

Dog Training Articles By Beth Bradley

Agility: More than Just Teaching your Dog to Jump

The Beginning:

The first widely-documented appearance of dog Agility was as entertainment at the Crufts Dog Show (England) in 1978. The demonstration immediately intrigued dog owners because of its speed, challenge and the dexterity displayed by the dogs. People wanted to see more, and indeed wanted their own dogs to be able to participate. The demonstration was so popular that it went on to grow into local, then national, and eventually international, competitions with standardized equipment.

In 1986, Kenneth Tatsch founded the United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA). The event's popularity sparked interest around the country. One year later, Charles (Bud) Kramer founded the National Club for Dog Agility (NCDA) in Kansas with the goal of convincing the AKC to recognize Agility as a sanctioned event.

The first AKC Show to include a sanctioned Agility match was held in August, 1987 at the St. Croix Valley Kennel Club Show in Lake Elmo, Minnesota. Recognition by the AKC made the rapidly growing sport nearly explode in the United States

Confidence Building:

Agility training will provide the environment and structure to build confidence in your dog. It is amazing to see a timid or insecure dog begin Agility. They may enter class with their hackles raised or hiding behind their owner's legs, but after a few sessions, they come to class excited and happy. I've seen dogs that can be aggressive because of fears of other dogs or people become excited when they meet their new dog friends or new human friends.

With each week that passes, these dogs become more outgoing and friendly. A timid dog may take a long time before he is ready to venture from under your chair or off your lap but when he does, lookout!

Dogs gain confidence in their abilities as they learn to climb, jump, or crawl through agility obstacles. The learning may be tough for the dog afraid of heights or reluctant to enter dark spaces, but determined owners can coax them through the uncertainty.

Structured Fun:

Teaching a dog the basic execution of most obstacles takes only a small amount of time and simple training techniques. However, to complete certain agility courses and to develop speed and accuracy, both dog and handler must learn a wide range of methods

for navigating the equipment, performing sequences of obstacles, and communicating on course while running full out.

Until you begin Agility, you don't realize how much control you need when directing your dog through a course. As no two Agility courses are identical, your dog will have to disregard his own urges and follow your lead. The need for continuous and intense communication between dog and handler naturally intensifies the bond between the two.

Sometimes obedience becomes stale and boring for our dogs. I've advised many clients who have been working towards an obedience title to start Agility training. Not because I want to sell another class but because of the obedience control they will gain from the Agility class. The dog must be in perfect sync with the handler on the Agility course because there is no leash and collar for control. Since the order of obstacles on each course is different and the pathway between the obstacles is never a straight line, dogs must learn a whole new vocabulary thereby working the dog's mind and releasing him from the boredom of heel, sit, down.

Precautions:

Naturally, there are precautions. Young dogs should not jump; landing on immature forelegs and shoulders can cause injuries. Dogs must be taught not to rush the obstacles, as they can injure themselves by falling from the A-frame or the dog walk if they throw caution to the winds. The climbing obstacles on an Agility course have yellow contact areas painted across the bottom; dogs must touch these contact areas on the way up and down the ramps. Ramps also have cross-laths to provide traction as the dogs scramble up the incline.

Almost any dog can do Agility. Giant breeds and those with a wide wheelbase may have trouble with some obstacles, but if the dog is game, it can be done. And, there are events and competitions for mixed breeds as well as pure breeds.

Conclusion:

Agility is fun for both owner and dogs. Dogs enjoy the freedom, speed and most of all the challenge. Owners enjoy the increased bond with the dog as they work out the challenges inherent in mastery of each obstacle. Both you and your dog will learn so much about each other by being involved in Agility. You will know how to motivate your dog so when you get into a 'funk' while training, you can work your dog through it and achieve the results you so desire.

Beth Bradley

Beth Bradley began studying animal behavior and dog training at 12 years of age. She became a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer in 1986. Beth graduated Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice. Throughout her schooling, Beth worked and studied under many well-renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. Beth formed her own company in 1989 and has made dog training her full time career since 1995. Beth is also a writer for the *Animal Companion*, she has produced CD-Roms and DVD's on training and is author of a training book titled *Real World Dog Training*.

Beth is a member of the German Shepherd Dog Club of America, the German Shepherd Dog Club of America – Working Dog Association, the United Schutzhund Clubs of America, and she is Secretary and Training Director of the Greater Philadelphia Schutzhund Club. Beth actively competes in both American Kennel Club and Schutzhund Trials both in the United States of America and Europe. Beth is a certified Canine Good Citizen Evaluator for the American Kennel Club. Beth can be contacted via the web at www.dog-trainer.biz or her business (201) 247-8472.