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Dog Agility Equipment – Free Play Or Competition?

By Brad Carlson

There are five factors to consider before you and your dog decide which agility direction you want to focus on. First, there is fun with your dog at home . Second, there is competition where many people have that "gotta win" inside their bodies (and I'm one of them!). Third, you will need to find out if you and your dog just want to have some fun and exercise at a club for a social and competitive outing. Fourth, there are pros and cons with running through the dog agility equipment for fun or competition. And lastly, make a decision and stick with it.

I've had people come to me and say their dog can jump high, is full of energy, has a hunger to run and jump, etc. But that does not mean all dog trainers and their dogs will want to compete in the agility sport ring. You might get the impression your dog just wants to have some fun, so make an effort to set up an agility course in your backyard, or get together with a small group. I am not suggesting to set up a whole agility course, we know its costly and takes up a lot of space, and we know most of your backyards will not be able to fit all equipment. Instead, set up a few obstacles such as some jumps and weaves, make up your own course. Or just have your dog do most of the exercise jumping over bars and chasing a ball or frisbee. You might want to get involved in social activities such as dog or breed clubs. There are a lot of clubs just starting agility, or just getting together to have some fun and to socialize, a healthy atmosphere to gather around dogs. Even clubs that have a competitive group also welcome newcomers to join a beginners class.

To train and prepare your dog for competition takes time, patience, and more patience. Converting from the fun atmosphere in your backyard or club to the competition level changes your spontaneous free play to planned training sessions and goals of putting in more training time.

Training for competition requires lots of teamwork. You and your dog need to know each other well, trust each other, and find your weaknesses and strengths in both of you. To be successful in competition, your dog must have a "clean run", meaning no bars knocked down, making the contacts, running on course, and making the time. Gee, that's a huge challenge to do all that in one run. This does require training specific behaviors for each obstacle. You need to ask yourself "are we willing and capable of working hard?" If that's what you want and your dog is able, then get start with simple training methods, do one thing at a time, until both of you can move on to the next harder method of

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training. Competition on Animal Planets channel on TV as well as games such as Great Outdoors on ESPN looks so easy for the handlers and their dog running the agility course. Don't forget the fact that it took most of them 3–5 years to reach that level, or more.

If you can't decide which direction to go, free play or competition, let your dog do the speaking. Play with your dog, throw a frisbee, ball, play tug o war, take up obedience training, give yourself some time, maybe 2–4 months. That will give you a better idea what your dog enjoys. Making a decision on either free play or competition, there is no right or wrong answer. Every dog owner and their dog will make an agreement or pact on what kind of activity they choose. However, one needs to observe carefully the talents, limitations, and desire each dog has. For instance, a border collie that loves to run and jump all over the agility equipment, but is asked to do training for obedience, which requires lots of sits, stays, gos, and comes, may find it difficult to be still. The bottom line is to find out what makes your dog happy and how you can have a good time with your dog. Do not force your dog to run in the agility ring when it wants to just stay at home, or do not force it to stay at home where it wants to get out and go.

There are some pros and cons with free play vs. competition agility. The good part about free play training is that there is no pressure to perform the best whereas competition requires no mistakes in the ring to be successful. Free play training is also less costly vs. competition. In competition, the equipment must meet the organizations standard requirements. Most competition agility equipment must be made from metal, which is expensive to purchase. Agility clubs have their own facility to train, but it will cost to practice or train at their club. Some clubs will charge a member monthly fee, or pay as you run the course or by time.

Don't wait until your dog gets too old to even walk anymore. Make a decision which way you want to go. You might want to wait up to 5 years of your dogs life before deciding to continue have free play agility and let you dog be a dog, or get into the competition mode. Remember no matter what kind of dog you have, it takes hours, months, and even years to train for competiion. Unless your dog tells you playing with balls and frisbees is good enough for dog life. You might make the wrong decision, but its never a bad one if you keep them both fun for the dog. And your dog probably don't give a hoot what you decide!

Brad Carlson is a dog trainer at Agility by Carlson. For more training details, visit our website at

<http://www.carlson-agility.com/>

Dog Agility Equipment – New Mini Contacts And Mini Jumps

By Brad Carlson

Dog Agility competitions are seen frequently on television. The eyes of most pet owners have seen this amazing sport and would some how like their dog to be introduced to the equipment for fun and for exercise. The competition size equipment may be larger than the pet owner needs or wants to invest in so, many are introducing their dog to "mini" equipment.

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Mini-agility equipment still provides lots of mental and physical stimulation to your dog, but without bulk of competition sized equipment. Almost all types of obstacles are made in a "mini" size. There are mini-A-frames, mini-dog walks, mini-teeters, mini-tire jumps, mini-jumps, mini-tables, and mini-weaves.

The mini-A-frame can be in different sizes, but is often made with two, 4-foot sides, instead of two, 8-foot sides. Mini-dog walks are often made with three, five-foot planks instead of three 12-foot planks. Similar is the mini-teeter, made from a five-foot plank instead of a 12-foot plank. These changes in size make shipping and delivery easier and less costly.

Mini equipment is safer for the beginner handler and dog because the equipment is lower to the ground. Dogs and puppies can learn and use the equipment with greater ease and confidence.

In addition to pet owners, breeders, kennel owners, and dog parks are purchasing mini-agility equipment. Breeders purchase mini equipment to stimulate their puppies mentally and physically. Some breeders add railings to their dog-walk for added puppy protection. Kennel and Doggie Day Care owners use the equipment to keep their clients happy and busy all day long. Dog parks are selecting mini-equipment because it is safer to use by the untrained owner.

Competition agility owners are also selecting mini-equipment for training specific behaviors, using them as training aids, and for indoor training in the wintertime. A contact trainer is a combination of a mini A-frame side attached to a pause table with a mini-dog walk plank attached to the opposite side. Agility competitors often use this apparatus for back chaining their contact behavior.

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