

Agility: Speed or Precision?

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Agility is a timed sport. In the standard classes, the fastest 'clean' run wins. 'Clean' means no knocked bars, no off-courses, no refusals; in short, no errors. There are other classes where point accumulation is the goal, but fast and clean will still get you the most points. So how do you train to get both fast and clean?

A dog's basic personality will tend towards fast-and-furious or slow-and-steady. People brand new to agility often prefer a slow and steady dog because it gives the handler time to think and react while learning new motor skills. When the team's skills have solidified and they start trialing, having a slow dog becomes a liability. At that point, the handler may feel they need to cheerlead their dog around the course, encouraging for speed. On the other hand, a new person learning with a fast and furious dog really struggles to direct the dog and will actively encourage the dog to slow down. Since the dog is also learning everything new, they now think that going slow is preferred for agility.

With experience, handlers come to understand that how you train impacts the dog's attitude toward agility. In all cases, the dog must be happy and confident to run their fastest. Really good trainers know what to focus on and what to ignore as the dog learns. These decisions can be different given the dog's basic personality.

Very sensitive dogs (actually many dogs) hate to be wrong or to disappoint their owner. If these dogs feel they are wrong they will inevitably go slower, question the handler before committing, shut down entirely and leave the stressful situation to sniff or visit. While dogs that stress 'down' will quit, but dogs that stress 'up' will get more frantic or begin making their own decisions.

Sensitive dogs should not be told they are wrong directly (with a verbal correction) or indirectly (by the handler's behavior or by constantly being brought back around to 'fix' the problem). Any 'failure' by a sensitive dog should be deemed feedback to consider when setting up for the next training repetition.

Other types of dogs are thought of as more bold or independent. They may not really care about hitting bars or going to the bottom of the contacts. They can be very fast, but off-courses and obstacle performance will be a problem when competing. They need very clear handling (especially at speed) and a strong reinforcement history for the correct performance.

Is your dog a Steady-Eddie or a Fast-Freddy? That determination will help you plan your training style. For the slower dogs, design your training so that speed is taught first on very easy versions of the obstacles. For example, when weave training (whether using 2x2s, channels, gates, wires or whatever), reward for the dog running fast through very few or wide-open weaves. Work on entries & exits at speed before you even start to make the 'weaving' part more challenging. Speed (even if not correct performance) is rewarded the most. Mistakes aren't typically even acknowledged. The dog learns that weaves should be taken fast and the weaving challenge is very slowly increased as they become proficient. Similarly, training sequences should encourage moving forward. Avoid twisty courses until the dog is confident and fast on the flowy lines.

This doesn't mean that you do the opposite for your Fast-Freddy. You still start easy and increase the challenge slowly. However, you may not stay at the



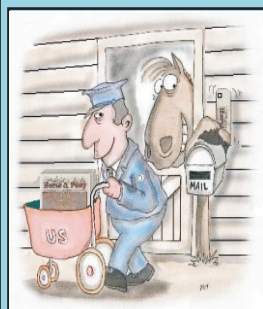
"run-through open weaves fast" stage as long because that is easy for this type of dog. The training difference is that rewards come only for correct performance, rather than speed. With fast-and-furious dogs you will need to train sequences that encourage the dog to pay attention and collect. You can introduce quick changes of direction earlier with them.

All dogs will gain speed as they become confident in what they are being asked to do. And good training will always be a step-by-step process to build that understanding. However, what gets emphasized first and rewarded more when introducing a skill should counter-balance the dog's own tendency. Support their natural talents for speed or reliable performance while you build up the other capabilities and you will get the best of both worlds in clean and fast runs.

Happy Practicing!

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