

Agility Is Rewarding

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Practice Makes Pawfect

Why does your dog do agility? Why do the best agility dogs do it extremely fast and enthusiastically? Because they like it or even love it. Why do they like it? Because they get great rewards for doing it. "Well, what if I just make my dog do it?" It is off-leash and you want speed, so you can't really make them do it. Force and coercion would cause the dog to avoid it or go really slow so they don't make any mistakes and get punished. Knowing how, when, where, and why to reward your dog is absolutely key to training a great agility dog.



Identifying what to use to reward your dog is the first step. The cardinal rule of rewards is that the DOG must actually like and want it. You may think this reward is great, but if the dog doesn't want it then you are wasting your time. There are 3 broad categories: food, toys, other.

You may think Food is a pretty easy choice. However, you need to pick things that can be quickly fed to the dog, goes down smoothly, and doesn't crumble into a million pieces in your pocket/pouch or on the floor. You will be feeding them a lot of these, so use very small pieces and maybe a variety of treats so they don't get bored with the reward. If you are tossing treats

on the ground, they need to be easily seen and picked up by the dog. Small brown bits thrown in tall grass will slow down training as the dog snuffles around trying to find them or you try pointing them out to the dog. Conversely, slices of white cheese may blend in with and adhere to smooth tile. Something that the dog really likes in the house (kibble) may not be interesting enough when outside, so you need options with different values to the dog (like steak when squirrels are present). Having a trail mix in your training bag let's you reward great effort with a great reward and OK effort with just an OK reward.

While some dogs are "food hounds", others go Toy crazy. Choice of toy is important. Will you be throwing the toy? Tugging with the toy? In all cases, you need to be a big part of the toy-play picture. A dog that runs off with the toy and plays by themselves is not going

to make training easy. You may actually have to work with your dog outside of training to figure out how they like to play with the toy and with you. Some dogs love fetch or tug, others need to learn to love these before you can use them in training as a reward. There are also toys that can contain food like a Lotus Ball or Treat



Hugger or tug pouches. These are things you can tug with or throw and the dog can either retrieve it for you to open or the dog can learn how to open it themselves to get the treat(s) out.



The Other category involves using activities or environmental things to reward the dog. "Go Sniff" is one type of reward. Sending your water-loving dog to play in the pool is another. Using things in the environment (like tossing a found stick or a bunch of leaves in the air) can be used as a play reward. If your dog finds it distracting or would pick it up to play with, you need to think of ways to use that as a reward (safely, of course). Chase games with you is a great way to reward your dog and build your relationship at the same time.

Now that you have a bunch of things you know your dog likes and would consider Rewards, you need to figure out when those different things can be used in your training. Food is usually a quicker reward than a toy because you have to spend time playing with or having them retrieve the toy. Toys tend to amp up the excitement level so food may be a better choice for initial training when the dog needs to think. Then once they understand, switch to a toy for enthusiasm and speed. Environmental rewards work when you don't have toy or food handy.

For many behaviors, How and Where the dog gets the reward is key.

Training duration behaviors like a start-line Stay lend themselves to calmly giving the reward to the dog while in position, so food is a good choice. How the reward is given (above the head, on the ground, at your side, while moving) will enhance or detract from your training. More active behaviors, like weave poles, are better if the reward comes as the dog is exiting the obstacle, so a thrown or placed reward is best. Rewarding at a distance from the handler can be used for training distance behaviors.

When and How Much should you reward your dog? Well... what gets rewarded, gets repeated, so reward what you want to see again. Don't reward for nothing (unless you are training for nothing). Immediately rewarding all the small things helps keep undesirable things from creeping into the behavior. Always make the reward proportional to the quality of what the dog gives you. Did they do it OK? That gets an OK reward. Did they do it Fantastic? Then "jackpot" them with better or multiple rewards. Most dogs can count better than they can judge quantity. Lots of small treats is more of a reward than that same amount of food as one large chunk. Stretching out the reward time is what makes a good jackpot reward. A quick tug session is good, an extended play session with you rolling around on the ground with them will make more of an impression on them. Also, taking a break or moving on to a different task is also a bit of a reward for most dogs.

Happy (and Rewarding) Practicing!



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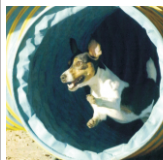
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