

Getting Started in Dog Agility



From homemade PVC jumps in the backyard to indoor, climate-controlled arenas, the dog agility bug is sweeping the country. Perhaps it has happened to you. You are flipping through the TV channels and something catches your eye. Animal Planet is showing a dog agility trial. You watch as dogs run, jump and weave through poles being directed through a complicated course by the human navigator running at their side. You poke the canine couch potato sleeping by your side and say, "Hey, do you think we could do that?"

The answer is probably yes. Almost any dog in relatively good health can perform agility at some level. All sizes, shapes and ages of people and dogs participate. Handlers range from age 9 to 90 and dogs from tiny Yorkshire Terriers to huge Great Danes. It is a great way to stimulate and exercise your dog, teaching her while she is playing. Handlers get their share of the exercise setting up jumps and trying to keep up with their dogs.

If you are interested in trying agility with your dog, there is some basic groundwork to do first. Your dog should have adequate obedience skills to be under control off leash. He should show no aggression towards other dogs or people, even in a situation with a high excitement level and much activity. It will be helpful if you know which rewards (food treats, balls, toys) motivate your dog the most. Although you can start your young pup over low jumps and introducing him to the other obstacles, he can't compete in most venues until he is 18 months old.

Some people start with a book and a few homemade obstacles at home, but the best way to train yourself and your dog is to join a class. Learning to pay attention while working around other dogs and people is often as important to your dog as being introduced to the obstacles. Safety is an important issue and it can be very helpful to have extra people around, especially when a dog is learning a new piece of equipment. Although there are various training techniques most are based on showing the dog a piece of equipment, helping him perform the behavior you want, and then rewarding success. As the dog and handler progress, they will learn to do several obstacles in a row and eventually string together an entire course.

If this sounds like something you would like to try with your canine companion, here is a partial list of instructors in and around the Willamette Valley. For more information about WAG, go to our website at www.wagagility.org

NORTH VALLEY & PORTLAND-METRO

- Craig French**, Dobie-Rockets Agility, Woodburn, 503-982-3513, email: DobieRockets@q.com (private lessons only)
Amanda Gross, Absolutely Magic Dog Training, Portland / Gresham, 503-754-1352, email: hope4agility@yahoo.com, www.absolutelymagicrockets.com
Cheryl Huffman, Smart Paws Academy, Oregon City & West Linn, 503-631-7297, email: topdog@smartpawsacademy.com, www.smartpawsacademy.com
Barbara Persson, Peak Agility, Hillsboro, 503-616-7177, email: barbara@peakagility.com, www.peakagility.com
Columbia Agility Team, CAT has information about agility training on their website at www.columbiaagility.org

MID-VALLEY & COAST

- Helix Fairweather**, * Salem-Albany-Eugene, 541-812-9228, email: helix@cyberagility.com, www.peak.org/~helix
Sharon Gakstatter, * Corvallis, 541-757-1236, email: Pawprintsagility@hotmail.com
Susan Fry, * Lebanon, 541-451-3100, email: susanfry@centurytel.net
Julie Life, * Agility 4 Life, Lincoln County area, 541-336-1209, email: jlifehay@aim.com (put "agility" in subject line)
Dana Stillinger, Bart and Debbie Pierce, Arlene Courtney, * Best Friends Obedience and Agility School, Corvallis-Monmouth, 541-754-6956, email: bestfriendsddc@peak.org, www.bestfriendsddc.com
Barb White, * Salem-Albany-Eugene (Turner, south of Salem), 503-371-9347, email: santiamsadlery@proaxis.com
Judi James, Alison Goodwin, My Dogs Gym & Training Centre, Salem, 971-239-5518, email: Judi@mydoggygym.com, www.mydoggygym.com

SOUTH VALLEY

- Joan Oakes**, * Junction City (Alvadore), 541-654-0149, email: noaz4oakes@yahoo.com

WAG Membership Chairman

Deb Pierce, email: piercedebbie@comcast.net

* Instructors marked with an asterisk (*) are WAG members. Completing a series of their agility classes counts as a membership activity for prospective WAG members.