Agility – How to Fail Well

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Hopefully, you are going to fail. Wait! What? Yes, you are going to fail as you learn agility. Learning implies trying something new that you don't know how to do. Since people and dogs are always unique, experimentation is also part of training. Improving your skills implies pushing the limit of what you can already do. In all these cases; errors, mistakes, wrong turns or falling short of a goal are going to happen at some point. Don't be discouraged. This is actually progress. Here's why.
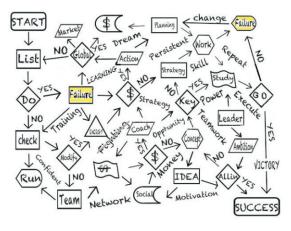
Let's start with learning something new. A great way to learn something is to break it down into its smallest components. Learn each component separately, then start stringing them together. Example for jumping over a jump: step over a bar on the ground, cross between two uprights, step over a bar between two uprights, raise the bar just off the ground, etc. At each step there is a small chance of 'failure'. Done well, failure is unlikely because you are taking incremental steps where each step is so small it is a natural progression. But if the dog steps on the bar or goes around the uprights, what are the consequences? Really nothing, other than maybe no reward for the dog. You just try again. The lack of reward tells the dog that action doesn't pay so, no sense doing that again.

New handlers should be learning the same way. A front cross can be broken into the what, the why, the when, the footwork, practicing at a standstill, adding some movement, adding in the dog, starting in a walk, adding some speed, adding an obstacle, etc. Again, no real ramifications if the handler doesn't get it right in the learning phase. They just try again. Still, they could trip or fall if they try progressing more quickly than their coordination allows. But in general, failures during learning are both expected and non-issues.

Advancing on; if learning the basics was easy, some people expect the whole journey to be easy. Learning; however, often comes in fits and starts. Expect some things to be easy and others to be hard. People and dogs are all different so judging how quickly to progress is more art

than science. Missteps will be made. These failures provide great information about how well the subject (dog or human) understands or can execute the skill. Expect to backup to previous steps to start moving forward again. Not addressing any obvious or even subtle failures can stall progress much more than the time it would take to go back a step or bolster the skill with a different method.

Study that 'failure'. Was it just part of the process of developing the skill, you skipped a step, lack of understanding, or a more serious lack of a foundational skill? When running sequences, sometimes you need to look a couple of obstacles before the actual 'failure'. After one failure and no obvious cause, try it again. After a second failure, really stop and reevaluate what you are trying to do. Do you need more practice on an easier version of the skill? Tweak the method? Try a new method? (For dog training I always look at the reward technique as the first thing to evaluate.) Look at it from another angle outside of your perspective (record a video of the attempt and watch it). Get another set of eyes on the problem (show them the video). Sometimes just stopping for the day and coming back to it later is a good technique. This may give you a fresh perspective or could be an example of "latent learning".

So now you are good enough to compete. You want to show off your skills. You want qualifying scores. You want to win. But you don't meet your goals for some reason. Give yourself a short time to feel that disappointment, preferably away from everyone else. Accept that you missed your goal. Know that it is not permanent. Then take the next very important step. Evaluate the 'failure' and develop a plan. Possibly go back to your instructor or the practice field for some missing skills or more proofing of

existing skills. Is it nerves? Check out mental management practices. Regardless of what caused the failure, taking action on it does two things: makes you feel better and provides a path towards success.

Why do we hate failure? There are lots of emotional explanations. Fear of looking bad in front of others is often a big reason. I could talk at length about not worrying about what other people think. That people are too wrapped up in their own insecurities to notice your shortfalls. That people who think or say things about your failures are just trying to bolster their own self-esteem. But that is very difficult to internalize. So think about this: what really makes you look good to others is taking action and overcoming that failure.
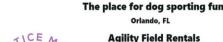
People who get really good at agility are those who stretch themselves. This means coming up against and beyond their current skills and limits. They are constantly asking "If this move works, is that move better or can I do it faster?". Even if the answer is no and they fail, they learn by pushing themselves. At any level, people who never fail are not trying anything beyond their current skills and will never get any better.

I started by saying I hoped you would fail. Failures show you are trying; not just coasting along or worse, not attempting anything. These failures are crucial information about what you need to work on. I also hope you learn from it, pick yourself up, analyze and understand why, create and execute a plan to overcome that failure, then move on to the next failure. Bouncing back from failure is also a skill that needs practice. The more often you fail, then the more often you practice the skills of resilience, troubleshooting, and overcoming obstacles on your way to success. Happy Practicing!