

YOUR FIRST AGILITY TRIAL

Entering your first agility trial can be very confusing. We hope to help clarify some the terms and procedures, to help out those who are new to this sport.

ARE YOU READY?

The first thing to consider is whether you, and your dog, are ready to enter a trial.

- Is your dog able to complete all of the obstacles safely, off lead?
- Is your dog able to complete a full course, without running off?
- What does your trainer say?
- How does your dog handle in different places?
- Is your dog under verbal control?
- Is it aggressive to other people or dogs?

It is a very good plan to enter Fun Matches or Show and Gos put on by different groups, to see how your dog handles at different sites and with different obstacles. These are both similar to a real trial, but in a more relaxed setting and without huge crowds. You can find out about them by contacting the officers/board members of your local agility groups. It is also a good plan to observe and help out at a trial or two before you 'show' your own dog. When you do enter a trial, consider only entering for one day, to get your feet wet, and helping out the other day.

WHAT VENUE DO I ENTER?

Then, you need to decide what venue of agility you will be entering. There are two groups sanctioning agility trials in the St. Louis area, and one in Columbia:

- AKC (American Kennel Club: www.akc.org)
- NADAC (North American Dog Agility Council: www.nadac.com)
- Some of these NADAC trials may also be dually sanctioned with
 - ASCA (Australian Shepherd Club of America: www.asca.org), or with
 - AMBOR (American Mixed Breed Obedience Registration: www.amborusa.org)
- UKC (United Kennel Club: www.ukc.org), in Columbia, Missouri

For an AKC trial, your dog must be a purebred dog that is registered with AKC, or that has an ILP number. An ILP is an Indefinite Listing Privilege, for those purebred dogs that do not have 'papers' but can otherwise authenticate their purebred status. For information on this program, go the AKC website. For the other groups, mixed breed dogs are welcome, but you also must be registered with them before you can enter their trials. Each group sets its own rules and the courses will be somewhat different. In general, AKC courses are 'tighter' (less distance between obstacles) and have more 'faults'; NADAC courses will be more spread out, have fewer faults, but have less time allowed to complete the course. UKC is generally a good way to begin trialing, as you can walk your dog through the course on lead during the walk-through period.

It is a very good idea to get copies of the agility rules or regulations from the venues that you are entering. These are available on their websites. You can learn what the faults are, how a run qualifies, how many legs are needed to get a title, and lots more. Be aware that the rules can change, so check back occasionally. AMBOR and ASCA follow the NADAC rules for agility.

HOW DO I GET AN ENTRY FORM?

Entry forms in agility are called 'premiums' (I have no idea why). Each trial has a secretary and a chairperson. The best person to get premiums from is the secretary. You can find out about upcoming trials, the names/e-mails of the secretary, and often, websites of the sponsoring club, at the websites of the sponsoring organizations (above), or from Clean Run (www.cleanrun.com), under their listings of events. Our club's website (www.stlouisagility.org), has a calendar, and we try to keep listed on it all of the local upcoming agility shows, with links to get more information. You can also sign up with MidwestAgility@yahoogle.com. You will be automatically notified by email of any trials that get posted on that site.

AKC trials will sometimes fill, so get your entry in early. NADAC trials in this area are less likely to fill. The UKC trial will also fill, as the entry limit is very small. If the club putting on the trial has a website, you can sometimes get the premium and entry form from that site (and even fill it in on-line before you print it out; trial secretaries really love how legible these entries are). If this is a local trial, be sure to read on the premium whether you can drop-off the entry at the secretary's house. Opening and closing dates are firm: do not send it in early or late! NADAC trials open whenever the premium becomes available. Be sure to read the whole premium carefully, as there will be lots of information buried in there. Especially check the 'running order,' as to when the Novice classes will be scheduled, as it is not always the same at every trial. This shows the sequence in which the classes run. You may also want to read our brochure about how to fill out the entry forms.

Be sure to sign and date your entry, or it will be returned to you!
If you are a Junior Handler, your parent/guardian must also sign the form.

You may get an e-mail reply from the secretary, telling you if your entry was received and if you are officially entered in the trial. This is a good time to check your entry, to make sure that all of the information is correct. After the closing date, you may not be able to make any more changes to your entry. You may also get a printed confirmation of your entry, which could include a numbered armband, which you must wear at the trial. A copy of the running order will be there, which shows when your dog's runs are scheduled. These could change slightly, but are usually pretty accurate. The premium will also state if food will be available there.

BEFORE THE TRIAL

Things to bring to a trial:

- Directions
- Food and drinks, unless you plan on buying them there

- Water and lots of treats for your dog
- Crate or exercise pen for the dog, if they are allowed (check the premium)
- Ground cover for the crate, if you wish
- A chair for yourself
- Shade if the trial is outside
- Clean up bags
- A leash
- A collar without tags (for AKC trials)
- Your dog's height card, if you have one
- Anything else that will make the day comfortable for you and your dog (some people bring fans, for instance, or video cameras for someone to record their runs, paper and pencil, tote bags, clipboard). Check out what others bring.

AT THE SHOW SITE

Be sure to arrive plenty early to get set up, walk your dog and relax for a while before your run. Many people get nervous before their runs, so this is a good time to take care of yourself: relax, visit with friends, watch other dogs and handlers on the courses. If your dog needs to get measured, you will need time for that, too. Check in with the trial secretary for that. If your dog does not need to get measured, then checking in may just be as simple as checking your name off the board for the Novice runs, shortly before your dog's run. There should be course maps available to look at, which will show the arrangement of the obstacles on the field for your run. Be aware that the judge can make last minute changes to that, if needed.

BEFORE YOU RUN

OK, you have arrived on time, are set up, walked your dog and played with it, have been measured and have read the course map. Before it is time for your run, first the course needs to be set. You will see a lot of people on the field, moving things around. This could take awhile, unless there are only a few things to be done. There will be a 'warm-up' jump set up somewhere to the side (if a NADAC trial, there may also be a short set of weaves set up). It is a very good idea to practice on this equipment. Be sure to potty your dog often before your run, because if it eliminates on the field, you are eliminated!

SHOW ETIQUETTE

Besides cleaning up after your dog, (even at the motel, if you are staying out of town for this trial), don't crowd the ring entrances or exits; keep your distance from the ring gating, and don't try to help competitors from the sidelines (they could be disqualified). The scorekeepers are the most visible people at a trial, but also some of the busiest. Please do not ask them a lot of questions, especially during runs. Try helping at that table sometime, and you will quickly understand.

Motel etiquette: if you are staying out of town for a trial, be sure to clean up after your dog at the motel. Don't leave barking dogs alone in the room, keep them crated if you do leave them there, and cover the beds with extra sheets from home.

WHAT ABOUT COLLARS?

Please note that at AKC trials, the dog is allowed to wear flat buckle or rolled leather collars only, with NO tags attached. No name tags, no rabies tags. They are not allowed to wear collars with the dog's name engraved on it. You may choose to run the dog without any collar. No "gentle leaders", electronic, prong or pinch collars, or even fake ones, are allowed anywhere at an AKC trial site. At NADAC trials, no collar is allowed at all on the dog while it is running the course. You could be disqualified if you don't follow this, even if you had the most beautifully clean run in the world.

WALKING THE COURSE

Once the course is set, you will be allowed to walk the course to plan your strategy (no treats are allowed on the course during your walk through). In fact, take out of your pockets anything that jangles or makes noise, as you could be disqualified for that; no fanny packs, (they could be considered training aids, as so many people use them to hold treats). At some trials, Novice dogs will be allowed a 'course familiarization,' which means that you will take your dog out on the course, on lead, to practice the contact obstacles only, and only once. You only get to do this on one day of the trial. No treats are allowed on the field at this time. At a UKC trial, a Novice exhibitor is allowed to walk the course with their dog on lead.

JUDGE'S BRIEFING

Before your Novice class begins, you will be given a 'briefing' by the judge. The briefing will include a reminder of some of the rules, the 'table count' for an AKC course, and a reminder of the location of the start and finish lines. These are very important: the time starts the minute the dog crosses the start line, whether you are ready or not, and the time will not stop until your dog crosses the finish line, no matter how perfect your run was. This is somewhat different if electronic timing is in use, be sure to ask the judge how that affects the run. The judge will also tell you how soon the first dog will be on the line, and when she/he wants the next dog to be ready for their run. This is very important: if you miss it, ask the Gate Steward. The briefing is a very good time to ask questions of the judge.

AT THE GATE

The Gate Stewards: Be nice to them! They are usually standing near the entry gate, with a large poster board near them. You will check-in there, (sometimes by just checking your name off the list). They will call you when your turn is coming, and will tell you when it is time to move onto the field. Make sure that you have removed all treats from your person! Please stay close by as your turn approaches (about 5-6 dogs ahead of your turn), and stay well within hearing distance of them. And, please go out onto the field when they ask. One of the biggest mistakes new handlers make is not being at the start line when it is their turn. It will really slow the whole trial for everyone. There will be a 'leash runner' who will take your dog's lead to the finish line. Set up your dog, and look to the timer, who will tell you when everything is ready for you to start (they often say something like: "Go when ready."). If the timer blows a whistle shortly after you start, there was probably a stopwatch problem: praise your dog, because you get a second chance. You will merely start over.

Have a great run! Have fun! Remember to breathe!

AFTER YOUR RUN

Get your dog back on leash, giving it lots of praise and treats once you are clear of the ring, no matter what happened on the course. After just a few minutes, you usually can get a yellow copy of your results from the secretary's table. It should indicate whether you have a 'Q' (you Qualified), or 'NQ' (non-qualifying). All 'Faults' (errors on the course) are indicated. (Hint: do not ask the Scorekeepers why you got any faults; they were not able to watch your run. Ask your friends who did watch).

If you did get a Q, then, when all of the Novice runs are done for that class, you will get a ribbon, maybe two ribbons if your score was good enough to be in the top four placements (for AKC). For NADAC trials, the top four dogs in each division always get placements, whether they qualified or not. The results of the entire class will also be posted shortly after the class is finished. In our club, for every Q you receive, you may also pick out a toy from our barrel. Congratulations! You now have what is called a 'Leg' towards your first title. Depending upon the venue you have entered, you will need to get a few more of these legs in order to get the Novice title. It is a good idea to keep track of your dog's progress toward Titles. Some people keep very extensive records of their runs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Go to the Dogpatch website: www.dogpatch.org/agility, and find these articles: Your First Trial, and Trial Guide for Novice. There are other good links on that site so that you can start your own Internet surf for more information.

Happy Trials!