopping. Some dogs (especially smaller dogs) may have strides that naturally do this, but most dogs still need to be trained to run all the way down to the bottom without

jumping off. Fast, long striding dogs have to be trained to adjust their stride so their feet hit in the contact zone while running at speed since their stride can easily carry them over the yellow without touching.

The second performance style is a "stopped" contact. The dog is trained to run to the bottom and stop. This is a slower performance, but more certain of touching that all important contact zone. A common method has the dog's front feet on the ground and their back feet on the obstacle ("2-on-2-off", also referenced as 2o2o). Other people train the dog to have all 4 feet either on the obstacle at the bottom or on the ground at the base of the obstacle (often trained with a mat or frame showing the dog where to be). Once the dog stops in the proper position, the handler then releases the dog to continue running the course. That pause may be obvious or just a split second.

While those are the basic styles, many handlers mix and match. They may have a "running" A-Frame and a "stopped" Dog Walk. Or they may train a "stopped" performance, but do a 'quick release' in major competitions such that it looks almost like a running performance.

A good contact obstacle performance can make or break your competition run. But even if you never compete, having the confidence to climb and traverse these obstacles quickly and safely is rewarding and fun for you and your dog.

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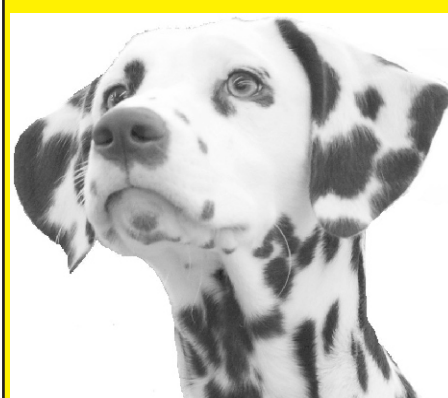
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