

# Perfect at Home

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

“Why won’t my dog do X when we are in a new place / at a trial? He does it perfectly at home.” There could be many reasons. We will start with a basic one. Dogs (and other animals) are very contextual learners.

Let’s take a look at their (assumed) thought process. “The human has taught me that in the evenings, during our normal training time, when the obstacle is over by the fence where I learned how to do this and they are wearing their training gear or have a toy/food with them ... that I get rewarded for doing X. I can do that!” “Wait, you are standing in a different place. Does that mean something?” “Still do X? OK.” “But now you have moved the obstacle to the other side of the yard. Am I supposed to do something different?” “OK, I still get rewarded when I do X.” “Hey, you are running now. I want to keep up, not do X.” “Oh, you still want me to do X and will reward me better than the fun I would have running with you. Got it.” “More obstacles make this more fun. I can go fast! I still have to do X? All right, but this is harder.”



But moving to a brand-new location (training center, competition, etc.) adds a myriad of new things, all at once, which can be overwhelming. Depending on the dog’s fundamental temperament, they may be worried about things in the environment, or just very excited. So a second cause of performance breakdown is the dog’s emotional state. No one works well when they are worried, unsettled, or over-the-top excited. Compare it to getting your child to sit still when a Disney character comes over to your table. And all that stimulation can also cause fatigue. Think of a child’s melt-down before naptime. Additionally, any sort of fear will take precedence over whatever you are asking of them. The dog needs to be emotionally comfortable to perform their best.

A third reason your dog doesn’t work as well away from home is just the sheer number of distractions in a new place. These can include new sights, sounds, smells, surfaces, and movement not even related to the agility field. Training for this involves what most people call ‘socialization’ but may be better described as ‘exposure’. Taking the dog to new places, making it an enjoyable but not over-the-top experience helps them learn to acclimate to new environments quickly. I’m not talking about having your dog play with other dogs. On the contrary, take your dog places and let them know they should ignore other dogs because they will not get to interact with them. Asking the dog for simple tasks and rewarding generously will teach your dog that they can still work with you while other things are happening around them. This will help with both their mental state and their ability to tune other things out and focus on the tasks you provide.

Another difference between agility at home and agility elsewhere is that the equipment and footing is different. The obstacles might look or feel different. Are the contact obstacle surfaces slicker, or more grippy? The dogwalk

boards may bounce more or less. Things like a teeter totter might move or sound differently. Are the weave poles stiffer or more whippy? Do the dog’s feet sink further into the ground or is it a slicker surface than they are used to? These types of things can make a dog unsure or throw them off their game as they adjust. The more you can practice in different locations and on different equipment, the better. In many places you can rent agility facilities for practice or participate in fun runs / matches much more cheaply than getting exposure through trialing, with the added benefit of being able to reward your dog in the ring (bonus for their mental state).

Much as different equipment stresses your dog, you may be different at a trial than when you are practicing at home. The added stress of getting to the venue, being ready to go in the ring at the correct time, performance nerves, and/or a competitive streak; all can make your handling different than the dog is accustomed to. Proofing your dog for independent obstacle performance, traveling to other locations to practice, participating in fun runs and feeling confident that your team is up to the challenge will help you handle many of a trial’s special stressors.

Having proofed all kinds of variables at home and on the road, you now have a confident dog that can easily perform all kinds of tricks in a busy environment. But the moment you are in a situation where the dog knows the reward won’t be coming, everything falls apart. One option is to train the dog to enjoy something you will always have available (praise, petting, playing). A second option is teaching the dog that a reward will be coming, just not immediately. Both of these are based on ‘behavior chains’. When things happen in a known order, the dog can anticipate that the reward will come at the end of the chain. The dog’s happy feelings about the reward at the end will bleed back into the activities right before the reward. If you always praise/pet then give a treat, the dog will learn to like praise/petting. If the dog gets praised (and then a treat) for taking a tunnel, they will like tunnels. If the dog does X then you send them to the tunnel, that becomes the reward. The goal is to make doing the obstacles intrinsically rewarding for the dog. Then the treats can sit outside of the ring for the end of the run. All of this involves gradually building a reward history and expanding what the dog finds rewarding into things you want the dog to do.

Now your dog knows their job, in all circumstances, with all kinds of distractions and best of all, they love it. Happy Practicing!



So now your dog does it correctly 99% of the time in your backyard. You’ve moved the obstacle around. You’ve changed where your position is relative to the obstacle. You can send them ahead of you over the obstacle. You can call them to you over the obstacle. You can be 20 feet away from the obstacle. You’ve added your motion to the picture for the dog. You’ve added some speed that the dog may have to adjust for. Good to go, right? “But in the mornings, Fifi is out in her backyard. She looks like more fun.” So, you keep explaining to the dog that they will get rewarded for a correct performance, even when new or different things are introduced into the backyard. You’ve decorated the obstacles, invited friends over to watch, worn costumes, trained with friendly loose dogs running around. Building the distractions up, one at a time. All this is called ‘proofing’ your dog’s performance.

Hours:  
M-F 8-6 S 8-5  
Closed Sunday

941-371-6591  
Fax:  
941-378-9754

Specializing in Purina Feeds

We carry feed, ranch supplies, hardware, western wear, home & garden and pet supplies

[Stockyard84@verizon.net](mailto:Stockyard84@verizon.net)  
1010 Cattlemen Road, Sarasota, Florida 34232

**GOOD APPLE**  
EQUINE CONSIGNMENT

Daily discounts based on tag color, up to 30% off. Items get marked down daily. Come in and find your next treasure.

Florida's Largest Equine Consignment Store

255 SW 60th Ave. • Ocala, FL 34474 • 352-789-6544  
[www.GoodAppleEquine.com](http://www.GoodAppleEquine.com)

The place for dog sporting fun  
Orlando, FL

Agility Field Rentals  
Trials and Seminars  
Fun Runs  
Structured Practice

Christy Gammage  
● [agility@gammage.org](mailto:agility@gammage.org)  
● [PracticeMakesPawfect.com](http://PracticeMakesPawfect.com)