

Agility



A Measurer's View

Cyrus, aged 12 weeks. Photo by Peter Harworth.

Supplied by Rosemarie Baker

So you would like your dog measured for agility? Not a problem! What can possibly go wrong?

All dogs competing at Agility events must be measured before they can compete, even at a ribbon trial. The earliest you can measure your dog is four weeks before he or she turns 18 months. This is an interim measure which will last for six months and allows them to compete. At two years, the dog will receive their final measure since they should have stopped growing by this age.

There were originally four height categories in Agility competition — maxi, medium, small and micro — but after a lengthy review there are now five: 600, 500, 380, 320 and 240mm. There must be 15 dogs in each height at an event to run as a separate class, where dogs don't have to compete for places with other heights.

So, if you are a complete newbie, what must you do? Hopefully someone at your club will be able to help with this, especially if you're not confident using a computer.

First, you need a permanent number before you can be measured, a letter denoting the year of the dog's birth, plus a three-figure number which the dog will keep for life.

This is not difficult to obtain since you can apply online at www.dogagility.org.nz. You simply fill in an online form and the number comes back immediately.

Now you have a number, you need to contact two measurers. There's a list on the Agility website and many shows have details of measurers attending and times they're available. Ask your club first since they may be arranging a measuring day.

So that's the paperwork sorted; now to the practical details, training your dog.

And how do you go about training your rather boisterous teenage dog who thinks he's still a puppy and has no intention of standing still? It can't be that hard; after all show people with every breed under the sun have dogs who stand like rocks while the judge goes over them, looks in their mouths and sometimes even grabs their testicles! So why is it so difficult to persuade some Agility dogs to stand still? Show people are motivated to teach standing still in order for their dog to win, whereas they may have non-existent recall and couldn't complete an elementary course to save their life!

The secret is in the training. Conformation show people start with their puppies as young as four weeks, teaching them to stand and later to move in a circle on a lead. It's not hard, but surprisingly difficult to do well without training. I'll now share a few tips to make everyone's life a bit easier.

To start, you need a board or other slightly raised surface, big enough for your dog to stand on comfortably. Place the dog's



Relko Blue Nile Ozzie. Photo by Lynda Watson.

front feet together on the edge of the board so they can't move forward without falling off. Provide a reward for this and a treat for standing still. If conformation is reasonable and the front feet are together, the hind feet should naturally be in place. The front legs and hind legs from hock to the ground should be at right angles to the surface of the board. The back should be level, and head in a natural position, not too high or too low. If necessary you can place the hind feet later when the dog has learned to stand still. Imagine the body is an oblong table with a leg at each corner and you don't want the table to slope or rock.

The next step is to get the dog to stand while strange people bend over them and touch them. Treats should be high quality and plentiful. Once the dog is happy with this, you can introduce a stick. Any stick will do. Place it on the withers, praise and treat. Wave it around (but not threateningly) then use your carpentry skills to replicate a measuring stick and practice with this. Take the dog to your club and practice with distractions, such as people and dogs milling around. Now you're both ready for a measuring appointment.

Make sure they have had some exercise, been toileted and you are armed with favourite treats. It may help to allow an anxious dog to watch a few dogs being measured before their turn. It's important for the owner not to be anxious as dogs are quick to pick up on this.

Sometimes, if the dog won't settle, measurers will suggest you take the dog away for 10 minutes or so. This gives an anxious dog a chance to process

information and will often be calmer on their return, knowing what to expect.

Each dog requires three measures, the same from each measurer. Sometimes, if the dog is borderline, other measurers will be asked for a second opinion. This is especially important if the dog is having their permanent measure. Time taken to successfully measure a dog varies enormously and is entirely dependent on the dog's behaviour. A quick measure is less stressful for everyone, especially the dog.

I have been measuring dogs since 2013. This was something I could contribute that would fit in with my other commitments. To date, I have measured over 250 dogs, not counting those who have required a third measurer. Measurers come

in all shapes, ages and sizes. They have all completed training, measuring a number of dogs under qualified supervision. Mostly, they're people with many years of experience owning and handling dogs. There is no payment; measurers give their time for free, often during happy hour, but satisfied with the knowledge that they are giving something back to a sport they all love. Most owners are very appreciative and that in itself is reward enough.

In conclusion, I would like to see every agility club in New Zealand appoint a committee member to oversee new competitors, incorporate the relevant practical training into their beginner's courses, and help them with the paperwork, which, although simple, can be confusing for new handlers. 🐾

Kim Orlando-Reep



Tubby at eight weeks. Photo by Kim Orlando-Reep.