

# Agility; Making It Last

By Christy Gammage,  
Practice Makes Pawfect

Agility makes many demands on the dog's body. As in any sport, injuries can happen. But there are a number of things we can do to help keep the dog healthy and happy.

First, start with a healthy dog. Is your dog at the correct weight? Check online for how to use a body score to evaluate your dog's current condition. You are looking for a score of 5 or 4 (Ideal); ribs easily felt, definite waist behind the ribs when viewed from above and the side. If they are a little chunky, lower their food intake and start using their normal food as treats when you think they deserve something.

Whether trim or chunky, make sure they are getting plenty of exercise outside of the agility ring. Walks are good, hikes are even better. Running around in the backyard works, but just hanging out there doesn't count. Are they moving easily or a little stiff? Get your dog checked out by your vet and address any problems before starting to increase their exercise or do more strenuous agility. Look into conditioning exercises and equipment appropriate for dogs if they need to build or balance muscles.

A good diet is a basic necessity to have an athletic dog. Many agility enthusiasts also use joint supplements to help protect from the extra wear

and tear. See what your vet suggests about nutrition and supplements. Glucosamine Sulfate and Chondroitin Sulfate are the most common (and are taken by many agility handlers as well).

**How you 'do' agility is also very important.**

**Warm-Up and Cool Down.** Before each session, start with a good warm-up for you and the dog. Begin by just walking around and gradually increase the intensity until all the muscles are warmed up and ready to really exert. And at the end of your sessions, don't just throw the dog in a crate or car. All athletes need a nice cool down. Walking around lets the heart beat return to normal and avoids muscles soreness and stiffness.

**Do Less.** When training, the fewer repetitions you need to do, the less wear and tear on the dog. Bonus: the dog will be happier and more willing on those repetitions. So how do you advance quickly by doing less?

Plan your training session before you even start your warm-up. What are you going to work on? Set up the environment for the dog to succeed and to progress. The more efficient you can make your training sessions, the shorter they can be for the dog.

Practice your own handling maneuvers without the dog. Walk,

then run through the moves you are going to do. Visualize your dog and where you expect them to be. Really try performing exactly what you will need to do when doing it 'for real'. Practice without them until you are fluent, then bring them out to play. When working with your dog, you should be focusing on them, not what you are supposed to be doing.

Train in small steps, starting with a solid foundation. A dog that doesn't know what they are doing, where their body parts are or where they are going is a serious injury risk. Does the dog have all the micro-skills needed for what you are asking? It is much easier on the dog to get those small skills in place individually than have them try to figure it all out at once. A confident dog is a fast, happy dog which is what you want for agility.

Use hoops and lower jump heights for training to avoid excessive impact on the dog's body. Most skills are more about the approach, angle, speed, joining obstacles into sequences and other performance aspects than the jump height. Once all the other pieces are in place, a few practices at full height are all you need before a competition. Also think about what height you want the dog to jump in competition and then find an organization that will accommodate that.



Stretching the spine

Weaves are very physically challenging, so don't drill the dog on full sets of weaves. The contact equipment can also be jarring with hard impacts when the dogs are going full speed.

Don't try anything your dog is not physically or mentally ready for. Puppy or young dog? Work on foundations, not jumps/weaves/contacts. If coming off of a vacation, keep the intensity low. If the dog is worried about the environment, do easy stuff until they can focus on harder tasks. Taking a wrong obstacle in training is easier on the dog physically (and mentally) than demanding an abrupt change of direction by screaming at the dog.

Finally: don't let your training sessions drag on. If your dog is successful, great! Do you really need to attempt exactly that again? If something is unsuccessful, stop, and think about why and what you could do differently. Immediately trying it again will likely be a wasted repetition. And when you hear yourself saying "Just one more time", Stop, you don't need to do it one more time. If things are really falling apart, reward something simple then call it a day and try fresh on another day with more planning.

Keeping your athlete in top condition, knowing how to perform what is asked and not burned out is the best way to have fun and success in agility for a long time.



Shoulder stretches

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