

# Your First Agility Show

by Kate Butler



*Competing can be great fun, but it's always daunting to start something new when you don't know the dos and don'ts. This information might help you to have an enjoyable debut with your dog. *

## What to bring

- **A flat collar with no attachments** (eg. no council or ID tags). These are the only collars allowed when competing. If you don't have one you'll need to remember to take your dog's collar off at the start line.
- **Treats and/or toys.** If you want to use treats after your run, these need to be in a container that is at least casually dog-proof, eg. Tupperware or a pill bottle.
- **Grippy shoes**, such as soccer/touch/rugby boots. These are much safer for running on wet grass than sneakers.
- **Water and a bowl** for your dog.
- **Poo bags** — more than you think you'll need.

- **A crate for your dog.** At the show you won't be allowed to leave your dog tied up when you aren't with him, or to leave him loose in the car with the doors open. A crate makes it much easier to give your dog plenty of fresh air.
- **Sunblock and a hat** if it's warm. A raincoat, gumboots and spare socks if it's not.
- **Dog towels.** If it's raining you can use them to minimise dirty-dog-to-clean-car contact. If it's fine you can use them to hang them on your dog's crate to make some shade. Aluminium shade cloths are even better, and you can get little USB-rechargeable fans for hot days too.
- **Cash for catering, raffles** and so on. \$20/person/day should be plenty, plus more for entry fees if it's a ribbon trial.
- **Food and snacks**, especially if you have special dietary needs or preferences.
- **A notebook.** You don't have to be too formal about it, but it's a good idea to take some notes after each run to help you remember what happened.

## Arriving at the show

Aim to turn up about 15 minutes before your first course walk, so that you have some time to explore the venue with your dog. You can split this time between walking around the outside of the rings to let your dog check out the sights and smells (on lead), and hanging out in the toileting area where your dog can be off lead.

Keep a close eye on your dog whenever they're off-lead. They should always be closer to you than to anybody else's dog. Sometimes the toileting area can be quite crowded first thing in the morning — if you aren't confident in their recall with so many other dogs nearby, keep them on lead.

There will usually be a morning briefing just before the first courses are walked. The show manager will explain the rules of the venue and any special requirements to help make the day run smoothly.

## Etiquette dos and don'ts

Agility shows go smoothly when everyone has lots of space. Sit well back from the ring so that there's plenty of room for people to walk through with their dogs. When you have your dog with you, don't loiter in high traffic areas — call boards, ring entrances, channels



Thanks to Alexus Richardson Dogography for the photos accompanying this article.

between rings — find somewhere a little back from the ring where you can wait for your turn instead.

Agility judges give up the chance to run their own dogs, spend their evenings designing courses, and then stand out in the ring in all weather conditions, just so that you can have fun with your dog. They don't even get paid to do this, so treat them with respect and remember that the judge's decision is always final. It's best to keep opinions about bad calls to yourself.

Don't leave your dog unsupervised, or loose in your car. The only places they should be off lead are the Agility ring, the warm-up area, and the toileting area. Keep a close eye on them and don't let them approach unfamiliar dogs without checking it's OK.

Remember that you and your dog are there to have fun. You're both new to this and you'll both make mistakes. Be gentle with yourself and your dog about this. You'll figure it out together! Everyone else at the show was also new once and has also made mistakes. They'll probably tell you about their most embarrassing one if you ask them nicely.

### **Walking the course**

You will usually have a set period of time to walk the course (seven minutes is about normal). After that there will be a small break so that the first competitors have time to get their dogs ready. You can't keep walking the course during this break: everyone gets the same amount of time to walk the course to keep things fair.

You may need to walk multiple courses before you have your first run. You should always walk a course as soon as you have enough free time to do so, even if you haven't had your turn on the other course yet: there may not be time to walk it after you've had your other run.

Don't carry food or drink into the ring while you walk the course, not even a coffee or a water bottle. The course can get quite crowded so be aware of where people are around you, and step aside a little if you want to stop and think about something for a minute.

### **Getting ready**

An Agility run takes about one minute on average, including the time spent entering and exiting the ring. Some courses will run a bit faster or slower than this — Jumpers C and Elementary courses are sometimes a bit quicker because the courses aren't as long.

I like to get my dog out of the car about 15-20 dogs ahead of my turn. I spend the first half of this time toileting my dog and walking around with him to warm him up. About seven dogs before our turn, I'll go to the warm-up jump and pop him over it a few times.

You and your dog should arrive at the ring about five-to-seven dogs before your turn. Let the call steward know you're there, find out who you're running after, and then find some private space near the ring to hang out until your turn. You can watch a couple of dogs to refresh your memory about where to go, then you can play with your dog and go through his favourite tricks to get them fully engaged before you enter the ring.

### **Entering the ring**

1. Move close to the ring entrance once the person before you has moved into the holding area.
2. Move into the holding area as soon as the person before you has started running. If the middle of the course passes very close to the start line, you can wait until after their dog has passed that point.
3. Use your toys and treats to keep your dog's focus on you, while also keeping an eye on what's happening in the ring so that you know when to start.

4. As the last dog is taking the last two obstacles, put your treats and toys in the bucket if there is one, or drop them on the ground in the holding area. These are not allowed in the ring, even in your pocket.
5. Step into the ring as soon as the last dog is finished. You can keep your dog's lead on at this stage. You don't need to wait for the judge to be ready before you enter the ring.
6. Check that the scribe has your number, even if an assistant wrote it down when you entered the holding area.
7. Set your dog up facing the first jump. Make sure that all six canine and human feet are inside the ring. It is both a trip hazard and against the rules to start outside the ring.
8. Unclip your lead and throw it back towards the holding area (keep it low to the ground so it doesn't whack the lead runner in the face).
9. Check with the judge that they are ready. Many judges will blow a whistle when they're ready. Begin!
10. It's useful to watch how smoothly and quickly the more experienced handlers can do this. As you and your dog get used to the routine, you should aim to be in the ring and ready to go as soon as the judge gives the signal.

### **Exiting the ring**

Get your dog on lead first. The rules state that you must have them on lead before you exit the holding area. Once you've done that, give them a treat or shove a tuggy in their mouth, but then move away from the ring. Remember that there will be another dog arriving in less than a minute.

Tell your dog how amazing they are as you find some free space away from the ring, and then have a big celebration. If your dog is a fetch-a-holic, ideally you should be out of sight of the rings before you start chucking their favourite ball around.

After your celebration, take 10 minutes to walk your dog around and cool them down, then pop them back in the car for a nap. This is the ideal time for you to jot down some notes on what happened in your run. Don't forget to mention the things that went super well as well as the things that need some more work! 

