

Need Volunteers?

ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET

By Robin Whitsell

Orchestrating an agility trial is not an easy undertaking. It would be nice if courses set themselves up and automatically timed competitors. It would be even better if times, rankings, and Qs magically posted themselves, and if ribbons flew out of their boxes into the deserving hands of competitors. Agility trials like that would be a dream come true. But real trials require real people and for most trials the majority of work is accomplished by volunteers. How do you keep those well-trained veteran volunteers coming back year after year, and how do you recruit newcomers? It's as simple as rolling out the red carpet.

Volunteer Swag

Whenever you read about a Hollywood award show, there is inevitably discussion of the behind-the-scenes parties and the hospitality gift bags that the presenters get. Designer sunglasses, vacations, spa visits—it's top-shelf swag. Each award show wants to boost its TV ratings by keeping A-list celebrities coming back each year. Wouldn't it be nice if every club or business organizing a trial could offer swag for volunteers? Many do!

The Rogue Canine Agility Club in Southern Oregon has taken a cue from Hollywood. The club provides a hospitality room for volunteers at its trials. "We are fortunate to have a great facility at our county fairgrounds. We get to rent a hospitality room with full kitchen facilities. In the morning we provide coffee, tea, cocoa, muffins, fruit, and donuts. At lunchtime we provide either a hot lunch such as chili, chicken, and pizza, or sandwich fixings. We also provide water and soda throughout the day for our volunteers," says club member Toby Brown.

The swag for the Rogue Canine Agility Club volunteers doesn't end at the hospitality room. They offer a free trial entry to their key volunteers. Other essential workers get Club Bucks—\$1



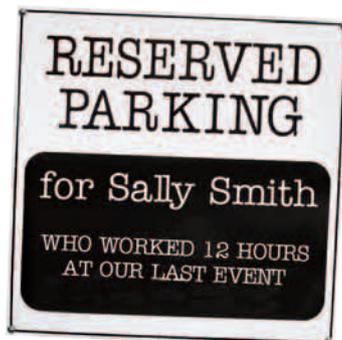
and \$5 coupons that can be used toward club activities, such as seminars and classes, or future trial entries.

Whether it's a nonprofit agility club or a for-profit business running a trial, it shouldn't affect how volunteers are treated. Valerie Olszyk owns Pet Behavior Help Obedience, Agility, and Flyball in Durham, North Carolina. She focuses on making her workers feel appreciated when they volunteer for the USDAA trials she hosts. "We have a program called Diehards that folks really like," she says. Diehards are dedicated workers who sign up to work anytime their dogs are not running (this usually only works for handlers who run just one dog or handlers running multiple dogs at the same level). They get free runs for one dog in all classes except Tournament events. Besides the Diehards, Olszyk also has dedicated course builders and scorekeepers who get free entries in the games classes as a reward. Because the incentive to help out is so great, Olszyk usually has more volunteers than she needs. Although volunteer spots are in demand, it doesn't mean that anyone gets turned away. "It does cost a good deal of money, but we think the program is worth it. We feel it is a great way to reward the folks who support our trials. Many of them would work just as hard even if we didn't have the program, but they deserve something for their efforts," she says.

Olszyk also believes in the something-for-everyone approach. "Anyone who works our trials gets free breakfast, lunch, and snacks, and we also offer a raffle for free classes—volunteers get one raffle ticket per class worked."

Says Susan Crank, Training Director of Wild Weavers in Gahanna, Ohio, "We superintend about 12 trials a year so we have to have workers in order to do that." Volunteers who put in the most hours of service are recognized with gift cards, prizes, and food. "We give out worker gifts at every trial, usually about \$150 a day in prizes. The prizes include t-shirts, gas cards, and human massages," explains Crank. The massage therapist attends the trials so that workers who win this prize can get their free massage over the weekend. Some contributors are even given gas reimbursement. "Members realize that having local trials and not having to travel and stay in a hotel saves them money, but that they need to work at the trials," says Crank.

Mary Beam of Gem City Dog Obedience Club in Dayton, Ohio, has a good trick she uses to lure people into sticking around until after the trial is over. "We give double hours to club members who stay to clean up afterward. The vouchers can be redeemed for free classes. We also have a fee scale for dues; members may work, and in return, receive reduced dues," says Beam.



Schedule Your Worker Problems Away

Worker raffles are a lot of fun and should be considered a staple of any trial. But organizers who think out of the box and come up with truly creative incentives are more likely to get a higher return rate from their volunteers.

Julie Rice of Hillsborough, North Carolina, has been playing agility and volunteering at trials since 1993. She appreciates clubs and organizers who put time and energy into letting her and others know their contributions are important. Among her favorite experiences have been trials that hold worker raffles with really great swag. “A worker raffle with something actually worth winning is nice. Once I won a set of six 2 x 2 weave poles, another time a jump, and another a voucher for a free day of entries at a USDAA trial,” says Rice.

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Pat Wallace of Raleigh, North Carolina, agrees. “I’ve been very lucky in those drawings, and have won a massage, Italian charm bracelet, and a photo of my dog, all donated by vendors at the show. In fact, the day my dog Maui and I achieved our MACH, I won the Italian charm bracelet. My husband and our friends who came to the trial bought me special charms that day and now the bracelet is one of my prized possessions. It will always remind me of one of my happiest days.” Volunteering for the trial led to an even more special day for Wallace. What organizer wouldn’t be thrilled to create that spirit?

How a trial is organized can encourage competitors to volunteer or discourage them from ever stepping up again. A common complaint of volunteers is being scheduled in a way that competes with their participation in the trial or requires them to rush or sacrifice warm-up or walk-through time.

David and Caroline Hanson, who own Hill Country Agility in Kerrville, Texas, use a time-management software program as part of their strategy to prevent worker/handler conflicts. It estimates when volunteers need to be where and for how long. The couple hosts two agility trials a year in order to provide local enthusiasts the opportunity to compete, to provide seed money for future trials, and to raise money for repair and purchase of equipment. The software has gone a long way in avoiding conflicts and keeping volunteers happy. Says Caroline Hanson, “Another thing the software allows you to do is email only handlers who have not volunteered. I can usually pick up a few by writing a nice email that says we need more help and perhaps they overlooked/forgot to volunteer.” Hanson adds, “Our goal is to have a fun trial and have competitors enjoy the event.”

Respecting volunteers’ time and reason for attending a trial is critical and will keep volunteers coming back. Janet Wagner runs K-9 Athletes in Lebanon, Indiana. She comments, “I tell all my workers that they are here to *play* with their dogs and if they need to leave the class they are working, just leave. We will get replacements.”

Mary Beam concurs that good scheduling helps retain volunteers, “I have committee members who are in charge of scheduling and do a great job of it. Workers don’t have to worry about conflicts. Now, I don’t have to think about how I get workers for the six trials I chair.”

Many volunteers mentioned that a raffle offering cheap prizes (such as \$1 coupons) is insulting. Also, be careful about how fair and equitable your raffles appear. Says Margie Clutter of Evansville, Indiana, “Once at another club’s trial I volunteered for quite a lot of classes and received raffle tickets. The club only had a few prizes, including \$25 and \$50 cash prizes. Members of their own club won almost all of the prizes, which kind of left me with a bad feeling.” Clutter’s own club makes volunteers feel welcome by having worker raffles that are focused on nonclub members. “Our club and the local obedience club hold a total of six AKC and two NADAC trial weekends a year. We have worker raffles that are open only to volunteers who are *not* club members. That way, most of the volunteers have a good chance of winning something. Volunteers get one raffle ticket for each full class worked. Some raffle prizes are donated by club members and trial vendors, while others, such as gift cards for \$10 at national chain stores or restaurants, are purchased by the club,” says Clutter.

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Appreciation Doesn't Have to Cost a Thing

Among the many concerns of trial organizers is the ability to provide volunteers with perks that won't drive up the cost of the trial. Sometimes the solution isn't providing more stuff, but being more creative. For example, arranging special parking spots for key volunteers (especially if parking is at a premium) is a nice way to say thank you. Also, reserving the best crate and tenting spots for volunteers can make them feel special. Just be sure to hang a sign

communicating why someone is getting the star treatment: Reserved Parking for [volunteer name] who worked 12 hours at our last event.

For popular trials that have to use a lottery to determine which entries they will accept, reserving slots in the lottery for workers is a huge incentive to volunteer. "We usually receive so many entries for our CPE trials that we have to do a random draw and we reserve

worker slots in the draw. We subtract our published number of worker slots from the total number of slots available and then draw from all of the entries to fill that number of slots. Then we take just the worker entries from those entries that weren't chosen and we draw for the published number of worker spots. So, if you sign up to work, you have increased your chances of making it into the trial," says Mary Beam.

Attitude is Everything

How volunteers are managed goes a long way in volunteer satisfaction. Organizers who provide detailed instructions and assign specific tasks and clear time slots make volunteers feel that their time and participation is respected. Conversely, if you make workers feel unwelcome or unappreciated, they aren't likely to come back. Says Rice, "There are things that will cause me to never volunteer for a club again, such as rudeness by a club member, making volunteers work more than one class to earn food and drink, and not honoring my preferences concerning how many classes and which classes to work." People who regularly volunteer also said that it's very helpful to get a copy of the worker schedule with

the confirmation letter so that they can plan ahead.

Realize that when your club or business hosts an event, you are being observed by people who may not have any other familiarity with you. Clutter experienced club conflict while volunteering at another club's trial. While moving a piece of equipment that she had been asked to move by a key member of the club, another club member came up to disagree. Says Clutter, "The person said, 'Well, if she wants that there, *she* will just have to pack it all up herself!' Brother, I did not want to get in the middle of a club conflict about who should do what, so

I laid the equipment down and walked off. I did not appreciate being yelled at for trying to help. Unloading club issues and personality conflicts on strangers is not the best way to encourage them to volunteer."

Sometimes what you don't say is important in how you treat workers. Wagner adds, "I have a great person to plan the food menu and our thoughts about worker food is, 'If you think you need to eat, then just eat.' I will not play food police. Another thing we do is a workers' raffle. It is self serve; workers get three tickets per class worked. Again, I will not police this. If a few people want to take more tickets, it's their choice and conscience they have to listen to."

If You Still Need More Help

Sometimes, if additional help is needed, community volunteers from 4-H clubs, service clubs, and local high schools can be put to work. Hill Country Agility has had great success with hiring local high school students who are fundraising for their extracurricular clubs. "This is a way for us to give back to our community and to help the kids while they help us. They have been great. Plus, then our volunteers do not have to do the grunt work of bar setting and chute straightening," says Hanson.

The Agility Club of Evansville, Indiana, has also had success with this strategy. "The club pays the kids' clubs for their time and effort, and again, everyone wins. Our club is fulfilling its responsibility to support the community and educate young people to the world of dog care and trials, and we get energetic young workers to help with our trials. In turn, they raise funds for projects and trips," says Clutter.

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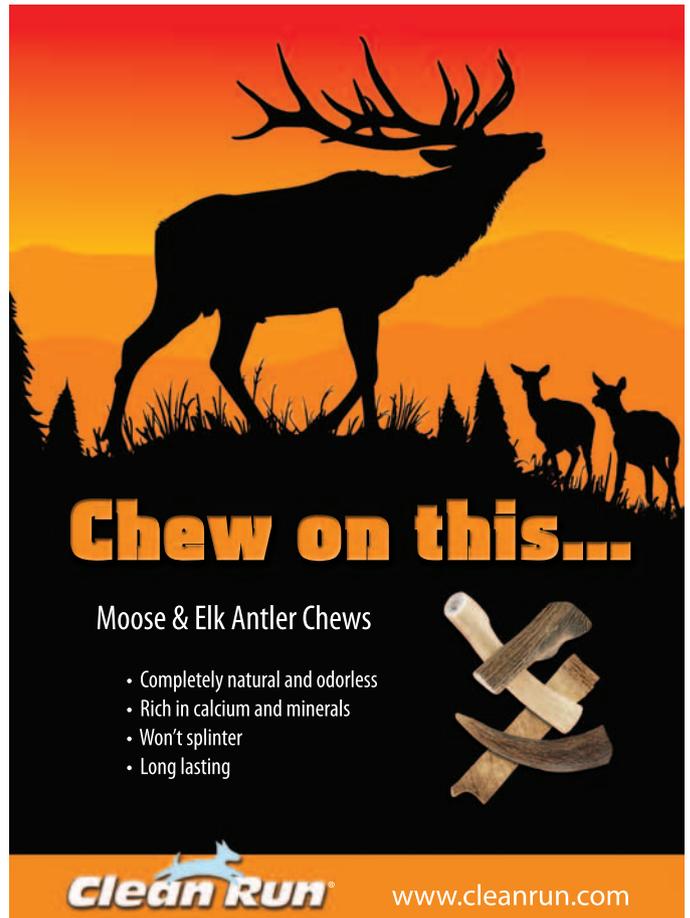
Be the Club that People Want to Volunteer For

Until those bars learn how to set themselves, attracting and retaining volunteers is a vital part of hosting a trial. Many volunteers have a horror story about the club or agility school where they volunteered and swore, "Never again!" Whether it's really bad coffee or the "food police," one bad experience can turn off a person who would be a regular and eager volunteer. Creating an environment where *you* would want to volunteer goes a long way in ensuring others will take part.

We reward our dogs for good behavior because it increases the chance of getting that same good behavior the next time we ask for it. The same principle holds true for our species. Rewarding volunteers for working at a trial improves the likelihood they will volunteer again.

If organizers want their experienced volunteers to return and new ones to come on board, they need to treat them with friendliness, courtesy, and respect. In a nutshell, they need to roll out the red carpet. 🐾

Robin Whitsell is a freelance writer living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with her husband, her three daughters, and her yellow Labrador Retriever puppy, Foster, who one day will be playing agility. Contact Robin through her website at robinwhitsell.com.



Chew on this...

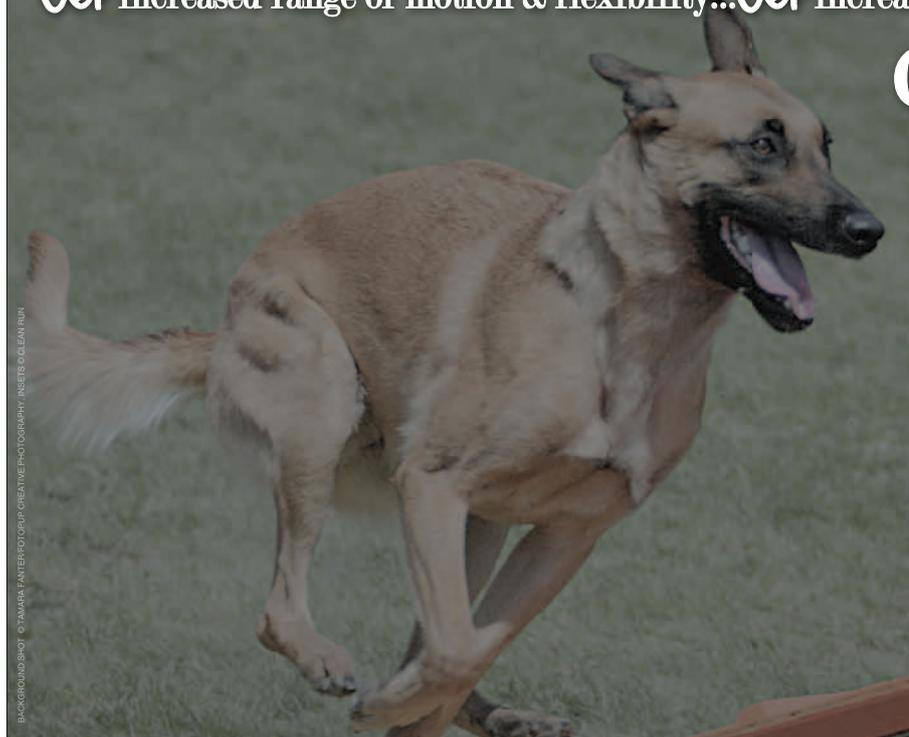
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