

Hoopers Dog Sport:

A Trainer's Perspective



If you'd told me a few years ago that one of the most rewarding, fun, and inclusive dog sports I'd be involved with wouldn't involve a single jump, heelwork or retrieve, I probably would've laughed. But then I watched a video from the USA around 2016, about a new dog sport, Hoopers, and everything changed.

I've worked with dogs for several decades now, from high-energy working breeds to nervous rescues and everything in between and I can honestly say that Hoopers is the sport that works for almost everyone. It's low-impact, open to all breeds, all ages and all handler abilities and it's full of those little lightbulb moments where dog and handlers just click.

This article is a dive into Hoopers through my eyes as a dog trainer, what the sport is, why people are drawn to it, which dogs do well, and why it might just be the sport you didn't know you and your dog were waiting for.

What is Hoopers exactly?

Hoopers is a dog sport where dogs navigate a flowing course of hoops, barrels, gates, short tunnels and touch-n-go mats but there's a twist: no jumps, no sharp turns, and no need to sprint alongside your dog. It is most certainly not just Agility without jumps.

The emphasis is on smooth movements, distance handling, and clear communication. That means you, the handler, often stay in one place, a dedicated zone, using your voice, posture, and subtle cues to guide your dog around the course. It's elegant, it's accessible, and it's a blast.

Why do people join Hoopers?

People come to Hoopers for all sorts of reasons, and I've seen them first-hand. Here are the five most common motivations that bring new handlers into my Hoopers sessions:

1. It's truly accessible

Hoopers welcomes everyone, and I mean that. I've had handlers in their 80s working alongside young children learning how to do Hoopers. You don't have to run. You don't have to be super fit.

You just have to be willing to work with your dog and learn how to communicate with them.

For many of my clients with chronic pain, injuries, or mobility challenges, it's often the only sport they feel physically comfortable doing. That's a big deal.

2. It feels friendly and low-pressure

One thing I hear again and again is how supportive the Hoopers community is. It doesn't matter if your dog runs the course backwards and sideways the first few times, people will cheer anyway.

Unlike some competitive dog sports, Hoopers has a genuinely relaxed atmosphere. People are there to have fun with their dogs, not to prove a point.

3. It is ideal for older retired dogs & those with reduced physical ability

This one's close to my heart. Many clients come to me with dogs that can't do Agility any more — too much strain, too many injuries. But those dogs still want to do something. Hoopers gives them a second chance of having fun.

I've had 13-year-old Labs and senior Shepherds who light up when we set up hoops in the backyard. You can see the excitement in their eyes; they know it's their time to shine again.

4. It teaches amazing distance control

Even if Hoopers isn't your main sport, it builds foundation skills that carry over everywhere. Distance handling, verbal cues, physical cues, obstacle focus, engagement all strengthen your teamwork and relationship in Agility, Obedience and Scent Work.

Several of my competitive Agility clients started Hoopers just to improve their Border Collie's independence on course and ended up loving it so much they now compete in both.

5. Its just pure fun

At the end of the day, Hoopers is joyful. It's you and your dog problem-solving together, without the pressure of speed or perfection. The first time your dog nails a three-hoop combo from 10 metres away is just magic!

What kind of dogs can play Hoopers?

The short answer: any kind. That's one of the most beautiful things about this sport. I've seen just about every size, breed, and background of dog take part, with each bringing something unique. Big, small, fast, old or cautious, they all fit.

- Chihuahuas and Miniature Dachshunds can navigate hoops like pros.
- Huskies and Staffies love the freedom of movement.
- Rescue mixes often gain confidence quickly in the low-pressure setting.
- Senior dogs get to work again without pain or risk.
- Puppies can build co-ordination, focus, and impulse control from an early age as we keep it low key.

There are no breed restrictions, no 'ideal' body shape, just you, your dog, and a course that can be adjusted to suit your team.

How I train Hoopers

Working one-on-one gives me the luxury of really tailoring sessions to each dog and handler. Workshop fun days are a great way to learn, with like-minded folk having fun with their dog. Here's how I guide someone through Hoopers from scratch:

Step 1: Build the basics

We start with simple directional cues, 'away', 'left', 'right', and encouraging the dog to move away from the handler with confidence. It's all positive, low pressure and very rewarding.

- Eye contact and focus
- Staying engaged even when the handler is standing still
- Gentle intro to equipment like cones and markers

Step 2: Introduce equipment

We don't throw full courses at dogs right away. We introduce a single hoop, a barrel, a short tunnel. We make it easy, set them up for success, and celebrate every win using treats, toys, praise, whatever motivates the dog.

Step 3: Start linking obstacles

Once a dog's got the hang of one or two elements, we start building tiny sequences: hoop, hoop or barrel, soft turn, hoop. The goal is flow not speed. We also start introducing handler zones where the handler stays in place and learns to cue from a distance.

This is often the trickiest part for people, trusting their dog to run forward without them following. Once they click, it's amazing

Step 4: Full courses (eventually)

Some clients get here quickly, others take their time. A full Hoopers course might have 15+ obstacles, set in flowing soft curves, imagine 'C's and 'S's. The handler often only moves a few metres. It's like guiding your dog with invisible threads. The

Keen to Give Hoopers a Go?

Hoopers is taking off in New Zealand, with more Agility clubs jumping on board. In fact, there are 11 Championship events happening this year! It's a fun, fast-growing sport with a good chance of a club near you where you can try it out.

Visit www.dogagility.org.nz/hoopers.html to see what it's all about. Here are some of the clubs running Championship Hoopers events this year: Selwyn (Rolleston); CCATS (Christchurch); Counties (Te Hahi); Christchurch Dog Training Club; Hawera; Otago (Dunedin); NZ Dog Agility Championships (Cromwell)

teamwork that comes from this is unlike anything else. You're not pushing or chasing your dog, you're guiding, encouraging, and communicating in real time.

Competing vs just playing

Not everyone wants to compete and that's totally okay. Some of my clients just want a structured, fun way to engage their dogs at home. We build mini-courses in their gardens. We use buckets for barrels and pool noodles for hoops. No ribbons, no rules, just play.

Others get hooked and want to compete, and Hoopers competitions are refreshingly welcoming. Local trials often focus on fun and encouragement. You'll find all skill levels, dogs of every shape, and a very real sense of community. There are structured levels and titles here in NZ. The sport is in its infancy. We only have qualifications awards. The culture stays friendly.

Equipment: What you actually need

You don't need a professional setup to get started. Here's what I recommend for my clients: 3-5 hoops (you can make these with pipe and hula hoops); a couple of plastic barrels (or use buckets, cones, bins); other things such as tunnels can be created by a tarp over chairs. A plastic pallet can be used as a gate.

Most of us start basic and build from there. As long as it's safe and your dog enjoys it, it's good enough. A flat area of grass is the ideal to train on.

Final thoughts: Why Hoopers works

I've trained a lot of dogs and a lot of people over the years. Some sports burn bright and fade. But Hoopers will stick. It's not just about competition or fancy titles.

It's about connection, confidence, and joy. It's seeing a senior dog light up again. It's watching a handler trust their dog, maybe for the first time. It's the look you give each other after a smooth run, that quiet, proud 'we did it'.

Hoopers reminds us that dog training isn't about control. It's about partnership. That to me is what makes it so special. 🐾

Stephanie Pountley: Compass K9 Training

A few client stories

Max the retired Collie

Max had done Agility for years until arthritis slowed him down. His owner came to me hoping for 'just a bit of fun'. What we found was that Max thrived on Hoopers. He could move gently, make choices, and still feel like he had a job. Every session brought his spark back.

Luna the nervous rescue

Luna, a sweet but anxious Greyhound mix, was terrified of new things. But Hoopers was quiet, gentle, and full of predictable patterns. Over time, she started trotting through hoops with confidence. Her handler told me it was the first time she'd ever seen Luna ask to keep going.

Sophie the first-time handler

Sophie had never done any dog sports before and was nervous. Her dog was excitable. Hoopers met them both exactly where they were. We built slow, steady skills over time, and now she's entering her first fun trial. "I never thought I'd do anything like this," she said, "but it's honestly changed how I relate to my dog."



Agility Committee Elections

Nominations for this year's Agility Committee elections are open now. The Agility Committee consists of eight members, with at least one member from each of the North Island and the South Island.

Last year we moved to a split-committee model with four members stepping down each year. Members each serve a two-year term meaning that each year there will be elections for four members, with four members remaining. Members who step down after two years can stand for re-election. If you are thinking about standing for AC here are some things you might like to know:

Meetings

The Agility Committee must meet at least six times a year. Online meetings are an option, but it has been the experience of the past few committees that while online meetings are fine for discussing a specific topic, face-to-face meetings are much more productive when there is a lot of business to get through.

Dates and locations of meetings are decided by AC members, but meetings are generally held in a main centre (due to availability and cost of flights) and run over both days of a weekend. Depending on where they live, some AC members may have to fly to meetings on Friday night to maximise the time available.

Every year the Agility Committee attends the Dogs New Zealand Annual Conference of Delegates (ACOD) in Wellington, over three days in June. ACOD takes up one full day (usually Saturday) and the AC meets on the Friday and the Sunday.

How the AC Works

For the past few terms, there has been a private Facebook group for each AC and a group chat for day-to-day discussion and communication. Documents are stored on Google Drive. Voting outside of meetings is done by polls on the Facebook group and all votes are recorded and added to the minutes of the next meeting.

Urgent matters and some things which can easily be dealt with by an online discussion or vote are discussed between meetings.

Time Commitment

The time commitment is not insignificant. As well as attending the face-to-face meetings and ACOD, AC members regularly discuss and vote on issues online. At times, discussion can be daily. AC members also devote time to their additional roles, both within and outside the Agility Committee. AC members may variously be working on special projects, developing resources and documents, or reviewing regulations.

Roles and Responsibilities

As well as the Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary and Treasurer positions, various AC members take responsibility for the following:

- Executive Council Representative
- Calendar maintenance
- Website maintenance
- Dogs on Report – South Island
- Dogs on Report - North Island
- Equipment Liaison (organising COF inspections)

- Measurer's Liaison
- Judges' Subcommittee Liaison
- JDT Liaison
- NZ Dog World Liaison

The Executive Council Representative is required to attend approximately six face-to-face EC meetings a year and is our very important liaison between AC and Dogs NZ.

Currently there are AC members serving on the various Dogs NZ sub-committees, including Canine Health and Welfare, Governance and Strategy, Regulations, and Disputes. The time commitment for these sub-committees varies, with some requiring weekend or weekday face-to-face meetings in addition to AC meetings.

Attributes

Agility Committee members should be willing to participate in discussions but should also be respectful and open to others' opinions: 'Strong opinions loosely held' is a good description!

Confidentiality is one of the most important attributes of an AC member: discussions and comments in meetings and online must remain confidential. Committee members also need to protect the confidentiality of sensitive matters brought to the attention of the AC, including the identity of those involved.

All matters should be dealt with fairly and without prejudice and AC members should try to always remain impartial. Committee members are expected to recuse themselves from discussions and/or abstain from voting on matters where they have a conflict of interest.

Being on the Agility Committee means you need to ensure that people can differentiate between your personal opinion(s) and the opinion(s) of the Agility Committee.

A good understanding of how Agility works nationwide is a useful attribute, as is a working knowledge of the Agility Regulations, Show Regulations and Rules of the New Zealand Kennel Club.

Submitting A Nomination

Nominations can be made using the form published opposite; it can also be downloaded from www.dogagility.org.nz/elections.html. Candidates must be a financial member of a registered Agility club and financial member of Dogs NZ. They must be nominated and seconded by two people who are also financial members of an Agility club and Dogs NZ.

Nominations must be accompanied by a biography and optional photo. Nominations close at 5:00pm on **1 October 2025**. If nominations exceed the number of positions available, an election will take place, concluding on **28 November**.

Election of Agility Committee Chairperson & Vice Chairperson

Any candidate or sitting AC member who wishes to stand as Agility Committee Chairperson or Vice Chairperson needs to send an expression of interest, along with a profile to Dogs NZ by the closing date of nominations for the Agility Committee. These positions will be elected by the members of the Agility Committee at their first meeting. 🐾

NOTICE OF 2025 AGILITY COMMITTEE ELECTIONS

Nominations are now open and will close on 1 October 2025. Nominations must be accompanied by a biography of the candidate, and only persons who are financial members of Dogs NZ and a current financial member of a Dogs NZ Agility club are eligible for nomination. The person must be nominated and seconded by financial members of Dogs NZ, who are also registered as members of a Dogs NZ Agility club. If nominations exceed the number of positions available, an election will take place concluding on 28 November 2025.

This form as set out below is also available online in an editable format on the Dogs NZ Agility Committee website, www.dogagility.org.nz/elections.html

Candidate Form

Complete the form if you wish to nominate an eligible individual as a candidate for the Agility Committee. If elected, the term of office will be for two years from 28 November 2025.

Nominations must be accompanied by a biography of the candidate (photo optional but recommended).

Form to be received via email no later than 5:00pm Wednesday **1 October 2025**.

Nominee Detail

Name: _____ Dogs NZ Number: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Dogs NZ Agility Club: _____

Nominator and Seconder Detail

Nominated By:

Name: _____ Dogs NZ Number: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Dogs NZ Agility Club: _____

Seconded By:

Name: _____ Dogs NZ Number: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Dogs NZ Agility Club: _____

By submitting this form, I (the nominator) hereby declare that the nominee has confirmed their interest and availability and that all the information provided is true and correct.

Postal forms are to be sent to:

Dogs New Zealand, AC Elections, Private Bag 50903,
Porirua 5240

or to be emailed, with biography of candidate and photo
(optional) to members@dogsnz.org.nz

**TO BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN
5:00PM WEDNESDAY 1 OCTOBER 2025**

