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Agility Class Etiquette

By Tom Francis and the Windy City
Agility Club Instructors



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While working my way through beginner agility classes with my Aussie/Shepherd mix partner, I was deeply impressed by the insights and willingness to share that characterized the instructors of Windy City Agility Club. Agility clearly has many matters of etiquette, as do other sports, which have evolved to make the entire experience more productive and enjoyable. Our agility “manners” were instilled along with other essentials as we progressed through the classes.

In the spirit of “wishing that I knew then what I know now,” I volunteered to compile what I learned through the generosity and patience of the instructors so that it could be shared with other newcomers to agility. Here is the result of that effort.

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Before Class

Managing Meals and Treats

The maxim, “A hungry dog is a motivated dog,” encourages some people either not to feed their dogs before class (they get plenty to eat during the class) or to feed them a smaller meal, or perhaps a meal at an earlier time than normal. You might use another variation depending on an individual dog’s feeding schedule. What is best for your dog can be learned only by trying different regimens. Keep track of what works and after a few weeks you will know the best schedule for your teammate.

Treats are one of the primary motivators for agility training (praise and toys being the others). Soft treats are the best choice, because they are less likely to cause choking when gulped by an excited dog. If your dog really prefers hard treats, break them up into small, easy-to-swallow pieces. As a courtesy to other students, please try to retrieve any treats that have fallen on the course during your run. Your dog will be glad to help!

Treat bags that hang from your belt are very handy. Should you decide to enter competitions, however, no treats or treat bags are allowed in the ring. Your dog may take the absence of a treat bag as a clear signal of “no treats today” and act accordingly. For some dogs, the presence or absence of a treat bag is not a problem; so you will see some handlers using treat bags regularly and some avoiding them.

Note: Some dogs will pass up 10 treats for that special toy. If that description fits your dog, check with your instructor for tips on working with toys as rewards during class.

Managing Nature Calls

When arriving at class, your dog will typically have been in the car for a while and be ready to visit nature. This time is well spent. If your dog does need to relieve himself after he is in the building you have two scenarios:

- Best case: Your dog will let you know it’s time for a walk, but you will lose some of the class time that you paid for.
- Worst case: Your dog will soil the course, then *everyone* loses course time. Guess who gets to clean up?

*Note: Agility class is a new place with lots of new people, lots of new dogs, and lots of neat stuff to do; all are **very** exciting and stimulating to a dog. So, one trip to potty will probably not be sufficient, especially in your first several classes. Watch for your dog’s signals and respond accordingly.*

During Class

Listen to Instructors

They have considerable experience and have become instructors because they love to see dogs and handlers learn, succeed, and have fun along the way.

Watch and Learn from Others

A class may commonly have a beginner dog paired with an experienced handler. This is usually one of several dogs they have (agility handlers tend to have multiple-dog households). Watching these people work with their “new” dogs is a great learning experience.

Manage Your Dog

Agility class is a shared environment with dogs and handlers of different stripes, spots, patches, preferences, and temperaments. Being aware of and respecting those differences is essential to a productive and enjoyable class experience.

Agility class is *not* puppy play time. Classes other than agility encourage direct interaction between dogs. If that is what you are seeking, these venues can be great fun and we encourage you to go. But agility class is not one of them. To that end:

- Be respectful of each dog’s space. Some dogs do not like other dogs in “their space.” Allow a minimum 3’ to 4’ buffer zone between dogs.
- Dogs are to be *on leash* at all times, except when the instructor has given consent to be off leash for training on specific obstacles or running the course.

- When you finish a run, your dog should be placed back on leash immediately after completing the run (at this point, another dog is waiting to be taken off leash).
- When it is not your turn, guide your dog to a neutral area either on or off the course where you will not be in the path of dogs running the course.
- While running a course, sometimes a particular obstacle may point your dog directly at a group of waiting dogs or an exit from the ring. If you have concerns about this, let the instructor know and an assistant can be asked to help block the exit.

Note: The guidelines for managing your dog also apply before class, after class, in the building, and out of the building. The dogs that often need special attention in this regard are the younger dogs that "love everybody," including other dogs. Their desire to socialize with every dog they see may result in their invading the space of a dog that does not welcome such exuberant advances.

Maximize Training Time

- Take the mystery out of who goes first. During class, each dog and handler get several turns. But the question is often, "Who goes next?" If the dogs are all about the same size, anyone can go next in the first round. After that, keep it simple. Note the order you ran in the first round, and then follow that order for the rest of class. If the dogs vary in size enough to warrant adjustments in the equipment, the dogs should be grouped according to size. Then follow that order for the rest of class.
- Be ready for your turn. When your turn is coming up, get your dog in position and be ready to start when the instructor signals you. Always wait until the dog that ran before you is back on leash. Keep your dog on a short leash or held by the collar until you get the instructor's go signal.

Exception: If the finish line and starting line are the same area, stay clear until the previous dog finishes and is back on leash, but be ready to move into position.

- Help with course setup and changes. Obstacles get jostled, knocked down, or just have to be adjusted for different height dogs. The more people help with this, the more class time for everyone. Feel free to help out with these tasks. If you are unsure of what to do, just ask.

Exception: You may have a dog that has problems when interacting with other dogs. If so, it might be best to relax with your dog, crate him so that you can help, and/or keep him occupied with other tasks (like attention exercises) while others work on course setup.

- Help other students retrieve their leashes. As a dog progresses to running off leash, the leash gets tossed aside (gently) just before the dog begins his run (standard procedure in competitions). Tossing the leash takes less time

than trying to fold and stuff it in your pocket. Since the starting and ending points of the run are rarely in the same area, you can save class time by helping other handlers retrieve their leashes.

- Admonish the dog that wants to see the world (dogs that run off the course or out of the training area). When dealt with immediately, this training problem can almost always be nipped in the bud, to everyone's benefit. If not, the behavior rapidly becomes self-rewarding for the offending dog(s) and robs the entire group of precious class time.

When dogs run off the course (for any reason), in most cases they should (at least the first time) be given a second chance. When it appears to be developing into a bad habit, the dogs must lose their turn and go to the end of the line. Or, very briefly, out of the ring for a timeout. It is a rare dog that doesn't respond to missing a chance to "play." Although that may mean fewer runs for a few weeks, managing the problem in this manner will be of great long-term benefit.

What to Do Between Turns

Attention games help your dog learn to focus on you (Watch Me, Auto Check-in, Eye Contact). You can calm your dog: with all the activity, it is a great time to work on calming techniques.

Downtime between turns can be an excellent time to work on fine-tuning tricks and commands, especially of the obedience variety. Work on long sits and long stays in a new environment with new distractions.

Note: If your dog is sizing up another dog, use one of the above techniques to get your dog to focus on you. By training your dog to focus, you will reduce the possibility of a confrontation.

Final Thoughts to Consider

Agility Class Is Not Fair

Dogs and handlers learn and negotiate the course at different speeds. The emphasis in a beginners' class is familiarization and overcoming any fear a dog may have of an obstacle. Therefore, some dogs will get more time and attention than others. You can still benefit by observing the training techniques that are being used for the other dogs and also apply that downtime to between-turns training techniques.

There Are Many Ways to Train a Dog

You will get different suggestions from different instructors. You will even get different suggestions from the same instructor. All this information can be confusing or frustrating. Yet, the instructors have worked with many dogs (and handlers). Although we all feel we know our own dog best,

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the instructors realize that we also are more likely to sell our dog short. Trying something new and different is often just what the agility doctor ordered. So when you are presented with a challenge, be willing to try different techniques. The final test is "Does it work for you and your dog?" These differences are what account for both the challenge and the rewards of teamwork in agility training.

"In Competition You Will Lose Points If..."

You will often hear this phrase during training class. So what are the rules? You can get guidance and clarification from the instructors who have had many dogs in competition. You can also check out the websites of the various sanctioning organizations. Rule books are generally available for download or as hard copies for a modest fee.

Last, your class is your special time with your dog. Few training problems are so dire that they cannot be overcome with time and patience. So, go on, enjoy!

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