

History of Agility, Part 2

By Brenna Fender

Shortly after its 1978 debut at the Crufts Dog Show in England, agility piqued the interest of dog trainers in the U.S. By the early 80s, two men had developed ideas about bringing organized agility to the U.S. Their ideas about the way the sport should be run differed enormously, and because of that difference, Americans found themselves in the midst of an agility explosion.

United States Dog Agility Association

In 1983, obedience competitor Ken Tatsch traveled to Olympia, U.K. and watched agility at Crufts. At the same time he met Peter Lewis, who is credited with popularizing agility around the world. Tatsch quizzed Lewis on how he could go about setting up a similar event in the U.S. Tatsch wanted to base an American version of agility on the English event. “I wasn’t interested in trying to reinvent the wheel,” he says.

Lewis connected Tatsch with American Sandra Davis, who had built her own equipment in El Paso, Texas, based on Lewis’s book. She created adjustable obstacles to adapt agility to different-sized dogs. Davis was the first to demonstrate British agility, doing so at the Rio Grande Obedience Dog Club’s trial in September 1984 and later at the Gaines Western Regional Obedience Tournament in Albuquerque, New Mexico in August 1985. Tatsch and Davis, along with some members from a Dallas obedience group, went to work creating a competition to take place at the Gaines Classic the following year. As interest in this new sport grew in Dallas, these agility exhibitors formed a new club: the Dallas Agility Working Group (DAWG). Tatsch and others took the equipment on the road, demonstrating agility to interested audiences.

The first event put on by Tatsch’s newly formed United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA) took place at the Gaines National Obedience Championship Classic on November 8, 1986 in



The Dallas Agility Working Group (DAWG) was one of the first agility clubs in the U.S.
© Gene Abrahamson



In the early nineties, spectators would take a break from the breed and obedience activities at the Astro World Series of Dog Shows in Houston, Texas and pack the stands of a fully sodded Astro Hall Arena to watch the USDAA Nationals. Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake

“The biggest thing about agility back then was that no one knew what we were doing.”

– Barb DeMascio

Dan Dege and his Keeshond Dancer go head-to-head with J.C. Thompson and his BC Robby in a Knockout class at the USDAA Nationals.
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1983 – 1995

Houston, Texas. Sixteen dogs and handlers faced off in a team competition between ADEPT (Agility Dogs of El Paso, Texas) and DAWG. Tatsch fielded over 100 inquiries from interested spectators wanting to know how they could get involved in this exciting new activity. “It helped the sport develop,” Tatsch says.

The growing popularity of agility in the U.S. caught the eye of Pedigree Dog Foods. Pedigree began sponsoring agility in the U.K. shortly after its inception, and the American marketing department contacted Tatsch about sponsorship possibilities. Pedigree sent Tatsch to England for 10 days of intense study in 1987. Then the company began supporting tournaments around the country, including the first Grand Prix on August 5, 1988 in Houston. The relationship that developed between Pedigree and the USDAA lasted nine years and furthered the growth of agility in the U.S.

To make agility more accessible to American exhibitors, the USDAA created three jump heights. British agility at the time required all dogs to jump 30", which limited participation in the sport. Allowing dogs to jump 12", 21", or 30" depending on height at the withers immediately opened doors for athletic members of many breeds to participate. As the sport grew, the heights were adjusted, eventually reaching the current standard of 12", 16", 22", and 26".

The first years of trialing offered a steep learning curve. Bud Houston, author of *The Clean Run Book of Agility Games*, remembers one early practice. “I recall that the course was ‘adjusted’ for each jump height to make the challenges comparable for dogs jumping at different heights,” Houston says. “This was time-consuming and has been abandoned over the years.”

Another time-consuming element was course building. Kathy Gregorieff, who helped form the first USDAA club in Florida, says that course building was more difficult in the early years. “The courses were not nested. We had to move all the equipment for every class,” she says.

Although these early trials were primitive by today’s standards, exhibitors were thrilled by the sense of community and fellowship they experienced. There were so few events that people traveled hundreds of miles to compete. Kim Duff, who has competed in agility since shortly after it was created, says, “We traveled great distances to compete, and we knew everyone.” Houston also remembers the camaraderie of the early days. “The agility community was small and enthusiastic.” Houston points out that these one-ring trials had real advantages. “Everyone got to show with the eyes of every other competitor on them. It was common that we cheered for and encouraged each other,” he says.



Real tires were always used for the tire jump.
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**“None of us were very experienced.
We were thrilled if we just qualified!”**

– Ileana Nadal



It was a real thrill to run in front of the large crowds at early USDAA National events. © Gene Abrahamson



The crossover was regularly used and even appeared at the USDAA Nationals.
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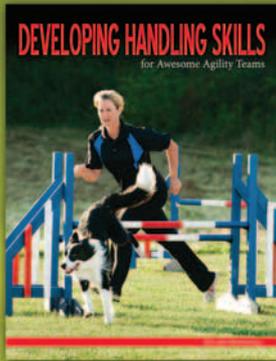


Placements being awarded at an early USDAA Nationals. © Gene Abrahamson



Pedigree was one of the early sponsors of dog agility both in the U.S. and around the world.
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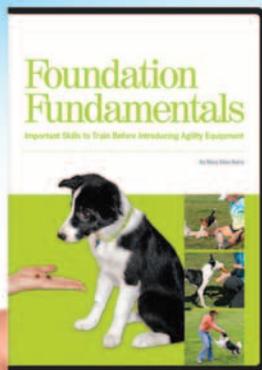
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Early USDAA equipment varied in its appearance and construction. The tire jump was usually made from an actual tire. Pam Juliano, now an agility judge, says, "The tire weighed a *ton* and usually everyone ran away when it was time to move it!" Ileana Nadal, who owned one of the first Boxers to earn an agility title, says that the contact equipment and jumps looked very different. "The equipment was all wood and painted in very bright colors," she says. "Some clubs used to have really cool decorated jump wings, such as wolves, cows, and just about anything else that could be used."

In 1990, the USDAA began offering titles earned by successfully completing a course. One qualifying run earned the title Agility Dog (AD). The first titling event was held on May 5th at the B&B Agility Center in Danville, Virginia. Alaina Axford and her Portuguese Water Dog, Cooper, had the honor of being the first to achieve the Agility Dog title. Nadal was there, and she describes the event. "None of us were very experienced. We were thrilled if we just qualified!"

Handling was very different at the first titling trial. Barb DeMascio, whose dog Revel would later win the 2002 USDAA National Grand Prix, says, "The biggest thing about agility back then was that no one knew what we were doing." A simple rear cross was a real feat. Anne A. Smith, who cofounded the Contact Agility Club, says, "It was a rare handler who attempted a front or rear cross, and then one had the feeling, judging by the execution, that it was more by accident than by choice!" DeMascio agrees: "We didn't know how to rear cross. Many people pulled their dogs toward them and let them spin back the other way, or just crossed and hoped for the best."

Skits and talent acts were a part of off-course activities at early USDAA Nationals. Here the FlashTones from FlashPaws Agility do a special rendition of "Rawhide." Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake



A briefing for finalists at an early USDAA Nationals. © Gene Abrahamson

In early days judges scribed faults for themselves, making marks on the scribe sheet while they judged the dog. © Gene Abrahamson



After titling was introduced, there were several milestones in 1991. On April 27, JoAnn Kelley and her Shetland sheepdog, Cuddles, earned the first Advanced Agility Dog title. On May 25, the first Dog Agility Masters Team tournament was hosted by Keystone Agility Club in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On June 11, the USDAA sent its first team to the FCI World Dog Show in Germany. Made up of J.C. Thompson, Stuart Mah, Felicia Whalen, Sharon Nelson, and Hazel Thompson (alternate), this team placed third behind Denmark and France. There was also a Germany versus the U.S. competition in which the USDAA team emerged victorious.

As the 90s continued, the USDAA was on a roll. On January 1, 1993, Kelley and Cuddles were the first to complete the Masters Agility Dog title. In June of that same year, the USDAA introduced classes for junior handlers, building a second generation of agility competitors. During that time, the USDAA also began requiring more than one run to earn the AD title, a move that raised the bar for agility performances. Later in the mid-90s, the USDAA began offering competitions of comparatively mammoth proportions, like the Spring Festival of Dog Agility, and the accompanying Dog Agility Steeplechase tournament, held in Lexington, Kentucky.

The USDAA continues to grow and change. In 2001, the group became a charter member of the International Federation of Cynological Sports (IFCS). This affiliation allows Tatsch's group to participate in a World competition, testing its athletes against the best from other countries. In 2004, the USDAA has plans for improved customer service through an updated website. "It's a light-year leap forward," Tatsch says, referring to a site that interacts with the organization's database.

National Dog Agility Club

In 1984, the first articles about agility appeared in *Front and Finish*, an American dog training magazine. These articles discussed the sport in the U.K. and its growing popularity. Charles "Bud" Kramer, an obedience competitor, read about this new sport and thought it sounded like fun. But without an outlet for agility enthusiasts in the U.S. he didn't give it further thought.

But, Robert Self, editor of *Front and Finish*, did think about agility a bit more. Self suggested that Kramer promote an American version of agility. Kramer published his first thoughts in the August issue of Self's magazine and continued chronicling the development of his different form of agility in print over the following months.

English agility, designed for spectator appeal, included large obstacles and high jumps. If a dog couldn't jump 30" it couldn't compete. "Bob and I both believed very strongly that the potential of this sport was too great to leave to only those breeds that could manage 30" jumps and run fast," Kramer wrote in the UKC's magazine, *Bloodlines*. Because of his strong belief that agility should be a sport for all dogs and all people, Kramer made major changes in the English format.

Throughout the winter of 1985, Kramer and his friend Tennyson Collins designed and built a collection of agility obstacles. The two had specific criteria for the equipment: it had to be economical, portable, easy to build, safe, and as equitable as possible for all dogs. Many of the obstacles were based on the English design, but others were adapted from other sources, like search-and-rescue training programs. Kramer provided plans for building the obstacles to further promote the sport.

"It was a rare handler who attempted a front or rear cross, and then one had the feeling, judging by the execution, that it was more by accident than by choice!"

- Anne A. Smith



Sandra Davis's two-level tire jump being used for an agility demo in September 1984. © Tom Stanfield



Agility rules developed as new situations came up. Originally, competitors would jump over and duck under obstacles in their way.
© Gene Abrahamson



Obstacles were often ornate and creatively decorated such as this dragon chute designed by Sandra Davis. Courtesy Sandra Davis.



Winners of the Open division (there was only Open and Mini at the time) at the 1992 USDAA Nationals: JoAnn Kelly & Cuddles, Jane Simmons-Moake and Tracy, Alaina Axford-Moore & Cooper. Courtesy Jane Simmons-Moake

Jump heights and course times were big concerns for Kramer. In an attempt to be both fair and efficient, he decided on three heights. Height divisions of 8", 14", and 20" were chosen because they seemed to equally divide the various breeds. Because Kramer considered the challenge of agility to be in the accuracy of the performance, no dog would be required to jump higher than its shoulder height. In fact, Kramer referred to jumps as hurdles to clarify that his sport was not a test of jumping skills. He also felt strongly that any dog that moved smoothly through the course at a moderate pace should qualify, so assigned course times were generous.

Eventually, Kramer and his family established the National Committee for Dog Agility (NCDA). Its birth date is loosely considered to be January 1, 1987, when Kramer's book, *Agility Dog Training for All Breeds*, was published, although the Kramers held agility seminars and other events long before that. The plan was not to develop a club but instead to create an agility program that that would be picked up by a major organization. In the meantime, Kramer's book inspired many people to build their own equipment and to start holding exhibitions. The American Kennel Club (AKC) allowed NCDA agility to be demonstrated at some of its obedience trials and conformation shows. This exposure encouraged more agility growth, and Kramer was faced with many competitors who wanted an outlet for competition and for exhibition.

To satisfy those exhibitors, Kramer changed the name of his organization to the National Club for Dog Agility on July 1, 1991. As a committee, the NCDA had organized agility as a sport, and

issued certificates of accomplishment to qualifiers. As a club, the NCDA did it all, including certifying judges, sanctioning trials, issuing titles, and printing a newsletter. Some of Kramer's friends originally chided him for thinking that training enthusiasts would support a sport that required moving so much equipment from place to place. Yet, the NCDA averaged between 100 and 125 trials a year. It quickly grew much larger than Kramer had ever imagined.

The first trials were different from those of today. Agility judge Joanne Killeen remembers competing in those early NCDA trials: "Everyone had to maintain their own records of legs and then mail the form to Bud Kramer." Course designs were simple. Pam Juliano says, "It was basically two or three rows of equipment. You would go up one way and come down the other. The challenge of the whole course was just to 'do it!'"

Early NCDA equipment was different as well. Kramer's version of agility included obstacles not seen in the British format, including a slide. Contact equipment was covered with carpet or mats rather than sand and paint. The weave poles were often mounted on individual bases. Some were made of a PVC pole with a small wooden or coffee-can base. Other groups simply used two foot tall traffic cones. Since there was no written rule requiring the weave poles to be in a straight line, one judge set up the poles in a spiral at the Imperial Polk Obedience Club's trial in Lakeland, Florida. Ileana Nadal reports, "That *really* blew all the dogs away!"

© Jim Griffin



A dog performs the sway bridge. © Carol & Paul Mount



NCDA demo in New Jersey in 1994. © Carol & Paul Mount



A British wishing well jump. © Russell Fine Art

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- Pam Juliano

The NCDA program first had two levels of difficulty, offering two titles: Agility I (AGI) and Agility II (AGII). In January, 1993, the Agility Trial Championship (ATCh) debuted. It was based on a point system, with a sliding scale of points awarded for high scores.

In 1995, the United Kennel Club (UKC) approached Kramer about adopting his program. NCDA-style agility had been run as a non-licensed class at UKC shows as early as 1985. Kramer transferred his records to the UKC on July 1, 1995. The UKC used Kramer's plans to establish an Agility III class to expand the program. Titles were grandfathered in, but the UKC changed the designations, adding the letter U.

UKC agility has grown in popularity over the years. The additions of a UKC Agility Championship Excellent (UACHX), and in 2003, a ranking system, have encouraged exhibitors to continue competing in this venue. Also in 2003, the UKC changed some of its equipment requirements, which made it easier for clubs to hold trials. Soon, an extensive revision to the rulebook is expected.

The first decade of agility development in the U.S. was one of explosive growth. Today's sport is a result of the trials and errors of agility's pioneers. "How times have changed," says Bud Houston. In the beginning, Houston says, "We made every training mistake imaginable. Today's agility competitors benefit from every mistake we made, and hopefully don't have to repeat them."

By the mid-90s, two other major agility organizations were on the verge of existence, eventually providing Americans with agility choices unrivaled elsewhere in the world.

To be continued... 🐕

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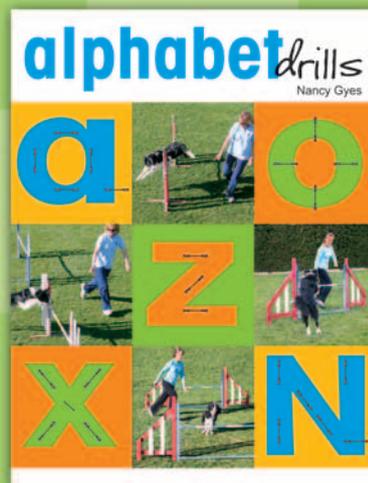
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