

A Philosophy for Training to Win

by Monica Percival

In preparation for a seminar several years ago, someone asked me to put together a list of what I thought went into "training a dog to win" in agility. I think the person expected a laundry list of agility skills to work on; instead, she got the list below. While many of these principles may seem to state the obvious or be messages that we strive to communicate to our students in every class, I find that it's helpful for students to have a handout like this to take home and think about from time to time.

- **Maintain a positive attitude.** You help shape your dog's attitude with the attitude that you project. A happy dog is an enthusiastic worker who is willing to accept challenges!
- **Have fun.** If you aren't having fun, your dog isn't having fun. Success on the agility field is not a life and death issue. Have you ever met a dog that cared whether or not he got a qualifying score?
- **Dogs are "only human."** Dogs make mistakes and have bad days just like us. When your dog makes a mistake, don't jump too quickly to blame him. Look at what you might have done to cause the error (such as giving a late command or standing in the wrong position). Think about what you could have done to prevent the dog from making the mistake. Evaluate whether or not the dog really understands what you expect of him.
- **Agility is a team sport.** You and your dog must work together. You are the team captain.
- **No harsh corrections.** Harsh corrections can destroy a dog's confidence. No praise should be the harshest correction you ever give.
- **A dog in top physical condition has an easier road to achieving top performance.** A top tennis player must have more than a killer serve and a great forehand to win-he must have strength, endurance, flexibility, timing, balance, and coordination. While we're born with some measure of these abilities, we can enhance them with regular exercise. The same holds true for dogs ... Agility requires greater overall physical fitness than what can be achieved by just working the obstacles. As with people, a regular exercise program will help increase your dog's strength and endurance, improve his concentration, keep him from becoming overweight, prevent injuries ("soft" muscles are more prone to injury), and make him feel better overall.
- **Every dog needs different training.** If this isn't the first dog you are training for agility, recognize that every dog is different and what worked for your other dog may not work for this dog.
- **Set achievable goals in both training and competition.** Setting realistic goals allows both you and your dog to achieve success in every training session and every competitive class you enter-success builds confidence! If your goals aren't realistic, you will constantly be frustrated with your dog and the dog may lose interest in agility. Don't let the success of other people's dogs cause you to set goals that your dog can't achieve-just because Fido learned the weave poles in a month doesn't mean that Rover can.
- **There are no shortcuts.** Just as a child can't progress from learning the alphabet to reading *War and Peace* overnight, a dog cannot progress from performing individual obstacles to running courses overnight. Slowly increase the number of obstacles you ask him to perform in sequence. Likewise, you cannot start teaching your dog to work at a distance by trying to send him 20' to the tunnel. It's important to build good basic agility skills that you can fall back on when you have a training problem in the future. If you try to take shortcuts in training, it will catch up with you later when you try to do more advanced work with your dog.
- **The training process never ends!** Just because your dog did a particular exercise right yesterday,

doesn't mean he'll remember how to do it right today or tomorrow. Even when a dog is competing successfully, you'll always run into new problems-such as the dog that forgets what a contact zone is or thinks it's better to begin weaving at the second pole. That's the challenge of agility.

- **Don't be afraid to go back to basics.** If, for example, your dog is missing contact zones or has started refusing to perform an obstacle that he's done correctly for years, don't go searching for gimmicks or magical cures. Usually, solving the problem requires taking one or more steps backwards. Figuratively, you need to step back from the situation and try to analyze the problem objectively. Literally, you need to go back a step or more in your training program and make sure that the dog understands the "job" . Sometimes, you'll even find that you need to start part of the training process all over again at step one. Many of us fight going backwards because we feel that there is some stigma attached to it or that we have failed in some way. Don't take it personally and don't fight it! Going back to basics can often be the quickest and easiest solution to a problem.
- **Introduce one challenge at a time.** You'll achieve greater success if you focus on teaching your dog one skill at a time. For example, if your dog is learning to weave with slanted poles and you want to teach him to enter the poles ahead of you, don't try increasing the angle of the poles and increasing distance between you and the dog at the same time. Instead, start by decreasing the angle of the poles to where the dog has been successful in the past. Run with the dog as he does the poles. Then on each subsequent performance, start hanging back a little bit at a time as the dog enters the poles. When you have built up to the distance you wanted to achieve (and this may take multiple training sessions), increase the angle of the poles and start by running with the dog again and then hanging back a little at a time.
- **Find out what motivates your dog.** A few dogs work just for the sake of working, however, this is the exception rather than the rule! Most dogs carefully weigh the cost versus the benefit of performing a particular task. These dogs need something to motivate them, especially while they are learning the basics of agility. You'll need to experiment to find out what turns on your dog-praise, cookies (and probably liver brownies or Rollover rather than Milk Bones!), a toy, or whatever works. With some dogs, you'll need to use a combination of tools to motivate the dog and you'll need to change the reward from time to time.
- **Know when to stop a training session.** It's important to stop each training session before your dog loses enthusiasm-very often this is before you, the handler, are ready to stop the training session. Learn to read your dog and know when his attention is waning. Before your dog has turned off, set up an exercise to end the session on a positive, successful note. If you are at a group practice, put your dog away in a quiet place and sit back and enjoy watching the other dogs train. You can learn a lot by watching other handlers and dogs work.
- **Know when you shouldn't start a training session.** If you are having a bad day and aren't able to be patient and project a positive attitude, don't start a training session-it doesn't matter if you only have access to equipment on that particular day. It's better to skip a training session than to experience failure because you can't hold up your end of the team or to inadvertently cause a future training problem because the dog associated your bad mood with a particular obstacle or exercise.
- **You don't need obstacles to train.** Many basic agility skills (such as wait, fast down, easy, and directional commands) can be taught at home without using any agility obstacles. Skill building and control exercises should be part of your daily routine.
- **Keep agility stress free.** Designing a training program that emphasizes the principles listed above will help create a stress-free learning environment for your dog. Remember, a dog that is stressed will shut down. This can be seen in the dog that runs laps around the course, leaves the course, sniffs around ignoring the handler, or refuses to perform the obstacles. Learn the strengths and weaknesses of your dog and learn how to get the most out of the dog without pushing him past his limits and stressing him out.