

Agility Needs Proprio – what?

By Christy Gammage,
Practice Makes Pawfect

Dog Agility requires the dog to run fast with quick changes of direction, jump over or through obstacles, climb up and down ramps, run along narrow and moving boards. If the dog doesn't keep track of where all their body parts are then injuries can occur. The scientific term is Proprioception. From J.L. Taylor, in Encyclopedia of Neuroscience, 2009: "Proprioception, or kinesthesia, is the sense that lets us perceive the location, movement, and action of parts of the body." A less technical term is body awareness.

Watching clumsy puppies gives you a good (and cute) example of a dog learning how to move their bodies. Watching a dog miss the Dog Walk with a back paw is a scary example. Speed and height worsen any consequences of poor body awareness. Some dogs are cautious, slow and take the time to place their feet. Other dogs can be like a wrecking ball attacking the course with little regard for the knocked over bumps, bruises, or worse injuries that can happen. The good news is there is a lot you can do to help your dog develop a good sense of where their feet are and how to place them precisely. Both speed demons



and cautious dogs will benefit from exercises that make them aware of their bodies while in movement.

One thing you can do in your home is to teach your dog to back-up. Walking backwards uses different muscles, brings your dog's awareness to their backend and what they are stepping on. Backing up straight requires the dog to use both sides of their body evenly. There are multiple ways to teach backing up: capturing and rewarding when a dog takes a step back, using a treat to move into the dog's space and letting them have it when they step back, using a channel of barriers (like the couch and a coffee table) to increase the

number of straight steps, or teaching the dog they get treats when their back feet are on a specific surface (like a dog bed or bath mat). The last method also gets the dog thinking about what is under their feet, not just where they are. More advanced back-up movements may include backing up to a slightly raised or slanted platform (like an A-Frame).

Another exercise is to teach the dog to walk or trot over low bars. These are referred to as Cavaletti and originate from the horse world. The dog moves steadily across a series of poles set for a normal stride. They must focus on placing front and back feet in the space between the bars. Take care that the bars do not roll if the dog steps on them. Start with the bars on the ground, raising them as the dog becomes comfortable with the exercise to about 1/2 the dog's hock height. More advanced sequences have the bars arranged in an arc, slightly different heights or in a random pattern.

Before your dog climbs onto any agility equipment, they should be comfortable moving onto, getting off and moving around on a slightly raised platform. Mistakenly stepping off a 4" platform is not dangerous but still teaches the dog where the boundaries of the platform are in relation to their feet. The smaller the

platform, the more care the dog must take in keeping their feet on it. Low sided boxes can also be used with the dog climbing into the box. Small stable platforms that only fit 2 feet can be used to train the dog to put their front or rear (more challenging) feet on.

Once the dog is trained to place their front feet on a small platform, teach the dog to move their hindquarters around the platform in a pivot. Teach them to swing around in both directions. One direction is always harder for the dog. Once the dog is comfortably pivoting around on their front end, try getting the dog to move fully sideways with their front feet on a longer raised platform or just on the ground.

When you graduate to working with wobbly platforms, the dog becomes very aware of their balance and center of gravity. Wobbly surfaces include riding in a car, tippy boards / low teeters, wobble boards, and inflatable conditioning equipment like peanuts or balance disks.

Remember, agility is a fast-moving sport, so static positions are only part of the picture for improving your dog's proprioception. Once they are happily working slowly, have them move onto or through these exercises in a more dynamic fashion. Happy Practicing!

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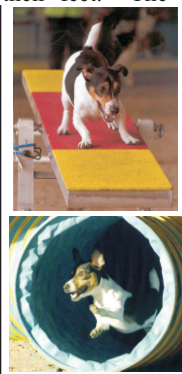
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