



Competing for the first time? Tips for your first competition

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What do you have to do to begin competing?

Competing at an agility competition can be pretty daunting if you haven't done it before, so while this guide does not provide a substitute for reading the rule book, it does aim to provide some tips and advice to help get you started.

First, **make sure your dog is ready**. This doesn't mean that you and your dog have to be running perfectly but a dog should be under your control (not likely to run away or disrupt another dog's run); able to complete all obstacles successfully; and negotiate a simple course under your direction.

While there is no avoiding nerves on the day, **both you and your dog need to also be emotionally ready**, meaning that you can both cope in the environment of a competition which can be quite different to a club training environment. You

should consider delaying the entry of a dog that is stressed or overstimulated by noise and lots of other dogs.

Consider attending a competition without competing first, so that you can see what happens and the environment you will be competing in, and your dog can become accustomed to the different environment.

Register with ADAA. You and your dog's registration applications must be lodged with ADAA a minimum of a fortnight before the closing of entries for your first competition.



Lodge your entry. An up-to-date calendar of competitions and entry forms is on the ADAA website. Deadlines for entries vary across clubs so you should always check the competition schedule to avoid late fees or missing out altogether.

As a beginner you are eligible to enter all Elementary, Starter, Intermediate, and Open A events, but consider the number of runs you enter your dog in (most people limit to between 3 and 5), as well as the complexity of courses you ask them to complete. Most new handlers limit their entries to Elementary and Starter events.

Read the ADAA rule book which can be purchased from ADAA or downloaded for free on the website.

Let your club know you are competing as your instructors can help you walk courses.

What to bring on the day...

A sense of humour! Some of us are lucky enough to get a clear run at our first competition, but most are not. You need to be able to laugh at yourself and your dog and not get too disappointed if your dog does not perform as expected, or if your handling is a little off because of nerves. There will be many other competitions in both your futures and plenty more opportunities to get it right!

Wear shorts/pants with pockets for somewhere to



store your treats. You can carry treats on you when on course but they must remain in your pocket and if they are in a treat bag, it must not be visible. Make sure that treats won't fall out of your pockets as you run.

A chair and a crate if you have one. But make sure that the competition is not the first time the dog is crated. Talk to one of your club instructors about crate games so that your dog is comfortable and relaxed in a crate for extended periods.

Treats. Lots of yummy, tasty, highly rewarding treats; a **tug toy**; a **water bowl**; and a **collar and lead** that is easy to remove.

A print-out of the schedule – this allows you to see what events are on, which ring, and when.



Patience. The average agility competition goes for at least 7 hours, PLUS presentations. You might have as few as two and up to 5 runs over that time so you will spend a lot of time watching others run.

What to do when you get there...

Make sure you arrive with plenty of time to spare. You will need time to set up your dog's crate, and some shade/shelter. You also need to toilet your dog to avoid accidents in the ring. As a competitor you are obliged to help judges set up the equipment in their rings which begins around an hour before the official start time. Allowing enough time to take care of your dog and to help out the host club will ensure you are not too harassed when it is time for you to run.

Get your dog measured. Measuring is scheduled around half an hour before the comp officially begins and must be done at your first competition to ensure your dog is competing in the correct height class, otherwise qualification cards may be void.

Check out the running order boards. Set up close to the scribing tables are boards that list the running order of each of the events and competitors. Make sure you know what order your dog is to run in each of their events. You can go back to this as many times as you like .

Walk the course. Once a judge declares a ring open for walking you may walk the course and work out your turns as many times as you like in the time allowed. You should be aiming for a minimum of 3 times to make sure you know where you are going. More complicated courses probably need to be walked 3 - 5 times to memorise the turns needed. Don't hesitate to ask one of your club's instructors or a more experienced handler to walk it with you.

Go to the judges briefing. The judges give a brief explanation of the rules before the running of each course begins, and will also tell you the standard course time. The judges may also describe their own judging technique (such as how they will count down the table).

Help out. All competitors are expected to help out on the day, shifting equipment at course changes and moving the bar heights between the height classes.

As your understanding of the rules and what is happening generally increases you are also expected to assist at the scribe table, with marshalling etc. Agility competitions are only possible if all competitors volunteer with these essential jobs.

Preparing for your run...

Get your dog out of his crate and be at the sideline of the ring in plenty of time to warm up and focus. Running orders have a tendency to change because of ring clashes, so always be prepared to run earlier than you are scheduled.

Take your dog to the toilet. If the dog toilets in the ring it will result in a dismissal. While you should do everything you can to prevent this, it may still happen as dogs will sometimes relieve themselves in stress.

Arm yourself with treats and/or a toy (making sure they can be hidden in your pocket).

Warm your dog up. This includes both their body and their mind. A few focus exercises and some play will get most dogs in the mood. But don't do anything you wouldn't do at training. Sudden and intense focus on a dog prior to running if it is not something you normally do may freak them out!

Remind yourself that you are there to have fun and no matter what goes wrong, you will still love the dog! We are not running for sheep stations so don't put pressure on yourself or your dog.



The run itself...

Respect the instructions of the ring marshals, particularly when they instruct you to make your way to the start line. Agility competitions rely on quick turnovers between dogs, so you should aim to be at the start line when the previous competitor is approaching the last 5 obstacles. Rings are defined by cones, stakes, or bunting.

You cannot feed your dog or play with toys anywhere within the ring boundary (at the start of your run) although you can keep their lead on, hold them or play with them *without* toys.

Take off your dog's collar and lead. You may be dismissed if the judge observes a collar on your dog once they cross the start line.



Make sure the judge is ready. The judge will check with the scribe table to make sure they are ready

and will then nod or verbally acknowledge that you may begin.

Remember, from the time that you enter the ring you cannot reward your dog with food or toys or you will be dismissed. Once you cross the start line you will be faulted for intentionally touching your dog and you will be eliminated if you lift your dog off the ground.

You cannot hold anything in your hands or you will be eliminated. This includes holding a hat that has flown off your head, or holding your pants if they start to slide down.

The run itself cont...

You will also be eliminated and asked to leave the ring if you harshly handle your dog including verbal or physical abuse (obviously you can't verbally or physically abuse the judge or ring stewards either).

But, **you may verbally encourage your dog as much or as little as you like.** This is when it is critical to know your dog as some dogs are put off by their handler's yabbering on, while others respond well to it.

Once you and your dog cross the fin-

ish line you are free to reward the dog with a tug lead as you quickly exit the ring but cannot reward with food or other toys until you have completely exited the ring.



Consider competing as Not For Competition (NFC) for one or even all of your runs. If you choose to run as NFC you need to signal the judge at the start line (the judge will show you the signal at the briefing).

You will not be judged to qualify or place and you can reward your dog with a tug toy (held in the hand, not dropped or thrown) and repeat or bypass obstacles. See the back page for a more detailed description of NFC.

What to do when things go wrong

At your first competition (and maybe much longer) **your dog will almost certainly surprise you.** Obstacles that they take with great confidence at training will suddenly appear insurmountable.

Your dog will do things and NOT do things for which you are totally unprepared: the single most common phrase uttered by beginners at agility competitions is: *"He never does that at training!"*

But don't despair – this is as new to your dog as it is to you and a competition sounds, looks and smells distinctly different to a training environment.

And from your dog's perspective, nerves will likely render YOU more

clumsy, turn your voice more desperate, and your turns less precise. Your body will also likely be emitting many nervous signals which your dog is well trained to pick up on.

PLUS (if you are really honest with yourself) you might very well be asking them to do things that you have not prepared or trained them for. So don't be down on the dog or yourself - you will both get there in time.



Laugh, or at the very least, keep your cool. Don't get mad at your dog and don't be embarrassed. Every single handler has been there, even the most polished and experienced of handlers.

Remember that you can only get what you train.

If your dog doesn't do start line stays at training they are certainly not going to do them at a competition so it isn't fair on the dog to expect them to. If your dog is having issues with a particular obstacle such as the cloth tunnel, or the dog walk, then don't expect that problem to disappear at a competition. Consider whether your dog is really ready to compete or consider competing under NFC (see back page).



If your dog leaves the course, it is your responsibility to get them back immediately. If the dog has not left the ring you may continue competing, although if the dog is unfocused, you should consider withdrawing.

If your dog toilets in the ring, they will be dismissed from the course and you will be asked to leave the ring. In this event, maintain your composure, clean it up, exit the

ring, and remember that it has happened to the best of us! If it becomes a recurring problem, talk to your instructor as it may be a symptom of nerves.

Learn from each of your runs. If something goes wrong, whether it is an overexcited dog, toileting in the ring, or refusing obstacles they usually take happily, talk to your instructors about it at your next training session. Your dog may be trying to communicate stress or that they are not ready to compete, or you may both just need some work on handling sequences or some more training on a specific obstacle.

If your hat flies off, let it go. If you pick it up it will be considered that you used a tug toy to encourage the dog and you will be eliminated. The same for pants falling down. So, wear well fitting pants and take off the hat.



And remember: Even when things go terribly wrong, agility is still the best fun you can have with your dog!

Important terms to understand...

Clear/qualifying round: this is when the dog takes the course correctly, with no faults or refusals, within the standard course time. This makes for a happy day!

Fault: a fault can be gained for any number of things such as a knocked bar, missing a contact, touching your dog. Each fault is worth 5 'points' so if a judge announces that you got 15 faults that doesn't mean you and your dog did 15 things wrong, just 3!

Refusal: if your dog comes to a halt directly in front of the obstacle, or goes around it, they will get a refusal. A total of 3 refusals over the course will gain you an elimination.

Non-qualification: when your dog gains faults, or goes clear but over time, and doesn't eliminate. Your time will be recorded and you are still in the running for a placing in the ring but not for a clear round card.

Elimination: This word sounds much worse than it really is! There are lots of things that will get you eliminated and in reality most dogs in the beginner rings will eliminate. Taking the wrong course or getting 3 or more refusals will both result in an elimination. So a dog will be eliminated for just going in the wrong end of a tunnel, or taking the wrong hurdle. The main difference between elimination and not qualifying is that when you eliminate a time will not be recorded for your run and you won't be eligible to gain a placing in the ring.

Dismissal: you will be dismissed from the ring (and potentially from the rest of the day's events) if you harshly handle your dog, feed your dog on course or get out a toy, or if your dog toilets in the ring. Also if the judge deems you to be training in the ring, you may be dismissed. You will be asked to leave the course immediately. If your dog is deemed to be "out of control" for an extended period, you may also be dismissed.

Standard course time (SCT): the time the judge sets to complete the course. This is worked out by measuring the course and calculating it with the rate of travel expected for a dog at your level.

Maximum course time (MCT): the maximum time you are allowed to stay on the course. It is usually 1.5 times the SCT. A buzzer will go off when the MCT is reached and you will need to leave the course.

Your course time: the time you complete the run in. Any time faults will be added on to your course faults. So, for example if the SCT is 62 seconds and you take 64.5 seconds and gain 5 course faults, your total faults will be recorded as 7.5.

Not for Competition (NFC): a handler may choose to run any event (except advanced, games, and team/pairs events) as NFC. After clearly signalling the judge *before* commencing the run, a handler may then reward the dog in the ring (tug toy and touch only), miss obstacles, repeat obstacles and alter the course. The tug toy must not be thrown on the ground and must remain in the handler's hands. The handler and dog are permitted to stay on course for the SCT but may exit earlier.

Some lighter agility thoughts...

Good news, bad news. Jane was an agility competitor. As the years progressed, she became more and more of a fanatic. One day it occurred to her that Heaven might not have agility comps. She soon became obsessed with this disturbing possibility.

In desperation, she went to a fortune teller. The fortune teller asked her, "Why have you come?" Jane blurted out, "Ohh, I just have to know, are there agility comps in Heaven?"

The fortune teller sighed and began to peer into her crystal ball. Finally she said, "I have good news and bad



news."

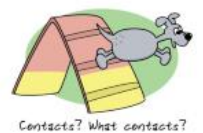
"The good news is, yes there are agility competitions in heaven".

Jane clapped her hands and began to cry with relief. Then she stopped short and said, "You said there was bad news, too. What is it?"

The fortune teller shrugged and said, "You are entered this Saturday!"

Agility Barbie: Unlike most slender versions of Barbie, this Barbie is quite muscular from hauling very heavy A-frames, seesaws, tunnels, and dogwalks. She can carry an A-frame panel with one arm and set up all of the contact obstacles single handedly.

Barbie comes complete with a full set of agility equipment, chair, esky, a gazebo for shade, sunscreen, insect-spray, rain jacket, waterproof boots, an agility rule book, and her very own dog trained to perfection.



Agility Barbie is dressed in khaki pants (that don't show muddy footprints) and an agility shirt with a cartoon joke that agility people will find hilarious but no one else will get.

Barbie also comes with her own Ken for hauling agility equipment (sold separately).