

BEGINNERS GUIDE TO AGILITY

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BEFORE YOU START AGILITY



AGILITY... WHAT IS IT?!

You may have seen agility at Crufts on TV, or by a display team at a county show, and found your interest piqued. If you haven't seen it, get yourself on Youtube and give it a watch - it's a lot of fun, even as a spectator!

At its essence, agility is a fast paced sport which derived from dog working trials (and likely inspired by horse show jumping). The first agility show was held at Crufts in 1978, and we've come a long way since then!

Like that very first show, dog and handler work together at competitions as a team to tackle a course set by a judge. They are *marked* on how they tackle the course - receiving *faults* for things such as dislodging jump poles, jumping the coloured area on the end of a contact, entering the weaves from the wrong side, or running past or under jumps. They can also be *eliminated* for taking an off-course obstacle. This can be hard to prevent as often your dog is behind or ahead of you on a course - control is very important!

Agility is fast - there's no doubt about that. Quite often there will be less than 5 seconds between a winner and 10th place; often there's less than a second between the higher places at comps.

THIS SOUNDS INTENSE...

And it is! Agility is fast, fun and furious - addictive for both handler & dog alike. But just because your dog is encouraged to go as fast as possible (whilst being as safe as possible, and whilst you exert as much control as possible...) that doesn't mean *you* have to be fast! There are plenty of people who train regularly and compete who are not mobile at all - who are able to handle their dog at a distance, relying on verbal control rather than physical presence. It is amazing to watch and an honour to help our distance handlers succeed!

WHERE CAN I TRAIN?

There are a lot of options, including KC clubs and private clubs & trainers. Wherever you train, it is important that your trainer doesn't throw you in at the deep end - you should be spending a good length of time working on the *foundations* before your dog starts tackling equipment, especially the more physically challenging and potentially dangerous equipment like contacts and weaves.

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AGILITY TERMS



A WORD FOR EVERYTHING!

There are many different terms used within agility - typically referring to a specific manoeuvre that either a dog or handler is performing. Some of these are self explanatory, e.g. a **front cross** is where you *cross* in *front* of the dog, and some are very much not, e.g. a **threadle** is where you pull a dog in to the nonobvious side of a jump.

GENERAL AGILITY TERMS

Acceleration is the ideal state for a lot of agility - the dog picking up speed as they travel across the course. Sometimes we need *deceleration* (*decel*) - for the dog to slow down a tiny bit!

Commitment to an obstacle means that the dog will take that next, regardless of the handler's movements - we want strong obstacle commitment to enable us to then move on to the next part of the course.

Criteria is how you expect the dog to perform an obstacle - they are then either performing *to criteria* or *not to criteria*.

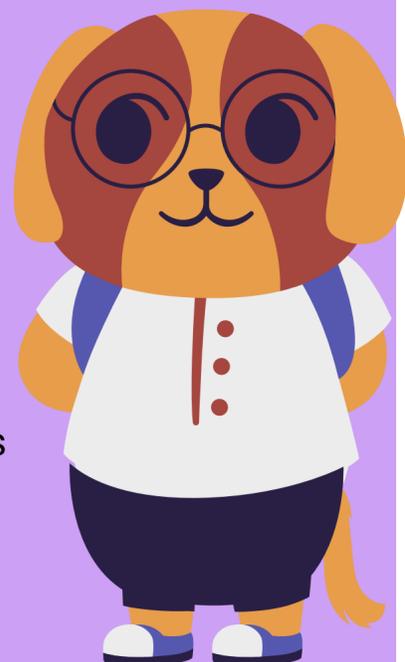
A *cross* is used to switch which side of the handler the dog is on.

A *cue* can be verbal or physical, but is the signal given by the handler to complete a particular obstacle or manoeuvre in a particular way.

When looking at a course, you need to look not only at where the obstacles are, but where the *dog's line* will take them. This refers to the path that the dog will take across the ground - and will very likely *not* be a straight line from A to B!

A dog heading on independently to an obstacle is *driving* to that obstacle. The arm nearest the dog is the arm that will be used to physically *drive* the dog - the *drive arm*. In comparison, the arm furthest from the dog (or the *off arm*) is usually used to *turn* the dog away from you or to indicate *decel*.

Forward focus refers to a dog looking ahead at obstacle(s) - not at their handler. The more the dog is looking for obstacles, the easier it is to direct them when ahead of you... in theory!



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CROSSES & TURNS (OH MY!)

FRONT CROSS

Where the handler is ahead of the dog on the course & changes side, while turning in toward / to face the dog.

Front crosses slow your dog down (they encourage *decel*) on approach and push them away from you on exit.

As you have your eyes on your dog throughout, front crossing helps prevent them from taking *traps* (i.e. incorrect next obstacles) on course - but also temporarily roots you to the spot as requires a lot of fast fancy footwork.

BLIND CROSS

Where the handler is ahead of the dog on the course & changes side, without turning toward the dog.

Blind crosses keep your dog in *acceleration* and encourage your dog to stay close to you on exit. They are used for small changes of direction only - not 90° turns.

Blind crosses also mean you are temporarily *blind* to your dog, so may not be a good idea if there are lots of *traps* around!

REAR CROSS

Where the handler is behind the dog on the course & changes side - to the rear of the dog.

Rear crosses are most often used by distance handlers, and as a "oh no" handling option by running handlers!

They can be hard to pull off as require a lot of obstacle *commitment* and *drive* from the dog and a good understanding of directional cues.

PIVOT (TURN)

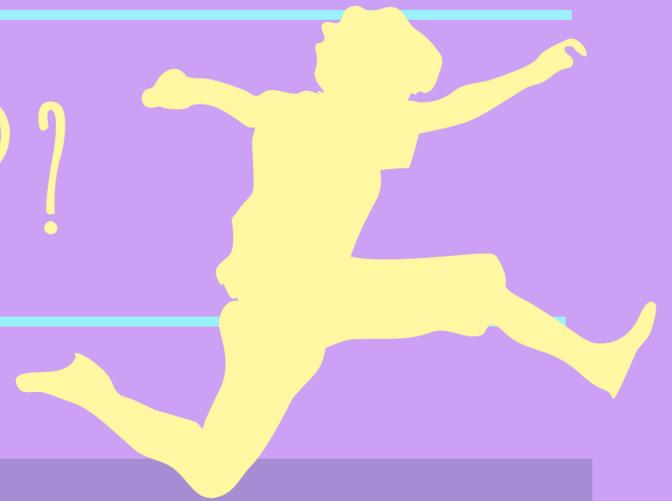
Where the handler turns, keeping the dog on the same side but changing the dog's trajectory.

Pivots or pivot turns are an important and sometimes neglected skill in agility. They can be used to shape the *dog's line* on the ground or through a series of jumps.



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DARE TO JUMP?



THE MOST COMMON OBSTACLE

Jumps are by far the obstacle that your dog will tackle the most often. As a newbie to the agility world your dog certainly shouldn't be jumping higher than elbows - even if they are good at jumping over things while out on walks etc - as it takes a while to teach our dogs good *jump form* and for them to understand their own bodies and how to safely and successfully navigate jumps.

TYPES OF JUMPS

There are a number of different jumps - most of which require the same action from your dog, but which *look* very different to them.

- Standard jump: a single pole between two wings
- Tyre: a circular hoop jump
- Wall: a solid looking piece (no gaps that dogs can see underneath so they don't know what's on the other side) with two pillars on either side
- Spread jump: two standard jumps placed one in front of the other, with the first jump's pole being 10cm lower than the dog's normal jump height; dog has to clear both poles.
- Long jump: a *long* construction of up to 5 elements (wood or foam) - the dog has to jump *long* to clear all elements.

JUST BOUNCE!

Nowadays most people don't have a general jump cue - though you do still hear *over* and *jump* from time to time. The problem with these generic cues is they aren't usually taught to any *criteria* so the dog doesn't understand the cue except for "jump a jump in front of you". There is a lot more to jumps than that - they can jump long, they can jump tightly, they can turn; and they don't always take the obvious side of the jump!

It is important that each of your verbal jump cues are distinctive enough from each other, and given early enough to the dog, so that they can translate the human speech into dog action, adjust their gait or path if necessary, and then carry that out - long before they get to the jump itself!

- Standard: Jump long - drive out
- Directional: Turn left/right
- Decel: Jump tightly
- Wing wrap: Jump tightly, doing a 360° *wrap* around the wing
- Back of the jump: Take the nonobvious side of the jump when *pushed* to it (backside) or *pulled* to it (threadle)

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TUNNELS...

MAKING DOGS CRAZY SINCE 1978

CREATING A TUNNEL MONSTER

Tunnels are one of the first pieces of equipment we can safely introduce to inexperienced & younger dogs, as the dog isn't having to jump or twist at all. Dogs must run through from one side of the tunnel to the other - meaning they exit from the opposite side they were sent in. Turning around in the tunnel is an impressive feat of dexterity - but not what we want!

We work a lot with beginners on making their dogs into tunnel monsters, so that they can be sent from far away to a tunnel (so they will *drive* to it) and so they will take the tunnel regardless of what you are doing (so they *commit* to it). Tunnels are also a great place to start introducing crosses, as they give you a couple of seconds to get in the right position - and your dog is likely to come out looking at you for guidance on where to go next!

SAFETY FIRST!

Although tunnels are one of the *safest* bits of equipment, they can still cause problems if not pegged or weighted down appropriately. Faster dogs often run along the outer edge of the tunnel (think Sonic the Hedgehog style!) if sent in from harder angles, and it is important that the tunnel doesn't shift or they'll slip and potentially injure themselves!

BLIND TO YOU

Remember that while your dog is in the tunnel, they are completely blind to where you are and what you're doing. Sometimes this is a bonus, as it means that we can get into position for a cross or start moving toward the next obstacle and make the dog catch up with us. And sometimes it isn't at all, as if the dog comes out of the tunnel and sees an obstacle close by they may take that - even if you haven't told them to do so! Or they may run straight to you, instead of taking an obstacle you *thought* you had indicated.

We need to give information to the dog on what to do next *while* in the tunnel - this may include checking in with you or a certain piece of equipment that we want them to look for.

Examples of cues we may give, for the dog to perform on exit:

- Dog's name - look at me
- Directional cue - turn left/right
- Jump cue - perform this action on an upcoming jump next (e.g. backside, wing wrap, GO)
- Other obstacle cues - look for this obstacle and take it

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THE BIG ONES - CONTACTS

WHAT EXACTLY ARE THEY?

The *contact* equipment is the most daunting looking kit in an agility course. Consisting of the *a-frame*, *dog walk* and *seesaw*, these require the dogs to exercise a lot of self control, to understand how to safely increase and decrease their speed, and perform set *criteria* at the end.

The *a frame* is a pair of two wide, steep planks that the dog must traverse.

The *dog walk* is the tallest piece; three very thin planks attached to each other that the dog has to run over. This requires great balance from the dog - especially when they're travelling at speed!

The *seesaw* is the only piece of equipment in a course that moves - it bangs down to the ground like a child's seesaw and dogs must have the confidence and understanding of where the *tipping point* is in order to safely navigate it.

Top tip: the *dog walk* and *seesaw* look very, very similar to the dog on approach as they are the exact same angle - so distinctive cues and *early cues* are important!



SO WHAT'S THIS ABOUT "CRITERIA"?

When performing any of the contacts, dogs have to touch (with any one part of their body) the differently coloured parts of the contact (the contact points) at both the start and end. For the seesaw that must also have hit the ground before the dog departs. Failure to do any of these results in *faults* if competing - and is a safety risk otherwise. No leaping from the top!

It is important to have *criteria* for your dog's contacts, such as:

- 4 on: dog stops with four feet on the contact point - usually seen on seesaw, mostly for small dogs.
- 2 on, 2 off: dog stops with two feet on the contact, two on the ground.
- Running: for the a frame (and dog walk if you're feeling brave) - the dog learns a set stride pattern to take them across the entire contact.

We don't do *hope and pray* contacts where we try to stop or slow the dog down mid stride on the coloured bit, then let them go again. It relies far too much on you being in the right place and doesn't give the dog clear understanding of what they are supposed to do.

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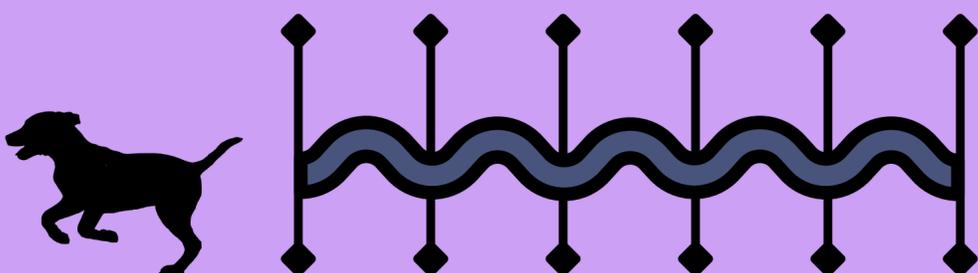
GET YOUR WIGGLE ON!

WEAVE, WEAVE, WEAVE!

Weaves are one of the most exciting things to watch - and one of the toughest on the dog's body. It requires the dog to fully flex and bend their spine throughout and puts a lot of pressure into the dog's shoulders. For bigger dogs, it's not uncommon to see them in contact with the weaves at several points - their head and shoulders passing by one pole, their body curved around another, and their tail curved around another still.

Weaves require enormous levels of concentration from the dog. We usually see six or twelve poles at a time in a course - that's a long time for them to be doing this physically demanding obstacle!

For all these reasons, weaves are one of the last things we teach dogs when working through agility skills. We need to make absolutely sure the dog is fully grown and that they are physically capable of doing them - as well as mentally capable of it! They aren't one to rush into, and most trainers don't even begin to start training them until the dog is 15-16 months old.



HOW DO WE TEACH THEM?

- Channel weaves: dog runs through 6 or 12 poles in total (3 and 3 or 6 and 6 on each side) and the gap is slowly reduced.
- V weaves: a set of weaves that bend at the joint where poles meet base; these are initially flattened so the dog is stepping between, then slowly lifted up.
- 2 x 2: the dog is *shaped* to run through a "gate" of two poles, which are then adjusted until they are one in front of the other. Then more gates are slowly added.

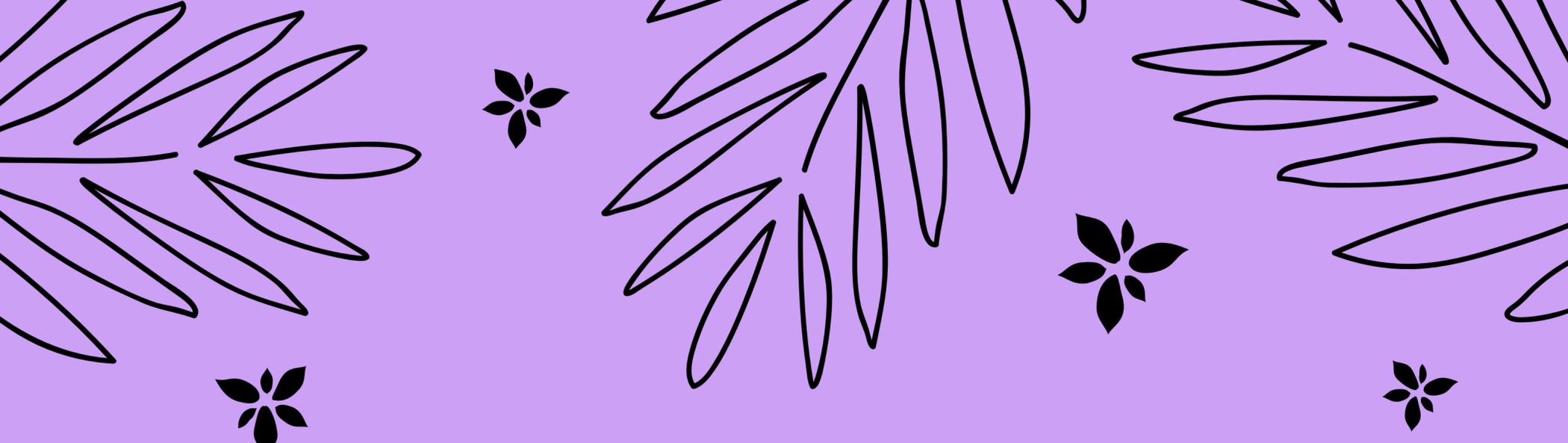
Quite often a combination of methods is used to teach independence and preferred footwork.

We don't suggest *luring* through the weaves, as although this seems like a shortcut to the finished goal, it doesn't promote independence at all - dogs usually are looking at your hand, not the poles!

THINGS TO REMEMBER...

Dogs have to enter the weaves with their left shoulder first.

The faster the dog approaches the weaves, the harder for them to stay in. They need to learn to *decel* themselves at the last possible moment.



IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT AGILITY...

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