

Walk the Agility Path

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect



In agility competitions, each course is a unique sequence of obstacles along a path that the judge has designed or selected. The competitors may get course maps the evening before, but no one will have had the opportunity to 'try it out' before the competition. Before each class starts, there is a walk-through period of 5-8 minutes for the handlers to go out on the course and make their plans.

Prior to being able to get out on the course, many people have already drawn the dog's path on the map and started to strategize about where the challenges might be and how they can handle them. They may make preliminary decisions about which side of the dog they want to be on for different sections or what type of cross to use at specific locations. Note: the map may be slightly different than the course that is actually built. There is always a chance of equipment changes or distance adjustments, but knowing the geometry of the dog's path is useful before the course walk even starts.

During the course walk period, handlers will walk their path multiple times to memorize the obstacle sequence and make handling decisions. To make the most of your course walk time, have a specific goal or focus each time you walk your path.

Your first pass around the ring should be to find the obstacles in the numbered sequence. Essentially, just reconnoitering to confirm the dog's path. Try not to make any handling decisions just yet. You may already have an idea from looking at the map, but don't practice those just yet.

Your second pass should be to determine what the dog sees as they navigate the course. Why does it matter? Looking at the course from the dog's perspective will highlight areas where the obvious choice of next obstacle is not where the course goes. These are places where your handling needs to be extra clear or pre-emptive in nature. You don't have to run around on all fours or crawl through tunnels. But it is helpful to actually walk the dog's path through the jumps (if bars haven't been set yet). No matter if your dog jumps long, swings wide or turns tight, walk their expected path. You might see an obstacle you hadn't considered as an off-course possibility. Always position yourself at the end of the tunnels and contact equipment to see what is in the dog's line-of-sight as they exit the obstacle.

If you've identified any safety issues in your initial walk through, now is the time to bring it up to the judge. After pass 1 and 2, you should (hopefully) have a clear understanding of where the challenges are for you and your dog. Now you are ready to make your handling choices. For the challenging spots, where do you need to be in the ring to help your dog? What handling choices will get you there?

On your 3rd pass, walk the course trying out the obvious handling choices with your imaginary dog (who runs a lot like your real dog). If you walk a section and it feels questionable, go back a couple of obstacles and try a different handling plan (like a rear instead of a front cross). Everyone else will be doing the same thing. Each team has different skills, so don't be swayed by someone else's handling plan. However, you may see someone doing something you hadn't thought about. It may or may not be right for your team.

Note: Those people that spend much of the course walk chatting with friends as they coast around the course are missing the opportunity for analysis, memorization and practice.

By your 4th and 5th pass through the course, you should

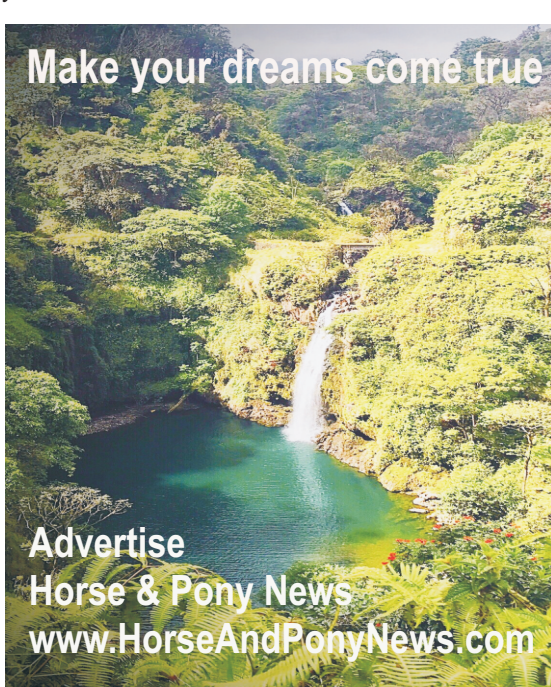
have developed a pretty solid plan. These are your 'practice runs'. Perform the course exactly how you plan to do it. It is important to 'watch' your imaginary dog during these runs. This will direct your field of vision to match your real run so timing your movements will be more familiar.

Next, move over to an open, out-of-the-way area on the course. 'Walk' the course in this very small space, envisioning your handling. This is a test of how well you remember the course and where you expect the obstacles to be. If something is fuzzy in your mind, go back to the real course and walk that part again. By now, the whistle or buzzer is going off indicating you must leave the ring. You can still practice the visualization step outside of the ring to solidify your plan in your mind.

As my husband reminds me: what you practiced during the course walk may not be what actually happens in the ring. Your dog may be faster or slower than expected or go visit the ring crew. You may end up doing that front cross you had originally discarded. Regardless, your course walk helped you memorize the course, try out some options and understand your dog's view of the world. At least you were able to practice your part. It is always the first time for the dog. Course walks are another thing you'd Better Practice.



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