

Fast Times at Agility High

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Dog Agility is a timed sport. The fastest 'clean' run wins (where clean = no faults). Some classes are scored with time + faults, so a really fast dog with some faults could still beat a slower dog that has no faults. Bottom line: speed counts.

But this does not mean that only really fast dogs win. Much like horse racing and track runners, taking the shorter distance of the inside path can shave seconds off the overall time. A small tight turning dog can still be faster than a huge striding dog that takes w-i-d-e turns.

Some dogs have great speed when chasing a squirrel but may not run nearly so fast on an agility course. Why? Let's look at some of the reasons.

Desire, drive, enthusiasm, call it what you will; the dog must want to go fast. That desire can be trained in ... or trained out. To train for speed, you must reward the dog with something that they really like. You must provide clear and consistent direction on what gets the dog their reward. The dog needs to 'win' that reward over 80% of the time so they feel they have a good chance of winning. The dog needs to be confident that they are performing correctly.

Training the desire out of a dog is far easier. Constantly correcting them, forcing something by physically pressuring them, punishing them for doing 'it' wrong; all of these will create a dog that dislikes whatever you are trying to get them to do. If a dog is afraid of being wrong, they will be, at best, tentative and slow. Worst case, they will shut down or try to leave entirely.

Another way to train a dog to be slow is to reward them for being slow. Most of us cannot run as fast as our dogs, so a beginner may actively (or inadvertently) try to slow their dog down so they can keep up. The better solution for a

slow handler of a fast dog is to train the dog to work at a distance and do the obstacles independently. But these skills require more training and experience.

As you gain more experience training your dog in agility, you may still struggle to get your dog's full speed potential. One cause is the handler giving cues too late; not giving the dog the information soon enough to adjust their stride and path on the current obstacle to set themselves up for good approaches on subsequent obstacles. Symptoms of this are the dog consistently looking towards you (head-checking) to get information on what they are supposed to do next. Some breeds may start barking at their handler, essentially saying "hurry up and tell me what to do".

Another thing that will create a slow dog is if the handler often corrects the dog for the wrong path (example: screaming to call them away from the wrong obstacle). Similarly disheartening is if the dog is constantly brought back around or scolded for going 'off course' (to what the handler was planning but maybe not indicating). Many times, the off-course is a result of that late cue and the dog genuinely thought they were going to the correct obstacle. Now the dog is questioning; "Does my handler really know where we are going? I'd better slow down so they/I can get it right." When the dog loses confidence in the handler, the dog will be slow or just check out entirely.

How do you keep your dog's confidence? Before correcting the dog, consider the possibility that you, the handler, cued too late, or wrong, or were unclear with your



Photo courtesy of William Kleinfelder

wanted.

Any 'mistakes' the dog makes are just misinterpretations of what we thought we told them. Number 1 Rule for a confident dog: never tell them they are wrong. Their 'failure' is feedback on how they interpreted and implemented our cue. Ninety-nine percent of the time we are training, not competing, so being 'wrong' is not a big deal. Instead of correcting the dog, we can continue the sequence with a mental note to revisit that part of our training.

OK, you have a fast, confident dog. You also need to train and handle for an efficient dog path. This means collected tight turns and/or a path that allows the dog to stay in extension; essentially opposite skills. To train a tight wrap around a wing, start without any bar and add height slowly. Wraps require a physical effort that needs to be conditioned. You will also need to train cues to tell the dog to collect, jump and turn tightly after the jump. To train extension, practice having the dog drive ahead over 3-4 obstacles to a pre-placed reward and train a cue that means "go forward as fast as possible, taking the obstacles in front of you".

Trained cues and their timely application are all part of the communication that the dog needs to navigate the course efficiently with speed and confidence. This all leads to Better Practice.



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