

How Parkour Can Complement Agility

By Kristine Hammar

I WILL ADMIT THAT WHEN I FIRST HEARD OF CANINE PARKOUR, A NEWER DOG SPORT WHICH IS SOMETIMES CALLED “URBAN AGILITY,” I WAS SKEPTICAL.

In my experience, the term “agility” had precisely one meaning: a course of regulation agility equipment is set out in a particular configuration at a training building, or on a field. At my direction, the dog runs from one piece of equipment to another at top speed. We strive to complete the run without any faults, and we race to beat the clock. This is agility, as we all know it and love it!

The idea of going out and about in the world, asking my dog to carry out behaviors using items and features in the environment did not hold the least appeal to me. I certainly did not associate this new activity with “agility.”

However, I was somewhat curious, and I decided to try parkour when I found myself at loose ends after my agility partner, Tessa, and I achieved our lifelong goal of a CPE C-ATCH. Tessa and I had put heart, soul, travel, and intense focus into our work toward that title for five years. After the initial excitement of reaching our destination started to wear off, I wanted to try something new.

To my amazement, Tessa and I both became parkour addicts. I enjoy it so much that I introduced the sport to my other two dogs, as well. I take each dog out individually for parkour filming sessions several times each month, as weather permits.

There are many aspects of parkour that I have come to appreciate. There is nothing quite like going out into the world, just my dog and I together, to seek out items to use for different parkour interactions. Parkour with a dog is a constant conversation. As we walk around together, I see something and get an idea for an interaction with that item. Then my dog gets the opportunity to try what I have in mind. Sometimes everything goes according to plan. In some cases, my dog and I find that my original idea will not work. And, on occasion, my dog has an even better idea. Parkour is all about exploration, experimentation, and creativity. In many ways, canine parkour is a dog sport, scavenger hunt, adventure, dog training opportunity, physical challenge, and fun bonding activity all rolled into one.

As my dogs and I travel from place to place and enjoy our parkour adventures, it strikes me again and again that traditional agility and canine parkour are excellent companion activities. In many ways, agility training has prepared my dogs to enjoy parkour thoughtfully and safely. And since getting into parkour, I have seen my agility partners gain confidence and enthusiasm in the agility ring. I have observed physical benefits from regular participation in parkour, as well.

COMPLEMENTARY SKILL SETS

While there are certainly many differences between agility and parkour, the two sports do share some degree of a common skill set. A dog who is trained to competition level in agility already has a strong foundation in some basic parkour behaviors. A few options for parkour interactions that will be familiar to a trained agility dog include: jump, get up on an elevated object with all four paws to wait for several seconds, send to an elevated object at a distance to wait for several seconds, move across a long and narrow object, weave between a row of objects, get on, and manage the movement of, a moving object, and go between two objects.



Tessa enjoys using her jumping skills on a playground.

In addition, many of us train parkour behaviors as foundation agility exercises. Often young agility dogs get the opportunity to learn to put two paws on an object and pivot in both directions, back up to place rear paws on a target, send around cones in both directions, place paws on wobble board to learn to control movement. All of these skills and more are also components of parkour training.

Parkour came into our lives just in time for simultaneous parkour training and foundation agility for my young Border Collie, Bandit. Getting a start with parkour provided an excellent supplement to his training in agility. Sending around trees in both directions, walking on logs and along the top of concrete barriers, climbing up and down steps on playground equipment, jumping over low branches and logs, and working on a vast array of surfaces helped him develop a great deal of confidence that transferred into his agility training noticeably.

JUMPING INTO PARKOUR

It is important to keep in mind that many dogs need to make a mental adjustment to performing agility behaviors on unfamiliar items, especially when working in new settings. Even a dog who has experience hiking can be somewhat confused when you suddenly stop and cue the dog to get up on a rock or run around a tree! Be sure to take along good treats and be prepared to help your dog understand at first.

Also, be sure to keep safety in mind. In the context of agility, our dogs can count on surfaces being relatively standard. Contact equipment is rubberized, jumps are consistently the same height, and dogs come to know what agility equipment feels like under their feet. In parkour, surfaces constantly vary. One log might have less traction than another. A rock might be slippery. A dog might jump on a leafy surface or a bed of pine needles. Certain surfaces can feel strange under the dog's feet.

Parkour titling venues require the use of a harness and leash for spotting, and it is essential to get familiar and comfortable with. I have been surprised several times when my experienced agility partner, who has never lost her balance on a piece of contact equipment, has slipped or stumbled on a picnic bench, and I have needed to spot her to prevent a fall.

Although I had some concerns about use of a leash for behaviors like jumping when I first began parkour, I have found that my dogs and I have adapted to it well, and we never have any problem going back and forth between agility, where the dog runs naked, and parkour, where the dog usually performs in harness and leash.

CONDITIONING AND FITNESS

One of the benefits that parkour has provided, both to my young dog in training and to my seasoned competition dog, is an opportunity to engage in exercises that build physical strength and flexibility while improving overall physical conditioning.

Parkour interactions engage different muscles throughout the dog's body. Some interactions shift weight onto the back legs, while others require the dog to use all four legs to perform the exercise. Certain interactions allow the dog to perform while remaining in motion and others are stationary. Dogs hop, turn, bend, balance, move up and move down, crouch, and stretch as they perform one interaction or another.



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Bandit learns distance skills as he practices sends around a tree.



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An introduction using treats helps Peter understand what behavior he is being asked to perform with this piece of playground equipment



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Peter, the Beagle, gains confidence moving across narrow objects.



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I am prepared to give Tessa some support if the big hole in the stump causes her to stumble or lose her balance as she gets on or off.



© STEPHANIE PEBBLES

"Get On 2 Front Feet" requires the dog to hold the position for several seconds. This can help build, and maintain core strength. The exercise can be performed on objects of different heights, and on different surfaces.



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Tessa crouches to "Go Under," powers forward with her rear legs as she performs the "Jump Assisted," and balances on the stump as she completes a "Trick on a Platform."

My dog and I usually do a fair amount of hiking around, looking for different environmental features to use for parkour, which also provides excellent exercise and conditioning for my agility partner.

A GREAT RETIREMENT SPORT

I found the most delightful surprise about parkour when I began working toward parkour titles with my retired agility partner, Dean.

Agility had been a part of Dean's life since the day he became part of our household. In his youth, we worked intensively on foundation training, and weekly agility classes soon became part of his life. Dean, a strong and athletic dog, found great joy in learning and practicing the sport. Going to agility class was a highlight of his week, year in and year out. Several years ago, he suffered a leg injury that resulted in a single restriction: no re-

petitive jumping. With that, agility, which had been part of his life for many years, was over. Most of the skills that Dean had enjoyed learning and practicing were no longer of any use.

Enter parkour! When Dean and I began working toward parkour titles together, I could not help but notice the joy on his face when he was given a chance to use some of his agility skills once again.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON PARKOUR, CHECK INTO THE TWO CANINE PARKOUR TITLING VENUES: ALL DOGS PARKOUR, OR THE INTERNATIONAL DOG PARKOUR ASSOCIATION. BOTH ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDE ONLINE INFORMATION ABOUT: EXERCISE DESCRIPTIONS, SAFETY, AND REQUIREMENTS FOR EARNING TITLES.



“Landscape Patterns,” such as the “Figure 8,” are among Dean’s favorite parkour interactions.



Dean rediscovers his agility table skills with “Get On Send.”

Dean and I work toward parkour titles through the titling venue, All Dogs Parkour (ADP), which allows for a high degree of flexibility. With ADP, each entry consists of video clips of 12 exercises, which are chosen from over 40 different options. Dogs are not required to perform all of the exercise options, so if a dog is unable to complete a particular skill, such as a jump, the team need not perform that interaction. There is also a division in this venue for senior dogs and dogs with physical limitations, which allows for further modification of specific exercises if needed.

The flexibility offered by ADP makes it possible for most dogs to participate in parkour in a way that is safe and appropriate to the dog’s level of physical ability. I can find objects for Dean to jump over that are low and safe. He can even step over items if that is more appropriate for him on a given day.

Dean has found great joy in parkour. I see it on his face every time we go out to film together. He especially enjoys parkour se-

quencing. He can run from one environmental feature to another, as he did with agility equipment, but he is performing behaviors that are safe for him, such as moving between items, or going under something, or going around something.

Drawing on his agility skills has allowed him to accomplish more advanced parkour exercises, as well. I was surprised one day to discover that he could send 10 feet to an object, get on it, and wait several seconds. It should not have been a surprise - it was basically a “table.”

For those who wish to try for titles, parkour is very friendly to an older dog. Because the video clips for parkour titling can be compiled in different filming sessions, and one can film just a few exercises on a given day, and create titling submissions over time. How much is filmed in one parkour outing can be customized to the well-being of the dog.

GIVE IT A TRY!

Whether you are working with a young dog or a seasoned agility competitor,

or you want to try something new with a retired agility partner, parkour might be an excellent activity for you and your dog to explore.

For further information on parkour, check into the two canine parkour titling venues: All Dogs Parkour, or the International Dog Parkour Association. Both organizations provide online information about: exercise descriptions, safety, and requirements for earning titles.

VIDEO LINKS

- Parkour is complementary to agility foundation training: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTDLBQCqYY>
- Examples of parkour interactions that build fitness and strength: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXlFc93j3Xk>
- Parkour as a retirement sport: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJsujbEh1Gg> 🐕

Kristine Hammar has been competing in agility since 2007, and she began parkour in 2016. She and C-ATCH Tessa have accomplished their ADP-GrCH title, as well as their CH-PKD. Kristine and Dean, now retired from agility, have completed their ADP-CH. Bandit, her agility-dog-in-training, has completed his ADP-CH. Kristine and her dogs also enjoy musical freestyle. Kristine teaches “Confidence and Self-Control” at Dandy Dog training in Pennsylvania, and offers parkour instruction through private online classes. Contact her at pfsfreestyle@gmail.com.