


Boost Your Agility Progress

By Christy Gammage,
Practice Makes Pawfect



Everyone wants to excel quickly at whatever they are attempting to learn. Agility is no different. But it takes more work than just showing up to a lesson once a week. You practice (occasionally) between lessons? That is a good first step, but that isn't enough to supercharge your learning. Progressing quickly can also be cheaper since you are not paying for additional lessons to cover things you haven't mastered yet. Let's look at ways to get you to the next level more quickly.

First step, start a training journal. It can be a simple paper notebook or note application on your phone. Write entries for the date and the skills you practiced on that day. Make some comments on what went well and what didn't. If something needs work, note how to break it down better next time. If something was good, you can plan on upping the difficulty or proofing that skill. Proofing means to prove that you and your dog can do that skill in any location and with distractions

like other dogs running around or strange noises.

Another great tool is video. No need to buy anything, just use your phone's camera. If you have a tripod, great. Otherwise just prop it up somewhere that you can see the whole working area. Horizontal format is best. You don't need to video everything, but if you are struggling with something grab a video and have your instructor review it with you at your next lesson. Likewise, if your instructor keeps telling you the same thing, get a video so that you can see what they are seeing and then discuss it with them.

If you are competing, always try to get someone to video your run so you can see where the wheels fell off the bus. It is often earlier than where the actual error occurs. If it was a smooth and flawless run then we just upload it to Facebook and make everyone jealous. Hey, everyone needs positive feedback too.

So, you've got your training journal, you are quick to record and review videos of your practice/lessons/competitions, and you practice a couple of times between your weekly lessons. How do you come up with what you should be practicing? Your first resource is your instructor, so just ask them what you should be working on for homework. They may give you a specific

drill or just a general suggestion. You can augment that suggestion by doing some book or internet research for exercises on that skill. If they suggest your Rear Crosses are weak, type that into your browser and see what you can set up at home. Working on the basics, such as just a head turn as you cross behind the dog, is something you can do with no equipment at all.

If you aren't taking weekly lessons, then your training journal should keep you from backtracking, but it may not point to a way ahead. This calls for some self-examination. Find a list of agility skills and try to break them into basic (recall, stay, FC, etc) and more advanced (contacts, distance, fancy moves, etc) skills. Rate yourself on a scale of 1-5 for each. Anything in the basic group that is less than a 4 is where you should focus. People always want to feel good about themselves so tend to practice those things they do well. This self-eval method points out where you need to focus the most. This doesn't mean you can't practice the easy things, but if that is all you are doing you won't improve. In each practice session focus on one new skill, one existing skill that needs improvement and one skill that you can do pretty well.

But what if the problem skill is the A-Frame performance and you don't have

access to an A-Frame between lessons? Yes, some things need the actual equipment (like a running A-Frame) but others (say a 2-on-2-off A-Frame) can be worked on with representative objects, like the bottom of stairs or a ramp. Break down the skill and be creative about what you can safely do to mockup a substitute.

But you have no time to practice? Micro practices of less than 5 minutes are great at solidifying skills. Build these into your daily routine such as at feeding time or on walks. Practice verbal spins before putting the bowl down or Front and Rear crosses while you are walking your dog. Build a jump grid in your back yard for your dog to come through when you call them inside. Again, creativity is the key.

And let's not forget the very basics of agility: dog training. Anything you can do to become a better dog trainer will help you in agility. Teaching tricks, understanding reward methodologies and ways to improve the dog's (and your) body awareness and coordination are all great ways to improve agility.

Gaining skills quickly takes work on your part. But you and your dog will have more fun if you are succeeding and moving forward together.

Happy Practicing!



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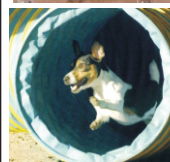
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