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# Introduction

Agility truly is the ultimate dog sport! It combines speed and precision, teamwork and independence, dog training skills and handler finesse in a wonderfully complex mix. Agility has the capacity to give both you and your dog innumerable moments of joy and excitement. In this book we wish to inspire you to make the most, and the best, of your agility training.

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## Our training program

What is it about agility that appeals to you? Why do you want to do agility with your dog? We often raise these questions in our classes, and although the answers vary, most groups come up with lists that look something like this:

- Fun
- Cooperation
- Brainwork
- Enrichment
- Nice social community
- Competitive
- Always room for improvement
- Want to do something with my dog
- Like to teach my dog stuff
- Physical exercise

Agility is all of these things, and more. We find these lists so useful that we usually leave them on the whiteboard during class, so that we can easily refer to them. The list of reasons to train agility helps keep matters in perspective, which in turn makes your life as a trainer and perhaps as a competitor easier. For example, using training methods based on positive reinforcement is the obvious choice if one of the reasons you train agility is to have fun with your dog. In the same fashion, it's a good idea to really teach your dog skills—not just let him run around the course—if you want your agility training to provide brainwork for your dog.



*Let's enjoy this game together!*

In our training program we don't differentiate between agility-just-for-fun and competitive agility. Our entire program rests on building good foundation skills for you and your dog, something that is as important for the backyard trainer as it is for the world cup team. There's no contradiction between "having a ton of fun" and "well-planned and thoughtfully executed training." Even if you have no intention of ever competing, clear goals and thorough planning will help you make training fun and fair for your dog. And if you want to reach the highest competitive level, you obviously will benefit from careful planning and step-by-step progression toward your highest goals—but it's equally important for your future success that both you and your dog have a blast every time you train.

### Our goal: a happy and confident dog

We strive toward one major goal in all our training: a happy and confident dog! We picture a dog that is focused, works intensely, embarks on any given task with great enthusiasm, and enjoys both the exercises and the rewards. The objective of having "a happy and confi-

dent dog” makes sense for all kinds of dogs and handlers and all levels of training, whether you just do a little agility in your backyard or strive to make it onto a world-class team.

And since agility is about dogs and people alike, your happiness and confidence is of equal importance. You’ll both get the most out of your agility training when you know what to do and enjoy doing it.

In addition to happiness and confidence, we also picture a dog and handler team that can get around any course with flow, speed, and precision. Our training program seeks to create a dog that knows exactly what to do whenever he gets to a piece of equipment and that smoothly follows your handling between the obstacles. We like to say that you and your dog have different responsibilities on the agility course: your job is to tell your dog where to go, and your dog’s job is to perform the obstacles correctly without help from you.

We strive to teach the dog all the behaviors he needs to master to be able to independently get to, perform, and leave each obstacle in the best possible fashion. Our teaching stresses independent obstacle performance for several reasons. If your dog can perform the obstacles on his own, that leaves you free to focus on directing his path. Basically it all boils down to happiness and confidence: your dog will be happier and more confident when he really knows what to do and gets rewarded for it, and you’ll be happier and more confident when you can count on your dog to get it right without you having to babysit him. Having a dog that can negotiate the obstacles at full speed gives you a competitive edge, and the very process of learning those skills works your dog’s brain and enriches his life.

We also strive for each dog and handler team to learn a system of handling—a limited repertoire of handling signals that are used consistently and that fit together without contradictions. Your handling system is your steering wheel, enabling you to direct your dog between obstacles at full speed. To build good habits for yourself and your dog, you need to be consistent in your body language throughout your agility training. The system you use to handle your dog should therefore carry through when moving your dog to and from exercises, directing him to a good spot to start each exercise, providing him with a sense of direction through the exercises, and throughout your reward procedures.

### **Building blocks for agility**

Our goal—a happy and confident team that can get around the agility course with flow, speed and precision—informs and influences our training, our teaching, and the structure of this book.

#### **1. You need to develop your theoretical understanding and knowledge of dogs, training, and agility.**

As your dog’s teammate and teacher, you’re in charge of the training process: The path to a happy and confident dog goes through you. The more you know and understand about dogs, training, and agility, the easier it will be to decide what to train (both what your ultimate goals are, and which steps you can take to get there) and how to train.

All our training is based on the principles of clicker training. Derived from the laws of learning, clicker training provides us with a clear outline for how to train: focus on behav-

ior, use positive reinforcement, and build behavior step by step. Foundation training thus becomes our top priority because that is where both you and your dog get to work on one aspect at a time, which enables you to gain success right from the start. Throughout this book we aim to provide you with an understanding of the underlying principles of clicker training and how to use them in your agility training. The more you learn about positive reinforcement training, the better equipped you'll be to design your own training program, reach your goals, and resolve any problems that might arise during the process.

All our training is also based on our conviction that everything in and around the training situation should happen in a manner that is appropriate to agility. No matter what you're training at the moment, you should always make sure to work with maximum focus and full intensity, and to follow your system of handling. We refer to these rules as Good Agility Practices. Along with the principles of clicker training, Good Agility Practices provide the framework for our training.

Accordingly, the first part of this book addresses the theoretical underpinnings that guide our training.

## **2. You and your dog need to learn foundation skills.**

The most important part of practical agility training is laying a solid foundation. It's like building a house or learning arithmetic: The genius is in the details, which means that you need to start with the basics. Foundation skills form the core of agility, so you'll revisit them over and over throughout your agility career to refresh, maintain, and refine them.

What kind of foundation training are we talking about, then? For you, it entails acquiring the skills needed to train your dog so that you can get the behaviors you want, and establishing the basics of handling so that you can move around smoothly with your dog during and between exercises. Applying the principles of positive reinforcement, we employ TAGteach to help you learn these basic skills. (TAGteach is discussed further in Chapter 3.)

For your dog, foundation training is all about learning to love the game of agility. He'll learn to work with focus and intensity, offering behaviors and earning rewards. Some examples of foundation skills you might work on during your agility training are: reward procedures (like running to a treat bowl or playing tug); working on both your left and your right sides; going between, over, and under things; developing body awareness; and liking and creating noise and movement. You can practice foundation skills virtually anywhere, and the good news is that you need neither a lot of space nor any formal agility equipment to do it.

We know that the equipment on the agility course can be very tempting! To maximize happiness and confidence throughout the training process, however, it's best to split your training into smaller segments and work on one thing at a time, building a proper foundation. There's no denying that thorough work on the basics will delay your first try at running a full course, but proper grounding in the basics is the only way to ensure that both you and your dog will get it right from the start, avoid rehearsing bad habits, have fun, and be successful all through the process. Later, when you start working on handling maneuvers and teaching the different obstacles (and

eventually begin running obstacle sequences and courses), you'll easily put the pieces together and reap the fruits of your excellent foundation work.

The second part of our book presents an array of basic skills that will give you and your dog the foundations necessary to play agility. Because you are the path to your dog's learning, we start with you. Once you have the methods and mechanics of training and handling under your belt, we move on to your dog.



*From foundation skill to final obstacle performance with happiness and confidence*

### **3. You need to put it all together.**

Soon enough the time will come for dog and handler to get onto the agility field and start working on handling maneuvers and obstacles. This is where all your foundation training really pays off!

If you've built a strong foundation, you'll be amazed at how quickly your dog becomes proficient on the various pieces of agility equipment. Because you've already established your own training and handling mechanics, you'll be able to keep up with your dog's progress. Before you know it, you and your dog will be zooming through obstacle sequences—your dog performing each piece of equipment independently and you directing his path between the obstacles.

The third part of the book shows you how to combine all those foundation skills to teach your dog to follow your handling and to perform the agility obstacles in sequences.

So let's get started! As you've probably gathered by now, principle is more important to us than method. Accordingly, we'll first discuss the laws of learning—the basic theories that govern all our training.