

Agility

Please give us space!

Supplied by Rosemarie Baker, rjbagility2020@gmail.com

If you have ever had a reactive dog you probably hate to hear or freak out when another dog owner yells at you "Don't worry... my dog's friendly!" as their dog runs at you out of control.

Many years ago I used to have a reactive dog and it got to the point where it was almost impossible to walk her in public since others didn't respect her space. Her reactivity was more out of nervousness than aggression. When she passed, the world of dog walking opened up again for us as a family and it was great. Over time our dog family grew, and then sadly shrunk.

Fast forward to 2021, and we found ourselves down to one dog: Kayla. She needed a friend so we decided to expand our dog family again. Enter Coal, Kayla's brother from the same litter. He was three-and-a-half years old and came from a good home where he was well taken care of. However, there were a lot of other dogs so he didn't get the same opportunities for exposure to other types of dogs in everyday situations that a dog would get if there was one or a few of them. We discovered this as we started to take him out and about.

I'm sure most of us would agree that all dogs are entitled to exercise but I'm also a firm believer that dogs need enrichment, especially if they are working/utility breeds. After all, they were bred to work or do something useful. I don't hunt, which is what my dogs are bred to do, so I wanted to do something fun, would use their brain, and help burn some energy. Kayla and I discovered Agility in 2018 and fell in love. I haven't got to the point where I can do it with Coal as we need to establish a stronger recall and control when he's off lead.

Even so, Coal tags along with us every chance we get which means I need to manage him to keep him, and other dogs, safe. More importantly, as we work on general exposure and desensitisation, we try to keep all interactions positive and calm.

I've been very heartened by the Agility community's response to my situation. Most people I've spoken to have been supportive but it also seems that's because people are in the same situation or have been in the past. Sometimes until you've had a reactive dog, it can be hard to empathise with those that do.

Agility is a great sport for us and our dogs. There is nothing like watching humans and canines in sync with each other in the ring. I'm even more amazed when I watch my fellow competitors out there doing it with their dogs who suffer from reactivity. In the ring, where it's safe, the dogs can show what they're made of and do some pretty amazing things.

Outside the ring, though, I think it becomes harder for reactive dogs. It's a heightened environment. When I look at it from their point of view it's a hotbed of activity. There are lots of dogs and people coming



and going. There's a lot of noise with dogs barking and people talking or yelling (in the ring that is). People are playing games and doing tricks with their dogs. Sometimes that can end up being closer than you thought, such as when people are warming up or rewarding their dogs by throwing a toy for them. Sometimes this can end up being a bit close for comfort.

There are things we can all do to help all our canine friends thrive at Agility events. Some of this is also covered under Dogs New Zealand Agility Standing Order 14:

- Pay attention to your dog
- Give other dogs space, unless of course you know them and you've been invited to interact with them
- Think about where and how you play with your dog
- Have a solid recall with your dog
- Don't crowd the call board, and get in and out with your dog so that others can do the same
- Don't crowd the chute: remember the golden rule of one in the ring, one in the chute, and one ready to go
- Identify the competitor in front of you, so you know when you're up and stand back
- Secure your dog as soon as feasible at the end of your run
- Exit the ring as quickly as possible
- For those with reactive dogs, don't be afraid to signal that your dog needs space through the use of a muzzle or a 'Bee Seen' coat. Check out www.hiviz4dogs.com or www.roccoandco.nz for some options.
- Respect the muzzle or coat and give these dogs extra space. If you are looking for a muzzle, check out this site: www.muzzletrainingandtips.com/sizing-a-muzzle. Readily available muzzles in New Zealand are Baskerville Ultra, Shoof and ones made out of BioThane (some Agility members make

Did You Know?

You can upload your additional family My Vaccine Pass under 'My Profile' at www.dogagility.org.nz



these).

There could be many reasons a dog is wearing a muzzle. Not all dogs wearing a muzzle are reactive or aggressive; they could be a scavenger that needs protection from their indiscriminate grazing. Also, there could be many reasons dogs are reactive — people, dogs, other animals, sounds, movement, or food to name just a few. Some dogs also like to resource guard and don't like people near their food or toys. Don't be afraid to ask; as an owner with a reactive dog I'm more than okay letting you know what my dog is or isn't comfortable with. After all, we are their voice.

If we remember and follow the tips above we shouldn't have any issues but if you find yourself in the unenviable position of being involved in an incident remember that nobody wanted it to happen and the other person is probably just as stressed about it as you. Be kind and respectful to each other.

Need help? Ask your veterinarian or club members for recommendations on who to contact for extra help, such as a qualified dog behaviourist. You can also contact your local council's Animal Liaison Coordinator for advice. Here is a link which offers tips for understanding dog body language: positively.com/dog-training/understanding-dogs/canine-body-language/

If we all work together, we can make our sport safe for all. Remember all dogs are entitled to exercise but I also think they deserve enrichment. Some just need a little extra help to create the space for that to happen.

As our sport, like many others, struggles with membership, I think anything we can do to encourage membership and competition is a win. 🐾

Natalie Greaves

