

History of Agility, Part 1

By Brenna Fender

Staring at an empty ring at a dog show is boring. Organizers of the Crufts Dog Show in England knew that. So in 1977 committee member John Varley set out to create a different kind of demonstration to fill the time between the end of the obedience championship and the beginning of group judging at England's biggest dog show.

But Varley knew more about horse show jumping than about training dogs. To help him design a dog jumping competition, he contacted Peter Meanwell, a working trials exhibitor with extensive dog training experience. Meanwell's assignment was to create a dog-safe, spectator-friendly event that could be performed on Olympia's hard floor.

Meanwell recruited friends Stuart Gillam, Kevin Foster, Albert Davies, Trevor Jones, and Fred Welham to help build equipment for the demo. Experience in working trials, which are similar to Schutzhund, helped Meanwell and his friends shape the basics of the dog jumping event.

Soon Meanwell realized that the demo would be more attractive to spectators if it had a competitive edge. So he set up two teams: his own Lincolnshire Alsatian Association and All Breeds Training Society and Jones's Yorkshire Working Trials Training



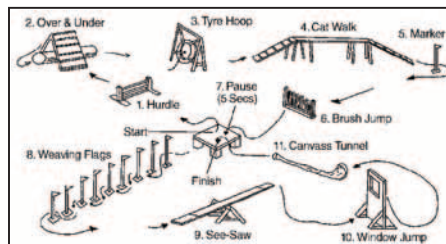
Peter Meanwell, the father of agility. From AgilityNet.com

1977—Peter Meanwell, a trainer of Working Trial dogs in the U.K., is asked to create a dog jumping event to amuse spectators waiting for group judging at Crufts Dog Show. He is strongly influenced by a jumpers course presented in the early to mid-1970s at an Agricultural Fair in England as well as by RAF Canine Corps exercises.

2/10/78—First demonstration of agility in the world at Crufts Dog Show in England; Peter Meanwell and his dog, WT Ch. Jamie of Petricas, won with a clean round.

1979—Agility returns to Crufts as a competitive event.

Originally the course at Crufts was in the shape of a figure eight with the table at the crossover point. That was also where the dog started and finished.



12/79—First Pedigree Chum Agility Stakes Finals at the Olympia Christmas Horse Show; Pedigree is the first national sponsor of agility in the U.K. and it continues to support agility today. Qualifying for the Pedigree Finals is a great accomplishment for U.K. exhibitors.

1980—First agility event is held under U.K. Kennel Club regulations.



Courtesy Pamela Green

1984-1985—The basics of agility according to Charles "Bud" Kramer are printed in Front and Finish magazine.



Charles (Bud) Kramer and his Springer Swinger. Courtesy Bud Kramer

1986—United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA) is formed through collaborative efforts of Ken Tatsch and Sandra Davis.



11/8/86—First USDAA competition is held in Houston, Texas at the Astrohall. It is a team event, involving 16 dogs and their handlers that represent USDAA's first two groups—DAWG and ADEPT—from Dallas and El Paso, respectively.

ADEPT of El Paso, Texas was one of the first agility groups. Courtesy Sandra Davis



1977 – 1983

Society. Matching uniforms added the final touch, and the event was ready for its Crufts debut.

On February 10, 1978, two teams of four dogs stepped into the ring, and agility was born. Simple rules and speedy rounds made for tremendous spectator appeal. Faults were more obvious and easier to understand than in conformation shows and obedience trials. Crowd reaction was good enough to ensure that a jumping competition would be invited back the following year. In 1979, the Crufts event was followed in December by the Finals of the Pedigree Chum Agility Stakes at the International Horse Show at Olympia. This began Pedigree's long standing sponsorship of dog jumping competitions in the U.K.

Soon dog trainers copied the basics of these events, adapting what they saw at Crufts. Complaints to the United Kingdom Kennel Club about "illegal" dog jumping competitions led to

a set of official rules that were effective January 1, 1980. Peter Lewis, a friend of Meanwell's and an accomplished working trials competitor in his own right, headed the committee that created rules for the new dog sport they named "agility."

The original Kennel Club regulations did not suggest how this new sport should be judged. Lewis devised a system of signals through which the judge could indicate faults. The 1980 competition at Crufts was the first test run under the new Kennel Club rules. Meanwell was the judge, and he asked Lewis to record faults. "I was acting as what we now know as his scribe," says Lewis.

In an attempt to further refine the sport, Lewis and friends, Angela and Bill Chuter, spent many hours determining the judge's responsibilities, including working out a path that allowed the judge to be in necessary places at the right times.



An early British agility trial. From AgilityNet.com

1981—First book on agility, *The Agility Dog* by Peter Lewis, is published. The book was later revised and expanded into *The Agility Dog International*.

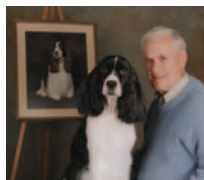


Ken Tatsch and Peter Lewis discuss course design at one of their early meetings. Courtesy Ken Tatsch

1983—Ken Tatsch meets Peter Lewis, one of agility's original participants, at Crufts. Peter Lewis talks to Ken about starting an agility organization in the U.S.



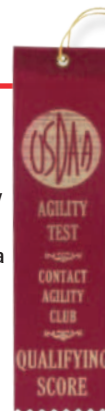
1/87—The National Committee for Dog Agility (NCDA) is created by Bud Kramer, his wife, Lou Ann, and his daughter, Vel.



Bud Kramer, a university professor by day, spent most of his spare time developing the ideas and concepts of agility. Courtesy Bud Kramer

8/5/88—First USDAA Grand Prix of Dog Agility is held in Houston, Texas. There are three jump heights competing against each other. Joyce Zmek and her Shetland Sheepdog, Trooper, win the event.

5/5/90—First USDAA title is earned. The Agility Dog® (AD) title is achieved by Alaina Axford and her Portuguese Water Dog, Cooper, in Danville, Virginia.



Six dogs earned their Agility Dog title in May 1990. Judge Sue Henry with (left to right): Julie Daniels and Arrow and Jessy, Fran Hoffman and Ali, Alaina Axford-Moore and Cooper, Marilyn Belli and Jessie, and Sally Gleis and Sophie. Courtesy Ken Tatsch

4/27/91—First USDAA Advanced Agility Dog® (AAD) title is earned by JoAnn Kelley and her Shetland Sheepdog, Cuddles.



JoAnn Kelly and Cuddles on the podium at the 1993 USDAA Nationals. © Wayne Cott

5/25/91—First USDAA Dog Agility Masters® Team tournament is held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

6/11/91—First USDAA World Team competes at the FCI World Dog Show in Germany. The team finishes in third place.



Sharon Nelson, founder of NADAC. Courtesy Sharon Nelson

1993—North American Dog Agility Council (NADAC) is formed by Sharon Nelson.



“ Now agility is bigger than one person,

8/93—The American Kennel Club (AKC) has an advisory committee meeting in Pennsylvania to decide whether the organization should add agility to their performance events. Sharon Anderson is named AKC consultant on agility.

8/13/94—First AKC-licensed agility trial is held at the Astrodome in Houston, Texas. John Loomis judges and 181 dogs enter.



Courtesy Rebecca Raths O'Sell



The first AKC trial was held in 1994 in a fully-sodded Astrodome in Houston, Texas. Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake

7/1/95—First Standard NADAC Agility Trial Champion (NATCH) title is completed by Barb Benner and her Belgian Malinois, Lexy.

10/13/95—First NADAC National Championship is held in Olympia, Washington.

4/26/96—First USDAA Spring Festival of Dog Agility® is held in Lexington, Kentucky.

10/4/96—First AKC World Team competes in Morges, Switzerland at the FCI Agility World Championship. Only a large dog team is sent, and they finish in 9th place overall.



Barb Benner and Lexy of Spokane, Washington earned the first NADAC NATCH title. Courtesy Barb Benner



First FCI Agility World Championships in Morges, Switzerland on dirt over an ice arena. Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake



First AKC/USA Team (left to right): Karen Moureaux and Dallas, Pati Hatfield-Mah and Lily, Jane Simmons-Moake and Holly, Stuart Mah and Recce, Nancy Gyes and Scud, Sharon Anderson. Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake

1/31/93—First USDAA Masters Agility Dog® (MAD) title is earned by JoAnn Kelley and her Shetland Sheepdog, Cuddles.

6/3/93—First USDAA Junior Handler competition is held.

The USDAA Junior Handler program started in 1993 and is part of the nationals each year.
© Skipper Productions



7/3/93—First NADAC trial is held at Frontier Park in Graham, Washington.



7/4/93—First NADAC title is earned by Sharon and Amanda Nelson and Corgi, Sunny.



Amanda Nelson and her Corgi Sunny earned the first NADAC agility title in 1993 (with her mother Sharon Nelson). Courtesy Amanda Nelson

club, or country,” says Lewis. “In other words, it is here to stay.”
— Peter Lewis

8/26/94—First AKC Novice Agility (NA) title is earned by Rebecca Raths O'Sell and her Corgi, Colby, at the AKC's second agility trial held by the St. Croix Kennel Club in Minnesota.

1995—The United Kennel Club (UKC) takes over the NCDA program.



3/18/95—First USDAA Agility Dog Champion® title is earned by Laura Yarbrough and her Pomeranian, Cody.



5/25/95—First issue of a weekly newsletter on agility training is sent out. Clean Run Vol.1, #1 is eight (photocopied) pages stapled together.

Laura Yarbrough and her Pomeranian, Cody were the first to capture the USDAA ADCH.
© Nancy Lane



11/23/96—First AKC Agility Nationals is held in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Two hundred twenty dogs enter. Judges Darlene

Woz, Patty Drom, and Janet Gauntt choose one overall winner: Dixie Nobel and her Shetland Sheepdog, Delta.

1997—Ken Boyd and his Corgi, Becky, are the first to win the USDAA, AKC, and NADAC national championships in the same year—the agility “triple crown.”



Ken Boyd and Becky remain the only team to win the AKC, NADAC, and USDAA Nationals in the same year. © Duncan McGilway

4/25/97—First USDAA Dog Agility Steeplechase® tournament is held in Lexington, Kentucky.



In the first AKC Nationals, rather than having a champion in each jump height, one overall winner was named. Courtesy Sharon Anderson



6/26/99—First AKC Master Agility Championship (MACH) title is earned by Marquand Cheek and his Shetland Sheepdog, Wyatt.

Marq Cheek of California and his Sheltie Wyatt make history by earning the first AKC MACH title. Courtesy Marq Cheek



Amanda Nelson with her Corgi, Sunny was the first to earn the JH-NATCH. Courtesy Amanda Nelson

8/1/99—First NADAC Junior Handler NATCH is earned by Amanda Nelson and her Corgi, Sunny.

2000—International Federation of Cynological Sports (IFCS) is founded on initiative of national sports cynological federations of Russia and Ukraine to unite dog sport organizations of different countries and hold international championships.

2001—USDAA becomes a charter member of the International Federation of Cynological Sports (IFCS).

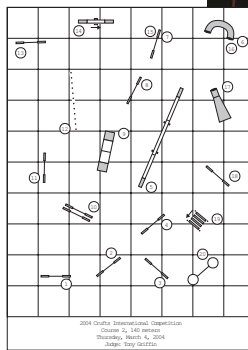


3/31/02—IFCS holds its first world championship with six countries participating. The USDAA USA team brings home team gold and individual standard gold.



Jen Pinder and Static are the first U.S. dog and handler team to compete at Crufts. Courtesy Sharon Anderson

2004—AKC is invited to participate in agility competition at Crufts Dog Show. Jen Pinder and her Border Collie, Static travel to England to represent the U.S.



The first courses were simply figure eights. The table was the “crossover point,” and also the start and finish. Once Lewis’s committee allowed the judge the freedom to create a course of any shape, agility as we know it had begun.

Lewis formed a national agility club in 1983. This club held judging seminars and taught course building and other additions to the meager Kennel Club rules. It wasn’t long until interest in agility developed in other countries as well. Lewis is credited with popularizing the sport, first bringing agility to Holland, then Belgium, Sweden, Norway, and France.

As agility spread, concern arose that without an international body to govern the sport, it could vary greatly from place to place. Lewis and French agility aficionado Jean-Paul Petitdidier petitioned the FCI to take agility under its wing. The French rules were adopted, and Petitdidier became president of the FCI Agility Commission.

Lewis chronicled agility’s beginnings in articles for various European magazines. “Something told me this new dog sport would become big,” he wrote, “but I did not realise at that time that it would cover the world.”

In 1983, Lewis and his wife met American Ken Tatsch at the competition in Olympia. The Lewises talked with Tatsch about setting up an agility association in the United States. During the same time frame, another American, Charles (Bud) Kramer, was making his own plans for agility. Both men would become essential to the introduction of agility to the U.S.

“Now agility is bigger than one person, club, or country,” says Lewis. “In other words, it is here to stay.” 🐕

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Kenneth Boyd	Kenneth Tastch
Bob Hoselton	
Charles Kramer	
Peter Lewis	Special thanks to Peter Lewis, without whom this article could not have been written.
Robert Loftus	

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