Agility

A History of Agility in New Zealand

Supplied by Rosemarie Baker, rjbagility2020@gmail.com

Ian Gray with his sheepdog trial dog Rose.

We have a lot of people to thank for the growth and development of Agility over the last 40-odd years. Not all of them can be named here, and not everything that happened can be mentioned, mainly due to lack of space!. However, I hope that you enjoy reading how we got to where we are now, how this amazing and enjoyable sport of ours developed, and who were the people who helped it happen. One thing you will discover is that Agility has been constantly changing, and looking ahead to the future whatever it may be. Let's hope we continue to have good people doing good things for the sport.

For more information on the History of agility see:

- **www.dogagility.org.nz/records/recordschampions.html**
- **www.facebook.com/groups/nzagilityhistory**

Agility started in the UK in the late 1970s: a display of agility by two teams of dogs filled some time at a Crufts show and impressed many people. It eventually became a sport in its own right, spreading all over the world.

The sport had a slow start in New Zealand. It began, according to Bob Pitt, Zone 1 rep 1979-1984, with an Agility demonstration at the 1980 NDOA at McLean Park, Napier. They made the mistake of letting people with untrained dogs have a go. The resulting debacle got back to the NZKC, so Agility didn't get approval to run shows. Clubs such as the Weimaraner Club and the South Island German Shepherd League continued to run Agility displays but the sport's growth was limited due to NZKC insisting on dogs acquiring the Companion Dog

(CD) qualification before they could participate in Agility.

The start of Agility competitions in New Zealand can be largely credited to the efforts of Ian Gray, a retired teacher from Auckland. When Ian retired, his idea was to take up pottery, but his wife Lesley had other ideas. Ian had a Fox Terrier as a youngster, but remained dogless until he met Lesley at university. Lesley, who had grown up with dogs, had her own working Sheepdog and trained Ian's first Sheepdog when he was working on farms as a young man. Once Ian retired, Lesley thought the time right for getting a dog, to help keep him fit. Their lifestyle, which included a small yacht, meant a large breed was out of the question, and in the end they got a Swedish Vallhund, a small working breed. While overseas in 1985 their puppy's

breeder took them to a training session for Agility, starting a long involvement in the sport. They liked what they saw and thought Agility would be a good thing for their dogs — and them— to do.

Once back home, they discovered it wasn't going to be quite that easy. For a start, there was nothing competitive in New Zealand, apart from German Shepherd Dogs doing displays. Ian started encouraging the North Shore club to forward proposals for Agility competition. They sought to remove the CD requirement, with the help of video tape on judging from Peter Lewis of the UK and support of Zone 1 rep John Muir.

A meeting was held in 1986 and with interest from about 50 people, an Agility club called DATA was formed with Ian Gray as the secretary and Allan Willox the president. In September 1987 they were responsible for the first ever event at the NDOA! Ian's efforts in Auckland encouraged other areas to follow suit.

Arty Knapp brought Agility to Wellington and was a founding member of Zone 3 Dog Agility Club, in 1987. He was president of the club twice and was its head instructor and committee member for many years. In the South Island, Zone Rep Alan Harris called a meeting of potantially interested people which resulted in the formation of the Agility-only Canterbury Canine Agility Training Society in May 1987. Lorraine Ramsell was president, Barbara Rusbridge secretary, and Graham Grether treasurer. Susan Sheppard was made head instructor mainly, she says, "because my dogs competed in trials so I must know something about teaching dogs to jump!"

In 1987, Ian offered to produce an Agility Column for the *New Zealand Kennel Gazette*, to provide the wide communication necessary to allow Agility to grow.
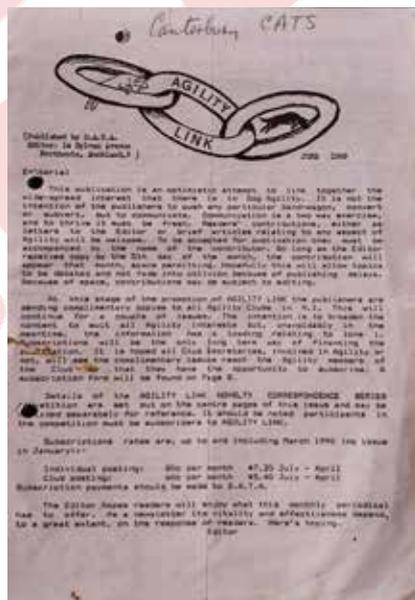
About this time, Lesley had a friend in the UK who ran a dog in Agility and she sent her a copy of a course run at North Shore Club, with their own dogs' times. Her friend's club ran the course at a training night and sent their results to Lesley. Very interesting! An idea was conceived! Here was the way to bring life to a newsletter and to a sport in a long and sparsely populated country like ours. Ian handed over the *Gazette* column to Karen de Wit and started the National Agility Link Association (NALA), producing monthly magazine *Agility Link* from June 1989, sent to all New Zealand clubs. To inject life into the monthly publication he added a correspondence course competition. The first competition boasted 12 competitors, with CCATS winning and North Shore and Taupo coming runner-up in the first Club Teams competition in July.

In 1991, NZKC approved the running of the *Agility Link* competition. The magazine had lively letters to the editor section and many topics discussed became incorporated into NZ Agility. NALA was also instrumental in bringing overseas experts to NZ, to help with judging and training dogs. Ian Gray wrote his last *Agility Link* magazine in December 1993. Since then Karen de Wit has been Editor/Secretary.

In 1987, NDOA included an Agility competition, and in 1988 the National Dog Show offered an Agility class, judged by Barry Monaghan. Agility was spreading around the country.

The Birth of the Agility Committee

Agility was initially run under the umbrella of the Dog Training Committee. The country was divided into five zones, each with a rep, secretary and treasurer, and clubs sent representatives to regular zone meetings to discuss and decide on dog training matters.

In 1994 *Agility Link* subscriber Gary Martin suggested it was time agiliteers took responsibility for their own sport, with a 1997 petition proposing a separate Agility committee.

The petition did not immediately result in a change to the governance of Agility, but a number of changes were introduced including lowering the maxi jump height from 760mm to 670mm, and the introduction of midi (500mm) height.

It wasn't until 2005 that the Agility Working Group was formed, to examine Agility's future direction. The members of the working group were Karen de Wit, Peter de Wit, Fiona Ferrar, Fiona Hodgson, Deb Jackson, Carole Logan, Alan McClumpha, Allan Rohde, Kathy Roper and Roy Thorndycraft.

The working group's task was to look at existing structures and processes and see if they could be improved. They recommended rule changes to the 2006 NZKC Annual Conference which paved the way for Agility to be able to have separate representation within the NZKC system. Therefore, Agility can be represented by a councillor on the Executive Council and has the right to send three additional delegates to the Annual Conference of Delegates.

In May 2007, the first Agility committee held its first meeting. That committee comprised Nick Chester, Karen de Wit, Fiona Hodgson, Alan McClumpha, Paul Remon, Allan Rohde, Lyn Sayers and Roy Thorndycraft. The funds from the five zones allowed the committee to run Agility in NZ. In the early days the emphasis was very much on clubs rather than individuals.

Technology

When Agility began, records were kept in exercise books or folders. Results for the *Agility Link* competition were recorded by Lesley Gray on a spreadsheet in an exercise book. People typed or hand-wrote letters to the editor and posted them to Ian. Competitors filled in paper entry forms, added a cheque, and posted them. Newsletters were were handed or posted out and pinned on club noticeboards.

With computers becoming more widespread, email lists were the way to communicate. Now it's smart phones and websites, Messenger and Facebook groups, and due to the hard work of a few volunteers we have online entry systems, with computerised results recording, live results, and we get an email message congratulating us when we graduate or achieve an award. Thanks must go to Mike Butler, Peter de wit and Diana Gausden for the IT revolution that has occurred.

National Events

The annual NDOA/NDTA was run over Labour weekend in October with Obedience people participating in individual and inter-zone events, as well as social functions. Judges' meetings were also held. In 1980, Agility consisted solely of a display, but 10 years later it had become an actual competition held alongside Obedience. In 1987 the first Agility competition was held at the NDOA, Auckland. Entries were seven Starters dogs and 51 Open dogs.

In 1989, Edith and Harry

Radcliff donated a shield for an inter-zone Agility event (photo right). The NDOA was held in Timaru and the event was run using the results from the Intermediate class. In 1990 in Christchurch the Agility teams event was a separate event, during a Monday lunchbreak, with three dogs from each zone running around an Open course.

During the first competition, there was one Starters dog and two Open dogs. Then a team comprised three Open dogs and the competition was run separately. Scoring was normal except that an eliminated dog got 50 faults and had to finish. Dogs were ranked. The system now is four dogs in four separate classes, suggested initially by Fiona Hodgson. These days NZDAC is a four-day extravaganza run in multiple rings.

TV show *TUX Wonder Dogs* ran from 1993 to 1999 (and 2004-2005), hosted by Mark Leishman and his trusty labrador Dexter. The programme really lifted the profile of Agility, and many people can credit *Tux Wonder Dogs* with getting them into the sport.

The National Agility Competition ran every second year from 1997 to 2009, run by members of Zone 3 Dog Agility Club. Clubs all over NZ ran heats and semis and the final was run in the NZKC Exhibition Centre, Porirua. Finalists represented every zone, at Starters and Open.

In recent years, the National Dog Show has included Agility, even if only as a display due to the venue not having room for agility rings. The first one in the early 1980s was held in a tiny ring at the Porirua Exhibition Centre in Porirua. It was extremely popular and there wasn't even standing room to watch it.

Pawblacks were the first Agility team to travel with their dogs to Australia, in 2007. Peter de Wit with C and Dianne Reid with Indie both won nationals events on that trip. In 2016 four Pawblacks won finals.

Picture: Team of Kiwis outside the double tents at the Australian Nationals: Kneeling L to R : Peter& C, Fiona & Fya, Lyn & Jenna, Carol & Raisin, Denyse & Josie, Karen & Tara, Nevenka, Fiona & Carmon, Dianne & India. Standing L to R: Clare & Abbie, Carol, Ross & Ice & Witch, Ngaire, Kevin, Julie McC, Julie McH, Jono, Am, Deb & Ace, Elaine & Flare.

NZ agiliteers have also travelled to the IFCS, competing with borrowed dogs. The most successful was Chelsea Marriner, winning gold at the 2012 IFCS world dog agility champs in the UK.

She has also been the most successful NZ junior agiliteer to date.

Judging

Initially, only Test C Obedience judges could judge Agility. In 1990 Ian Gray went to the UK and took part in a judges' training weekend seminar run by Peter Lewis and John Gilbert, leaders in the sport since its inception. He was awarded a certificate of approval for judging in the UK. The seminar emphasised course design for safety and judgability, and judge movement so they could clearly see contacts, weave, tunnel entries, as well as provide clear judging signals and difficulty levels appropriate to the dog's experience. Before this, most judges stood still, calling out 'fault' and 'refusal' as dogs went round the course, many taking a scribe into the ring to record mistakes. Some judges made up their own rules, and one judge penalised handlers for using hand signals during a run, Mo Toeke running his GSD to win with his hands in his pockets!

Other interesting variations were offering weave wands in a tight curve, and suggesting that touching the poles should be penalised. Initially the weaves were a row of single poles pushed into the ground.

On his return, Ian ran several judging seminars and invented and made The Agility Judges Assistant, comprising scale equipment and a piece of material to define the 'ring'.

Judges learned to work with squared paper, and a piece of string to work out distance which proved very accurate in course design. These days systems such as *Clean Run Course Designer* are used by Agility judges to design courses.

In 1990 more recognition was given to the sport, with Agility judges being appointed. Of that original group, Karen de Wit is still judging. These days there are multiple panels and new judges are assigned mentors to help them out. The first-ever Agility judges panel in 1990 was John Muir, Bernadette Thompson, Peter de Wit, Karen de Wit, Irene Lock, Susan Sheppard, and Alan Willox.

The AD Trial and Agility Champion

In 1988 Ian Gray and his Hungarian Viszla Santa visited Australia to compete in the Bicentennial Tracking Competition. While there he noted Australia had AD titles and brought this qualification award back to NZ. Initially, there were only four opportunities per zone to give it a go. The first AD class was held 15 September 1990 in Christchurch with 25 competitors, 24 maxis and one mini. Wendy Champion judged. Course 10 was selected, with a length of 150m and a SCT of 62 seconds. There was only one successful team — Peter de Wit and his GSD Sarah. The first AD trial was held in Zone 1 two weeks later and Santa gained his first AD Clear Round Certificate. The first dog to achieve AD was GSD Justin with Belinda Goyarts, November 1990. Belinda, from Auckland, famously flew her dog to Christchurch to get her second clear round in Timaru. Ian Gray's Santa was the first mini dog in NZ to gain the ADX title.

The first Agility Champion was Gerard Kennedy of Timaru with his Border Collie Tara at Forrester Park, Dunedin at the Otago Canine Training Club show, 30 January 1999.

Introducing the Mini and Midi

In 1986, a display of Agility included Ian Gray's Santa who had to jump the 600mm fixed jumps for the GSDS. At that time in the

UK there was no provision for smaller dogs, and NZ led the way in providing for both mini and midi dogs. In recent years there have been more changes, with more height divisions and with jumps being lowered at each stage.

In September 1989 the idea of a middle height class (the midi) was raised in *Agility Link*, and the ball started rolling in December with the first course ever offered to the middle sized dogs. Prior to the introduction of midi, dogs only 1cm taller than mini were required to jump 760mm! Nola Calder's Fox Terrier Rocky famously actually competed successfully as a maxi and gained his ADX at that height.

Ian Gray's trailer

Equipment

Enterprising people made all the equipment, based on UK plans, in many areas a few people towing it around to events since not all clubs had their own. Len and Carol Parker in Zone 3, and Ian Gray, who towed his Agility gear to WAG training days and other clubs in Zone 1, were examples of this.

The Weimaraner Club gave CATS their first Agility equipment: eight hurdles, a rigid tunnel and an A-Frame. They made weaving poles by sticking poles in concrete in ice cream containers. There were many inter-club competitions and the early success of Agility depended on support from club members who gathered to make their own gear. Working bees were popular get-togethers as were cross-country, displays at schools and fairs, and other fun events. Clubs are still a key element of Agility, where new people start. At the top level, clubs get together to run NZDAC, providing equipment and lots of volunteers.

Initially, jumps were wings, so we have gone full circle. However the first wings were large and heavy. Modifications over the years have included lighter metal all-in-one options and now much lighter wings. Weave poles were originally individual poles that were pushed into the ground. Innovation created the weave base, sets of six poles that can be joined together to make the required 12 poles.

Dogs had to get on the table and either sit, lie down or stand while a judge counted the five-second pause. A metronome was initially ensured standardisation of timing, but eventually the table was withdrawn due to inaccuracies and time-saving.


Many doing Agility today will have no idea what a pausebox was. It was an area on the ground defined by a wooden/PVC square that the dog had to go into and stay for five seconds. The rules allowed for a sit, down or stand position. The pausebox didn't last too many years. I remember having to put a dog in it three times during a course which wasn't much fun for the dogs especially when ground conditions were muddy.
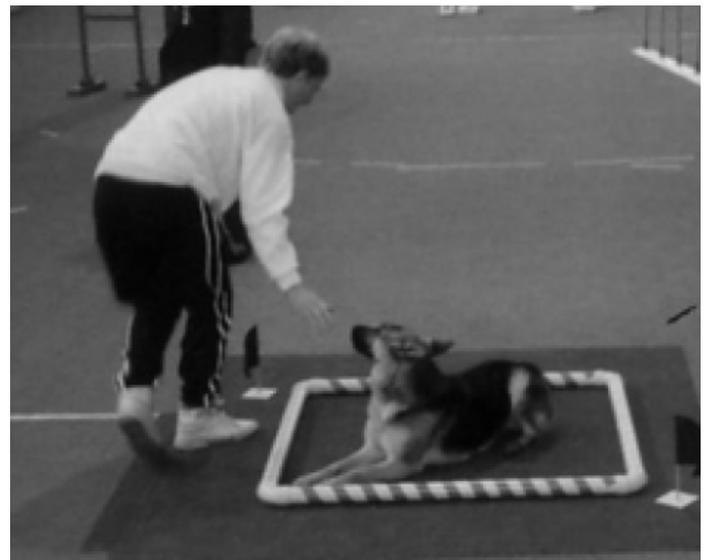
Len Parker built a crossover that was used at Taupo's February weekend in 1992. Although the ramps were considerably shorter than those used overseas, it was believed that the essential ingredients of the obstacle (requiring dogs to turn and negotiate ramps) were retained. The plans were submitted to the NZKC and form the basis of all New Zealand crossovers.

In 1989, a recipe for non-slip contacts gear was recommended. It stated, "Sand is not nearly as good as coarse sawdust or buzzer shavings. This material should be sprinkled liberally on to acrylic paint IMMEDIATELY it has been brushed on, one person applying the paint and a second person applying the sawdust straight away. When dry, bump off any excess. Dab on a further generous coat of paint." The Agility community can thank Lyn Sayers for introducing rubberised contacts which make negotiating the contact equipment much safer for dogs. Equipment safety has always been important, and safety has improved over the years. Hoops used to be tyres, often suspended from a frame by lengths of chain. Contact equipment had large pieces of wood that acted
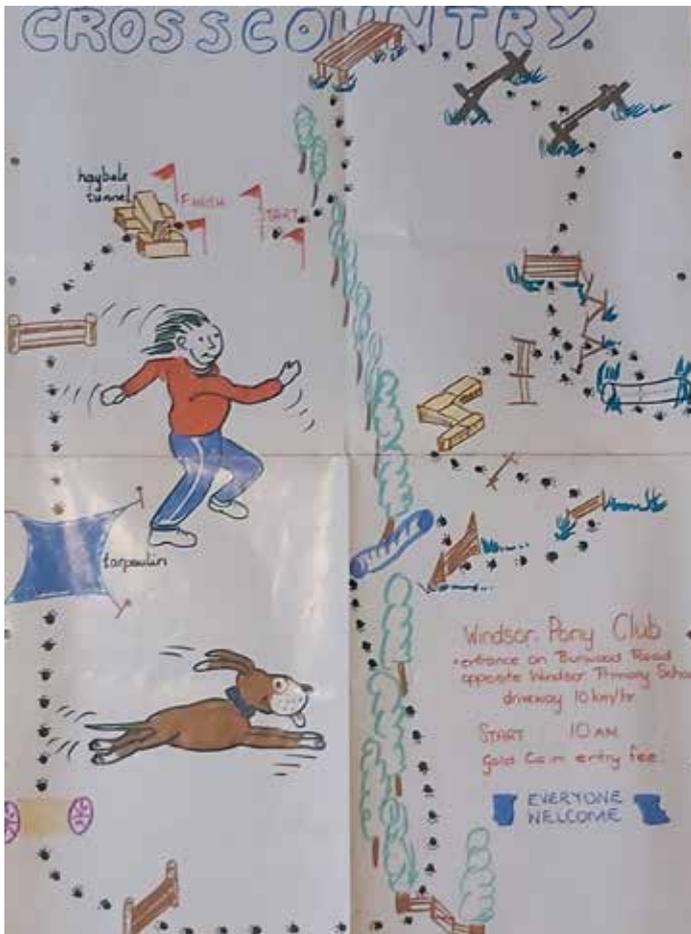
as nonslip slats, and we now have lightweight wing jumps with lowered bars.

In February 1994, electronic timers were being discussed, with the Taupo Club operating one successfully. However, the first time it was used in an official event there was a huge uproar from competitors. The judge altered her course so that the timer was positioned at the first jump. The differences in times between manual and electronic times were significant, and could have altered the placings quite a bit. In 2003 Lyn Sayers introduced electronic timing systems to New Zealand. Now the time is taken from the first to the last obstacle, not from a start/finish line. No need now for two people to stand with stopwatches, and with times going to 100ths of a second there are far fewer run-offs.

Competition

The first official events offered Starters and Open. In 1993/94 Open class was turned into Intermediate and excluded Starter dogs. In many areas Agility classes were held alongside or after the Obedience event.

The first Canty CATS official event was held in June 1988 and Karen de Wit and Cobber made *The Press* newspaper. In August 1989 John Muir officiated at the first Senior course to be run in Zone 1. It included a decoy jump.

In those days the four events on offer were: Starters, Novice, Open and Senior. Later Open became more restricted and is now called Intermediate.

Napier Dog Training Club held its first official Agility event on 14 November 1989, with 41 entries in Starters and 39 in Open.

The first two day weekend of Agility was held at Taupo in February 1990, organised by Paul Whitelock and his team. Donations totalling $100 helped South Islanders travel to the event, an example of real generosity by Agility people. There was lots of sun, a bit of rain, a really friendly atmosphere and an informal meeting attended by 60 agiliteers from four of the five zones.

The first ever Jumpers event was held in January 2009 at Upper Hutt Dog Training Club.

In November 1998 the first ever Agility Games Day in New Zealand was held at Napier Dog Training Club grounds. Games have been held since, both as novelties like tunnelers, and now are a standard class with awards able to be gained — GD, GDX and GDM.

Volunteers

As with most sport and recreation in NZ, volunteers are responsible for keeping the sport of Agility going. Many people over the years have helped in many ways large and small: painting equipment, instructing at their club, baking goods, being on call-board and even picking up poles. I am sure this will continue and look forward to being part of it for a while longer.

In October 2012, at NZDAC in Cambridge, the first-ever Agility Committee Certificate of Appreciation was presented, to Allan Rohde.

Thanks to Nick Chester for recording, in 2018, an interview with Ian Gray, soon to be 94. We wish him a happy birthday and thank him for getting this sport up and running in New Zealand. 🐾

Karen De Wit

Did you know...
Information on show refunds can be found at
dogsnz.org.nz/pdfs/regs-agility (5.2.15)