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A Brief History of the Dogs NZ Agility Committee

Nothing makes you feel quite so old as being asked to write a short history of something, given you were there at the start. The worst part is that I was the fresh young face on the original Agility Committee and am now the grizzled veteran! The truth is that the Agility Committee (AC) has only been around for 16 years but has served competitors incredibly well in this time, and without question, advanced the sport in ways that simply would not have happened under the model that it replaced. Nick Chester – member of the 1st, 4th and 7th Agility Committees.

The Agility Committee was first established in 2007 following a decision by Dogs New Zealand to give Agility and Obedience their own voices and decision-making ability. Prior to this, both were included together in a dog training committee but it became clear in the mid-noughties that the needs and aspirations of each code were changing and needed separate representation and governance models. This decision to have a separate committee was hard fought for by key people in the sport and everyone who has followed has benefitted greatly from their advocacy.

An Agility Working Group established the form and function for an Agility Committee, and the first elections were held in 2007. The structure of the committee has largely remained unchanged since then, with a committee of eight members being elected for a two-year term, with at least two representatives required from each island. The first election was very competitive, with several candidates putting their names forward. The eight successful candidates were by-and-large well-known and experienced members of the community — and all eight were current judges in the sport. Clearly knowing the rules (or at least knowing how to look them up) was seen as a benefit!

The task in front of the first committee was massive. Although there were terms of reference for the how things would work, there was no real precedent in terms of what needed to be done and in what order. Lots of tasks were delegated down to subcommittees, with



Schondara Defending Warrior (Sascha), owner Lyn Sayers.

each AC person taking on the responsibility for a particular area of interest (judging, regulations, equipment etc). There was a need to address smaller, admin-related issues on the day to day running of the sport, alongside competitor expectation of starting to make bigger structural changes. The first AC ran a wide-reaching survey about potential changes that could be made, from equipment to class structures and graduation systems. The biggest legacy of the initial committee was probably the introduction of jumpers classes, which became official on 1 January, 2009. Its hard to imagine a time before jumpers classes given how popular they have become in the decade and half since, but there were long debates and discussions about how the system would work and how it would interact with the existing agility classes already in place.

The huge amount of work to ensure the sport was working well didn't happen over just one term of the AC and several of the first few committees dealt with setting up systems that we are still using today. The sport has been fortunate that transitions from outgoing committees to new ones have always run very smoothly. And although not every committee election has been contested, there has not yet been a lack of interest to fill the eight committee seats every two years. Each incoming committee has generally overseen their own significant change to the way the sport works. In the 15 years or so since the introduction of the Agility Committee, the following major changes have been seen in the sport:



Loki the Trickster (Loki), owner Sharon Bergen.



Eyespy The Love Of Aphrodite (Adonis), owner Lou Baker.

- Introduction of Jumpers classes
- Introduction of Games classes (first at ribbon trial level and then championship level)
- Re-organisation of classes through the introduction of height-splits
- Changes to jump heights, including the introduction of a 4th, and then a 5th jump height
- Introduction of new and safer versions of equipment, standardisation of equipment and removal of items such as crossover, table and collapsible tunnel
- Introduction of a Junior Dog Training events and a junior team (aka 'Zone 6') in the Interzone Team event
- Introduction of permanent numbers for competition dogs
- Introduction of a range of new titles ((JD, JDX, Super Champ) and milestone certificates
- Introduction of the 'Take the Lead' initiative to promote a more positive environment for Agility competitors

The establishment of the AC has also been instrumental in Agility being able to have a stand-alone national event, the New Zealand Dog Agility Championships. The first NZDAC was held at Cambridge in 2012. A standalone NZDAC has given a large amount of freedom to hold and shape an event that works specifically for Agility. The event has grown significantly over time, and this simply would not have been possible without strong leadership and support from the AC.

While the list of changes to events and equipment is often the things that are cited as being the biggest successes of the AC, it is often the more administrative activities that quietly happen behind the scenes that have been of massive benefit to the community. Some of these actions include:

- Managing annual event calendars
- Overseeing all issues related to measuring of dogs, including record keeping and training of measurers
- Advocating for the needs of Agility to Dogs NZ through Executive Council.
- Running regular judges' exams and providing significant support and training for judges
- Managing official complaints and overseeing processes related to dogs who are 'on report' for aggressive behaviour
- Inputting weekly event results and notifying competitors of results and achievements

The strength of the AC was clearly on display during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns and then restrictions on gathering limits put a huge amount of pressure on clubs in terms of running events



Loki again.

and training nights. The pandemic stretched over the term of two separate committees, and both responded quickly and decisively to provide clarity and support to clubs during incredibly uncertain times.

Communication with the wider sport has also been a major function of the AC over the years and one that has changed as the ways and forms of communication have evolved over the last decade and a half. From the beginning, there has been high expectations from competitors that the AC will involve them in decision-making. Prior to the AC, any communication of Agility matters largely came through clubs, with many changes catching unawarwe those who were not closely involved with their club. The AC had an ability to engage more directly with competitors regardless of their relationship to their own club. AC members have almost exclusively been active competitors or participants in Agility and the Agility community has had great access to them over the years. While the AC has consistently communicated with clubs on a wide range of issues, individuals have also been able to have their say in a variety of ways, including surveys and online (starting with Yahoo email groups and moving into Facebook). This high level of access has come with its challenges and most, if not all, committees over the years have grappled with how to ensure that competitors have a fair and equitable opportunity to provide feedback on the various projects underway.

The AC has also looked to use the fact that it contained members from around the country to engage directly with their local clubs and competitors. The relationship between the AC and clubs has had a fair amount of twists and turns: clubs have often felt they are at the coal face, dealing with the impact of changes enacted by the AC (especially related to equipment), but the AC has also looked to support clubs in a variety of ways, either through grants, or support for trainers and seminars to improve local training opportunities.

There have now been eight Agility Committee elections since 2007. The first committee was made up exclusively of judges and people who were relatively well-known in the sport. The diversity of the AC has changed greatly since then and it is clear that there is a need for a variety of skills in order to keep the sport moving in the right direction. In fact, the current AC sees judges outnumbered 5-3!

Unfortunately, there has not been an election for the AC for several years due to a lack of applicants. At times it has been difficult to find enough people to fill the eight chairs and if you were to ask anyone who has been on the committee, it can be a challenging role. Depending on the agenda and ambition of each individual committee, it can be time-consuming, both in terms of attending meetings and undertaking work in between them. However, the majority of AC members would probably also say it is a

particularly rewarding position and allows them the ability to make a difference in a sport they love. 🐾

Did You Know? Hoopers is coming. If you want to know more, check out the September NZ Dog World.