

Agility Safety

By Christy Gammage Practice Makes Pawfect

Dog Agility is a fast-paced sport. And as in all sports, there is the chance of injury. But there are things we can do to minimize the chance of your dog (or you) getting hurt while playing the game that you love. Your job as team leader is to evaluate and mitigate the risks and make educated decisions about when something is safe or not.

When thinking about safety there are a lot of variables and many of these aspects are team dependent. Something that is safe for a small, slow, or light weight dog may not be safe for a big, fast, or heavy dog; and the converse is also true. The dog's personality can be a significant factor when evaluating if an activity is a safe idea in the current circumstances. Some dogs have very little self-preservation while others are overly cautious and would never put themselves at risk. Speed usually always adds risk. A fit athletic dog may have reflexes that help them avoid problems or adjust quickly if something starts going wrong. But those are often the ones that are going fast with less time to react.

Start with a safe space. Agility is an off-leash sport. Does the area have suitable containment for your dog's level of recall? Some teams need a fully fenced, exclusive area, with limited access points to avoid escapes when off-leash. That is a good place to start, but our goal as agility handlers/trainers is to make agility so fun that your dog doesn't want to leave. Even if your dog has a solid recall and loves the sport, be aware of possible worst-case scenarios (like a critter dashing through the field taking your dog in hot pursuit towards a busy road). If you wouldn't be walking your dog off-leash in that area, don't do agility there.

Just like with horses running and jumping, good footing is particularly important to avoid injury. Is the area relatively level with no holes or tripping hazards? Is it deep sand or irregular in depth? If indoors, is there enough cushion for repeated landings? If you wouldn't want to stand on it for a long time, don't jump your dog on it. Is it slippery or is there good traction for sharp turns? Dirt, sand, grass, artificial footing, turf / carpet, and foam mats can each be acceptable for agility, but always check for traction, consistency and cushion.

Any equipment you ask your dog to interact with should be evaluated for safety. The A-Frame, Dog Walk, Teeter and Table that your dog lands on needs to be sturdy enough to easily support their weight, the force of their impact, and the moving load they will put on it while running. It should not wiggle, wobble, flex or

buckle. Look for sharp edges and pointy bits sticking out. Look for gaps where boards meet. Could the dog get a toenail stuck there? While the Teeter will obviously move, is the board correctly calibrated so that it will fall at an appropriate speed (approx. 3 seconds with a 3lb weight 12" from the end)? Is the board too flexible so that it could 'whip' when it bounces and toss a small dog off? Could a



paw get caught between the board and the base as it pivots? Check PVC bases on training equipment for loose joints that might come apart.

Jumps should not have any sharp edges. The dog should be able to easily knock off the bar and/or knock the supports over without getting hurt. A safer Tire jumps will split open if the dog hits it and have no overhead frame that could fall on the dog.

Manufacturers are starting to use foam for wall and broad jumps.

Tunnels should be inspected often. Look for hanging threads, holes that a toenail could get stuck in, and, most importantly, exposed support wires sticking through to poke an eye out. Similarly inspect weaves for a slippery base or peeling tape that could poke an eye or slice a face.

OK, you've got a safe space and all the equipment is sturdy, suitable for the dogs using it and in good repair. There are still things you need to watch out for. Tunnels should be securely staked or bagged to not roll as the dog goes through them. Big fast dogs need more staking/bagging of tunnels than small or slower dogs. Spacing between the equipment (and fencing) should allow the dog enough room to maneuver at the speeds you are asking for.

When moving the equipment around or out of the way, is every piece set up so that if a dog takes it they won't get hurt? One example I often see is a jump (especially the tire jump) set flush against the fence so that if the dog tries to take it, they will jump right into the fence. Or a tunnel set off to the side with one end open and the other collapsed to the ground. The dog gets a rude surprise if they think that is the obstacle you wanted them to perform. When obstacles aren't in use, make sure they are blocked or stored so that the dog cannot get hurt if they try to take it.



The weather is a big factor in safety if you are playing outside. Rain can obviously make footing unsafe. Rubberized surfaces are much better than in olden days, but still watch for slippery surfaces. Frost is always slick, so that's a no-go. And a blustery wind can sweep a small dog right off a piece of tall equipment. Luckily here in Florida snow and ice are foreign concepts.

Lastly, dog fitness and repetitive injuries must always be considered. As an athletic endeavor, your dog will be running, jumping, and turning at speed. They (and we) can do that best if at a proper weight and physically fit. While agility is good exercise, other conditioning exercises like general walking, running and hill work, or specific sports physio exercises along with proper warm-up and cool down can greatly reduce the chance of injuries. Even when fit, don't overwork your dog on physically challenging exercises like weaving.

Once you've inspected, adjusted and handled all the things within your control, you now have to make the personal decision on what is safe to do and what is not. A careful dog may be perfectly safe performing an agility course in a light rain over well-constructed obstacles on well-draining footing. A speed-demon may not be safe running that same course on dry grass. Different people also have different skill levels and tolerances for risk taking; think sky diver vs. shuffle board player. It is always your choice and you can adjust the things you ask the dog based on the circumstances. Look for the safety issues, evaluate the risks, then do the things you can within that framework. Better Practice!

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Christy Gammage
● agility@gammage.org
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