



When Is the Right Time to Retire Your Dog From Agility?

Deciding when to retire your dog from Agility is one of the most emotionally challenging decisions an owner-handler can make. Agility is more than a sport: it's a partnership, a lifestyle, and, for many dogs, a source of immense joy. For those running only one dog, it's also the social connection that training and competitions provide. Retirement does not mean the end of purpose or fulfillment, but it is a transition toward protecting your dog's long-term comfort, soundness, and quality of life.

There is no 'correct' age or moment to retire a dog from Agility. Instead, the decision should be based on a combination of physical, mental, and lifestyle factors. Below are the key things to consider when determining the appropriate time to step away from competition or modify participation.

Age Is Only One Piece of the Puzzle

Age alone is a poor predictor for retirement. Dogs age at different rates depending on genetics, size, workload, and injury history.

Even in dogs that are sound, the aging process affects muscles, joints and connective tissues. Sarcopenia is the age-related loss of muscle mass and strength and can start as early as age seven. The proteins which build muscle are not made as effectively, but protein in the body is still broken down at the same rate. As muscle fibres are lost, they get replaced by both fatty and connective tissue. This causes a reduction in muscle strength which means older dogs are more prone to both muscle fatigue and injury.

Recovery time is a key indicator: dogs that take longer to bounce back after training or competition may be telling you their workload

is no longer appropriate.

Tip: Compare a video of your older dog competing recently, to a video of them competing a year ago. Are they still running at the same speed? Turning as well? Hitting their weave entries and contacts the same way?

Size and Biomechanics of the Dog

A dog's size and build significantly influence the forces placed on joints, spine, and soft tissues during agility.

- Larger dogs experience higher impact forces on landing, particularly at the shoulders, elbows, carpi and lumbosacral junction. This causes more wear and larger dogs generally benefit from earlier retirement.
- Dogs with long backs, straight stifles, or less than ideal shoulder angulation may be predisposed to earlier issues in these structures. For example, straighter shoulders are more poorly designed to take on the impact of landing when compared to well angulated ones.

Training Load and Competition History

Cumulative workload matters. Consider:

- Number of years training and competing
- Frequency of weekly training sessions
- Level of competition
- Time spent not training or competing

Dogs with long, intensive careers may show earlier signs of overuse



injuries or degenerative change, even if they have never had a major acute injury.

Injury History

A prior injury is one of the strongest predictors of future problems. Most injuries can be fully rehabilitated with time and dedication, but if maintaining soundness requires increasing levels of intervention (medications, time off, rehab), it may be time to reconsider ongoing competition.

Changes in Performance or Movement Quality

Subtle changes often precede obvious lameness. Watch for:

- Slower acceleration or hesitation on course
- Wider turns or difficulty collecting
- Knocking bars or missing contacts
- Stiffness after rest or the day following training
- Missed weave entries/popping weaves

These changes are not signs of disobedience or loss of drive, they are usually the early indicators of discomfort or reduced physical capacity.

Veterinary and Rehabilitation Input

Regular assessment by a canine rehabilitation veterinarian or physiotherapist is invaluable, particularly for senior or high-drive Agility dogs. Owners are often unaware their dog has been compensating, and it's not uncommon to find reduced joint range of motion, pain on spinal musculature palpation or decreased core strength, especially in older dogs.

What Retirement Can Look Like

Retirement does not have to be abrupt or absolute. Options include:

- Retiring from competition but continuing some low-impact training (ie., lower jump heights, no weaves or A-frame)
- Training in tricks, Scent Work, Hoopers or Rally-O
- Shifting focus to fitness, mobility, and enrichment

For many dogs, just working with you is what gives them joy, whether it be agility or another discipline.

The Kindest Question to Ask

Rather than asking "Can my dog still do Agility?" consider asking "Is Agility still serving my dog's long-term comfort and well-being?" Agility is a sport we choose, and while many dogs genuinely love the game, their participation is ultimately driven by human ambitions. Longevity matters more than titles. Choosing to retire a dog before a major breakdown or injury occurs often allows them to remain more comfortable and active in the years to come. 🐾

Rochelle Jager

Off Course with Chris

It seems everywhere I look (on Facebook of course, 'cause where else is there), the theme of *Bridgerton* is coming up: the Auckland Museum is holding a masquerade ball, our local cheesecake shop has just done an advert trying to entice the patronage of the 'ton with this seasons pickings on display... so I thought...

Dearest Gentle Reader,

The 'ton is abuzz with the usual scandals, but none so scandalous as the state of my own morning routine. While the rest of the world is busy seeking a match, I have been engaged in a far more illicit affair: a torrid, multi-platform dalliance with Wordle, Connections, Strands, HangFive, OWS, and Stackdown.

In a fit of intellectual vanity — and perhaps a touch too much tea — I have deigned to concoct a Connections puzzle of my own. You shall find a QR code below, which should transport you to the digital version, provided the website hasn't withered away like a debutante's reputation after a single dance with a rogue. Should the link fail, you must resort to the quill and parchment like a commoner. Be warned: the answers shall not be revealed until next month's dispatch. I do so love to keep you wanting more.

However, a far more pointed observation has come to my attention.

I have recently perused this month's featured article, and I cannot shake the unnerving sensation that our dear Ros was envisioning my particular shortcomings while her pen flew across the page. She dares to suggest we compare videos of a year ago to one of the present day. She asks, with what I can only assume is a pointed glare, "Are they still running at the same speed?"

Heavens, no. My pace has shifted from a gallop to a dignified crawl that would barely outrun a stationary carriage.

She then inquires, "Are they turning as well?". Perish the thought. My hip flexor emits a shriek of protest — a veritable social outcry — every time I attempt a manoeuvre more complex than standing perfectly still. One begins to wonder: is she truly questioning the dog's Agility? Or is she subtly suggesting that the Chair of the AC, is, in fact, ready to be retired to a quiet country estate with a very soft cushion and a sturdy cane?

It is a most vexing thought, indeed. But for now, I shall leave you to your puzzles and my own crumbling sense of importance.

Yours in sport and scandal,

Chris Richardson

AC Chair and EC Agility Representative

