

# Agility Training vs. Handling

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect



Photos by William Kleinfelder



It takes two to be an agility team; the dog and you. In this article we are going to talk about you. As you learn and practice agility, you will wear many hats: team owner and financier, manager, bus driver, dog's personal assistant, conditioning coach, and more. Arguably, the most important two jobs are Trainer and Handler. These are complementary

skills that really impact how well you succeed on the agility field. A great handler can make up for some gaps in training. Great training can make handling much easier and/or open up better options for handling. (Example: You can either train a solid start line stay for a long lead-out or be prepared to race your dog down the line of jumps to that tricky tunnel entrance.) Being weak at either of these skills may limit your agility career to just backyard fun (and nothing wrong with that if you don't want to compete). Being great at both skills will lead you to accolades and the podium. Let's examine these two skill sets.

Training your dog to do the obstacles safely is a prerequisite for doing any kind of agility. Of course, a mentor/instructor can speed up the learning process as they teach you how to teach your dog. But being a good trainer means you know what to train and when, how to break down complex goals into workable steps, what/when to reward, and how to motivate your student (the dog). The major goals of any agility dog trainer should be 1) for the dog to understand their job and 2) to respond appropriately to direction given by the handler.

We will start with the dog's understanding of his job. The more the dog understands what the desired performance is for an obstacle, the less the handler has to manage the dog for that obstacle. For example: does the dog know how to correctly perform the A-Frame independently? This means the dog, on their own, would be setting a straight approach path to the A-Frame at the appropriate speed, moving quickly over the top, touching the yellow contact zones, and leaving the A-Frame more or less straight off the bottom (and for 2-on-2-off 'stopped' contacts, only leave when the handler says it is OK to continue). Alternatively, does the handler have to shape the dog's path and speed for a straight approach to the A-Frame, then encourage the dog to quickly get over the top and down to the bottom contact zone. Does the handler need to be at the end to help the dog to touch or even stay on that bottom contact? Does the handler need to adjust their speed running past the obstacle to encourage the correct performance by the dog? The well-trained dog can be sent to the obstacle from any speed or direction and they successfully negotiate it by themselves, regardless of where the handler is and how they are moving. The well-handled dog still meets all the criteria for a good performance, but you can see how much more involved the handler must be to achieve the same outcome.

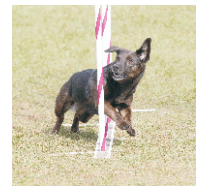
The second major training goal is for the dog to respond appropriately to directions given by the handler. Those directions may come as body gestures, handler location on the course, or verbal cues. Instructions may include going to the correct obstacle, turning left or right and by how much, taking (or not taking) the obstacle in front of them based on information provided by the handler. This training involves teaching the dog what to do when the handler says or does "x". For example: to be able to use verbal cues when running a course, you must teach the dog what the verbal means. Does the word mean an obstacle type they should go find, a direction to turn, a speed? Non-verbal cues are even more important to dogs. You have to train the dog that when you hold your arm in a certain way, you want them to go away, or come closer, or run towards where you are pointing. You are essentially teaching the dog a language based on what you are doing with your body and where you are on the course relative to

them. The more consistent and clearly trained that language, the quicker your success.

The beginning stages of training look a whole lot like handling. You, as the trainer, will be using your body (and reward techniques) to explain to the dog what you want. Gradually, you want to move yourself out of the picture as the dog gains an understanding and can work at a distance from you, the handler.

As a final note, being a great Handler involves both strategy and athletic ability on your part. You should know when and where to run to be in the correct position to help the dog perform correctly. Being a great Trainer takes a lot of planning, time and effort before stepping into the competition ring. Both are great ways to play with your dog.

Happy Practicing!



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