Agility

Course Design: behind the numbers

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Chris Moody in all weathers! Right, with Typhoon.

For a 30-40 second run, there is a phenomenal amount of work that goes into NZ Agility. The training, the travel, the tribulations and the course designs to mention a few.

Course design has been a fickle subject lately largely due to safety expectations, obstacle performance and handling practices. Dogs are moving faster and equipment is not being used enough in courses so trainers are not training all the gear as much as they need to for excellent performance of the obstacle. This can cause safety concerns from a judge's perspective, reducing the confidence to use that gear in courses. You can see how something small can have an impact on course design.

After only eight years in judging, courses have changed dramatically to the point of coming full circle with certain pieces of equipment but there are still two types of courses I enjoy setting out: ones that look tricky for handlers on first glance but have the smoothest dog's line once it's running and other that are taken for granted as 'easy' with handlers realising too late how tricky and fast the course can be. This doesn't mean I intend for handlers to fail. Actually, I aim to encourage handlers to assess how to approach a sequence from their dog's point of view and where the dog will end up to prepare for the next sequence.

My course ideas do start from a small sequence (four ro seven obstacles) or a certain piece of another judge's course and build on that idea into a full course of my own. Even as I write this, I am working on courses I look forward to seeing run over the next couple of months.

I feel it is important for courses to accurately reflect the skill level of handlers and dogs. Starters and Jumpers C should be designed for newer handlers starting out, offering encouragement since no one would be likely to find a passion for Agility if they are struggling week in week out on the first few obstacles in a course. Senior and Jumpers A, I believe, need the assumption that every handler has the skillset to maintain control for their dog's safety and is complemented by tricky and technical courses.

The best courses, I find, provide a variety of handling options to successfully complete a run. Nothing in Agility feels more enjoyable than watching two teams run the same course differently and it works perfectly for everyone. Watching the same run multiple times comes down to which dog can run the fastest and this takes the strategy of course designs and walking the course out of the excitement of Agility especially with the higher levels and various games. Agility should be about who can get the best performance from their dog and run a course to their best strength.

If you have read this far, it is fair to say you have probably run or at least walked a course thinking or heard others say "this really doesn't suit my dog", "this judge hasn't thought about my dog's safety". These criticisms have become more common with people's desire to force speed above all else out on the course and expect judges to know exactly how their dog runs.

Dogs are unpredictable and it is impossible to set a course for every style of dog

When it comes to course design, there is so much to consider. Factors that are constantly in my mind include:

- Equipment is always changing. Restrictions such as the dog walk length has a huge impact in course design, trying to fit into a course maintaining safety requirements, handlers have a preference towards particular gear with judges not knowing exactly they will have on the day as each club has different gear.
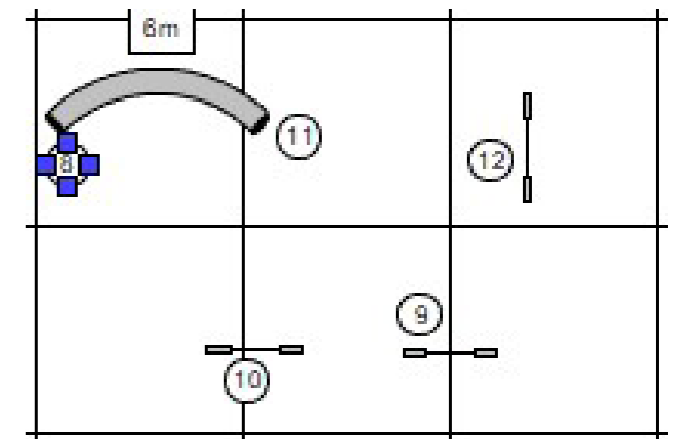
- Skill level of handlers. The levels are ideal for those newer to Agility to get teamwork with their dogs in the basic classes and experienced handlers work on tougher courses knowing how their dogs run in higher grades.

- Dogs are getting faster. The constant changes to equipment and handling preferences cause more safety concerns on courses. This becomes a cascading effect on Agility as a whole.

- Changes on the day. Nobody can predict ground conditions and weather when designing courses. There is nothing worse than having a great sequence changed due to mud, rain and other poor conditions making a sequence unsafe. It is also important to consider how people walk courses in these conditions to ensure the changes in courses aren't ruined by worsening grounds.

- Nesting. Great for event organisation to ensure volunteers are not overworked, giving more time for handlers to walk and plan their runs, but the consequences of small changes early on has a huge impact as the day goes on. This ripple effect can make courses harder to look good on the ground if earlier changes alter the ideal sequences.

- Consider the club. I try to think of a club's gear, ring setup and even the time of year to design courses that are suitable. It's helpful with events I've judged or competed at before. Times such as the lead-up to NZDAC where people want to remain in lower classes but still want to train in preparation can be a difficult medium to achieve. Some handlers want courses to be challenging for people to test their skills before the big event but not so difficult that very few dogs go clear in the lower classes to remain in these events for NZDAC.

- Number of dogs. This can make a big difference when thinking about course design, when you have 150+ dogs to judge, running a smaller class by even 30 metres can save a lot of time for a busy weekend

- Predict dog performance. Predict how the fast dogs, the slow dogs, the wide-turning dogs, the quick-responding dogs, big, small and everything in between is a hard ask while trying to create a course to accommodate them all. I have primarily run 600 dogs but have been fortunate enough to run a nice mixture of all-sized dogs. In saying this, I will always think how I would run a course I design and how it could potentially be run differently to include as many different handling styles as possible.

I know my courses will never be ideal for every single handler and their dog. All I aim for is for the majority of teams out there to be able to handle the course and hope to achieve that clear round while enjoying themselves. Thanks to all the handlers and fellow judges out there who have helped me over time make courses enjoyable, provide helpful suggestions to improve and give courses everything they have and succeed in their goals.
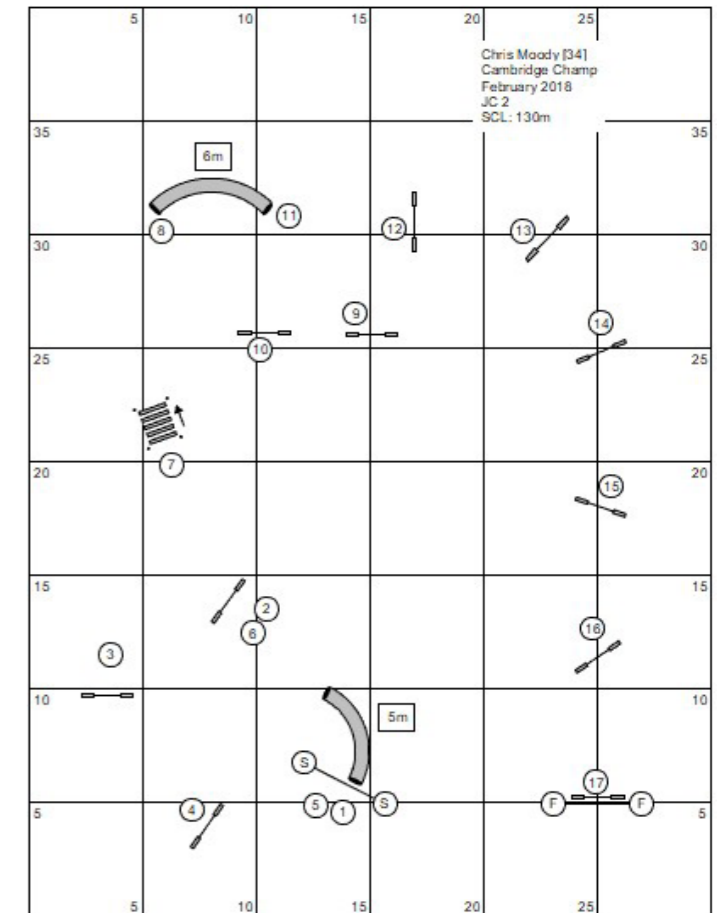
Next time you're out there on a course walking or running, just remember: that random person standing out in the blazing sun, pouring rain, freezing sleet is a volunteer doing their absolute best to give you and your dog a course worthy of running to be the best like no one ever was. 🐾
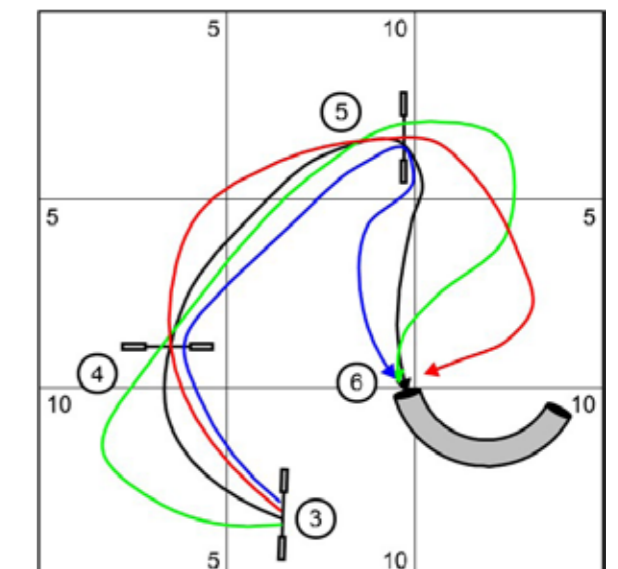
Chris Moody

How it starts...

Chris Moody [34]
Cambridge Champ
February 2018
JC 2
SCL: 130m

Now it's come together..

Running scenarios.