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A MONTHLY GUIDE TO NATURAL DOG CARE & TRAINING

## Agility Ability

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**In this exciting sport, dogs run, jump, and climb – and it's all off-leash!**

Eddie Pepper's muscles flex as his compact body flies over the jumps and scrambles up the A-frame. Eddie's guardian, Bonnie Vogt, rewards him for hitting the contact zone and then signals him through the tunnel and over the teeter. When Eddie takes the last obstacle in the sequence, he races back to Vogt for a quick game of tug and a whole lot of praise.

By now, if you're into dogs, you've probably heard about agility. Maybe you've even seen it in action or tried it with your dog. Agility is one of the fastest growing dog sports in the world, and with good reason – it's fun!



"Of all of the dog things I've done, agility is the most fun," says Vogt, a resident of Scotts Valley, California, who has participated in a multitude of dog activities, including search and rescue, obedience, hunting tests and flyball, as well as agility.

### **The ultimate team sport**

Agility is fun for a whole bunch of reasons. It's fast. It's always different. The dogs love it. The handler is constantly challenged. But perhaps the most wonderful part about agility is the way the dog and handler work together as a team. It is the ultimate team sport – and like any team sport, the relationship of the team members is key.

**Agility is a leash-free sport that can be enjoyed by any healthy dog, regardless of breed, age, or size – and as long as his or her handler can keep up!**

"It's a really active and involved thing," says Bud Houston, a long-time agility teacher and seminar leader who resides in Ostrander, Ohio. Houston has written numerous books on agility and is founder of the Just For Fun (JFF) agility organization. He points to his dogs' joy and enthusiasm for

the sport when he describes why he loves agility. “They really light up when we go out to the training building.”

Vogt echoes Houston’s sentiment. “Playing agility has brought us closer, sealed that bond a little tighter. Eddie seems to thoroughly enjoy the running and playing, and it’s helped us have more of a partnership.”

From the beginning, agility seemed to be a hit with dogs and people. Agility began as a demonstration event at the Crufts Dog Show in England in 1978. The obvious enjoyment of the dogs and the enthusiasm of the crowd at the first agility demonstration could have predicted the future popularity and growth of the sport. Today, agility is practiced throughout the world. In North America alone, you can find more than 10 organizations that sanction agility trials.

The goal in agility is for the handler and dog to run an obstacle course, with the handler directing the dog through and the dog navigating the obstacles. The course generally consists of between 14 and 20 obstacles that are designed to test a dog’s balance, speed, jumping, and climbing ability as well as the communication between the dog and handler. The obstacles commonly include:

- **Jumps:** A variety of jumps are used in agility including single jumps, double jumps, triple jumps, winged and non-winged jumps, panel jumps, broad jump, and tire or hoop jumps. The height of the jumps varies depending on the size of the dog.
- **Tunnels:** Flexible tunnels, 15 to 20 feet long, are used, as well as a collapsed tunnel made with a barrel opening and a fabric sleeve that the dog pushes through.
- **A-frame:** One of the “contact” obstacles (an obstacle that the dog must touch in a yellow-painted zone to insure a safe performance on the obstacle), the A-frame is a large climbing structure that the dog runs over.
- **Teeter-totter:** Also called the seesaw, the dog tips the board as he runs across. The teeter-totter is another contact obstacle and the dog needs to touch the yellow zones for safety.
- **Dog walk:** This contact obstacle is a type of balance beam that is three to four feet in the air. The dog runs up a ramp, across the beam, and down the descending ramp.
- **Weave poles:** Up to 12 weave poles are found on a standard agility course. Weave poles are often considered the most difficult obstacles to teach a dog.
- **Table or pause box:** The dog gets on the table and stays in either a down or sit position for five seconds. This is a control exercise and requires a dog to stop in the midst of running through the course.

In a competition, the course must be run within a certain amount of time and the team can be judged “faults” for mistake, such as taking the wrong obstacle or knocking down a jump bar. The courses are always different, making communication between the handler and dog as critical as the dog’s ability to navigate the obstacles.

### **Not just for superdogs**

Big dogs, little dogs, fast dogs, slow dogs, mixed breeds and pure breeds – all types of dogs can do agility. In fact, agility is one of the few dog sports providing as many opportunities for mixed breed dogs as for pure breeds. With the exception of AKC Agility, every dog agility organization in the United States welcomes mixed

breeds in competition. Dogs as small as a Papillon and as large as a Great Dane can and do enjoy agility. Of course, not every dog (or person) is cut out for competition and only a select few will win national championships. But almost all dogs can enjoy some version of the sport.

Agility is an obvious choice for high energy and athletic dogs. It gives dogs that are often seen as “hyper” a place to put their drive and energy. It is also a good way to help timid or shy dogs build confidence. It’s a great way for both people and dogs to get some exercise.

“Agility keeps Eddie and me both in better shape,” says Vogt. “We both need the exercise and he needs a job to do.”

In general, dogs who play agility should be physically able to do the sport safely – they should have sound hips, elbows, good vision, and be in good physical shape. But even dogs and handlers with some physical limitations can enjoy the just for fun experience of agility. For example, jump heights can be lowered for a dog that is not physically able to jump full height. A dog shouldn’t do agility if it will make a condition worse, cause pain, or be unsafe in any way. It’s a good idea to have your veterinarian conduct a basic health examination before beginning agility.

### **Competition or fun?**

As with all sports, agility encompasses elements of competition. The competition can be as intense as professional basketball or as casual as a pick up game of softball on a sunny afternoon. In other words, agility can be played at the Olympic level, the city league level, or strictly for fun in the backyard or park.

In agility trials, teams compete in two ways. First, the dog and handler run against the time on the clock, with the goal of completing the course under the time limit and with no faults (called a clean run). In addition, the team is also competing against the other dog and handler teams within their class and height for placement – generally first, second, and third place dogs are recognized and awarded ribbons. The competition for a clean run and title are not the same as competing against other dogs. You can have a clean run and not win. You can also win and not have a clean run. As in other dog sports, you can compete at different levels and earn titles on your dog.

In addition to the standard agility course, dozens of games can be played in agility. Games range from those commonly found at trials, like Jumpers (which tests the dog’s speed and the person’s handling skills), Gamblers (which offers challenges in distance handling), and Snooker (which incorporates elements of both strategy and control), to those designed for fun or to help build specific skills.

But do you have to compete to do agility? Absolutely not. Some people do agility with the goal of winning at the highest level. Some people run their dogs with the goal of a clean run and earning a title, but aren’t really concerned about winning. Others play agility strictly for fun, without ever needing or wanting to compete. Agility can be enjoyed in a totally non-competitive fashion. That means that you can teach your dog the obstacles, learn to direct him through course, and run courses either with or without a time limit. Playing agility non-competitively eliminates the pressure to perform – so you and your dog really can just get out there and have fun.

Agility practice, even without competition as a goal, is a wonderful way to build everyday skills. Agility strengthens basic training such as the down, stay and recall. It is a fun way to work on off-leash behaviors and develop off-leash reliability. It can help dogs become more confident in the world, and it can help people learn to better train and communicate with their dogs. (If you can teach a dog to run through a set of weave poles –

which is anything but a natural behavior for a dog – you can probably teach him just about anything!) Quite simply, agility practice can improve relationships between dogs and people.

“I’d like to get to the point where we can compete,” says Vogt, when she talks about training with Eddie. “But if we don’t, that’s OK too.”

Houston, who has competed and earned many titles on his dogs, says that one of his dogs, Ringer, will probably not become a dog he takes to trials. “Ringer gets carsick if we go more than about four miles,” says Houston. “So he will probably never do a lot of agility trialing in the world. But, he loves the game and he’s developing very nicely.”

Houston strongly promotes the recreational aspects of agility, and cautions against making agility into something that validates the handler, rather than something that is fun to do with your dog.

“It’s not about winning, you know,” says Houston. Houston emphasizes that agility is a recreational sport we play with the canine members of our family. It is about the relationship, the fun, and enjoyment of playing with your best friend.

Houston also stresses that agility should be accessible to anyone who is interested and can be a “lifetime sport” that we share with our dogs. With this spirit in mind, Houston formed Just For Fun agility. JFF’s slogan, “dog agility for the rest of us,” is helping to make the sport more available to those who may not have the perfect “competition” dog as well as to those who cannot afford the time or money needed to train competitively and enter trials.

JFF agility does promote a degree of competition, but emphasizes that it should always be low cost (or no cost) and fun. With that in mind, JFF agility launched the idea of league play – a version of the sport that can be organized and played on a local level, similar to local softball or basketball leagues offered through park and recreation programs. As with local softball and basketball leagues, anyone can join and play at the level at which they are comfortable. In JFF, each person chooses the jump height that is most appropriate for his dog’s ability.

### **Purely positive fun**

The sport of agility has, perhaps inadvertently, become a huge promoter of positive training methods. You can probably imagine that it would be difficult to drag a reluctant dog over an A-frame or force a dog to run at top speed through a set of weave poles. Agility training generally incorporates positive-oriented training techniques, including clicker training, lure and reward, and classical conditioning. Dogs are motivated and rewarded with food, praise, and toys. Although some agility instructors do use punitive methods, most do not.

Nancy Gyes, co-owner of Power Paws Agility and a top level agility competitor in the United States, addressed the very issue of using compulsion methods in training at a recent seminar in Watsonville, California. Gyes admitted to the seminar crowd that she is so competitive that if using a pinch collar on her dog would help her win, she might use it for training in agility. But that the fact is, according to Gyes, positive reinforcement training methods work better in building accuracy, speed, and enthusiasm. Gyes went on to point out that the leading agility competitors in the country all use some elements of clicker training in working with their dogs – even those who do not consider themselves clicker trainers.

### **Getting started**

Because agility is still relatively new, many of the people who are currently involved started out self-taught – building equipment, reading books, watching videos, attending seminars, and learning by trial and error. With the growing popularity of the sport, however, agility-training facilities are popping up everywhere. If you'd like to try agility, you could begin on your own, but your best bet is to find a trainer in your area to help you get started. When you are looking for a trainer, look for someone who:

- Focuses on safety and the well-being of the dogs above all else.
- Uses motivational methods. Forcing a dog onto equipment can ruin the fun for both of you.
- Can help you understand both how to teach your dog to use the equipment and help you learn to direct your dog through the course. Agility is a 50/50 team sport. You both need to learn your part.

If you do not plan to compete, your instructor does not need a competition background. But if you do want to compete, look for a teacher who has competition experience to mentor you through the process. If you or your dog have any special needs or limitations, ask the instructor if she is willing to work with you around those areas.

Because agility training is a long-term training process, it becomes especially important to find an instructor with whom you enjoy working.

### **It's addictive**

When asked what he would say to someone who was considering trying agility, Bud Houston responds, "You've got to do this. It's too much fun!" Anyone who has tried agility can tell you that it's addictive. You just may end up with jumps in your backyard, weave poles in your living room, and a whole new set of vocabulary words. You may end up practicing front crosses and reverse flow pivots as you vacuum. You may start muttering terms like "clean runs" and "yards per second" in your sleep. Like any person exhibiting signs of addiction, your friends and family may wonder if you've lost your mind – or just given it to the dog.

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