

Editorializing...

Has Agility Gone the Way of Obedience?

By Kristine Gunter



I've been involved in dog sports for several years. I started out training and trialing my dogs in obedience with little thought of participating in any other sport. Friends of mine who, at the time, were involved in agility constantly tried to coerce me into joining them. They told me how the military-like precision training so common in obedience was nowhere to be found in the world of agility. They tempted me with tales of competitions where there was no pressure to win. They told me how, at agility trials, both competitors and judges cheered for every team. There were no cliques like those so often found among obedience participants.

With so much going for it, I finally relented and sought out an agility trainer. Back in those days I had to drive over an hour each way just to find someone who offered classes. Class time was spent exclusively on teaching dogs how to perform obstacles in a safe manner and it wasn't unusual for people to start competing with their dog soon after finishing an eight-week session of beginning agility. When it came to handling or training, we had few directives back then. The only rule I remember being taught was to be sure to tie my shoelaces tight before going into the ring.

At my first agility trial, I was overwhelmed by how supportive the crowd was. Single-ring trials were the norm then and most exhibitors sat ringside and applauded each and every run. Handlers showing in the highest level classes generally stuck around until the end of the trial (usually early afternoon) to support and cheer the novice exhibitors. It was a camaraderie I hadn't seen often in obedience. To this day I have fond memories of the first several agility trials I attended because of how supportive the people were to a newcomer like me.

As the years went by I began noticing a trend. Agility began to more closely resemble obedience, the very sport that had been on the receiving end of so many disparaging remarks by agility participants. Cliques of competitors started to form. The catch phrase, "handling system" was coined and in some instances became the basis for feuds between various groups of trainers and their students who subscribed to one method or another. Suddenly we had a "right" way to handle various course challenges and a "wrong" way to train obstacles.

As agility grew rapidly in popularity, two-, three-, and even four-ring trials became common, with trials frequently continuing on through the early (and sometimes late) evening. Consequently clubs began to struggle to find workers to staff multiple rings, and few exhibitors stuck around to watch the novice participants. At classes and seminars trainers spent less time teaching actual obstacle performance and more time teaching handlers systematic and precise ways to negotiate each course. Agility trials became highly competitive for some people and suddenly it wasn't unusual to hear handlers at events talking badly about fellow competitors, trial judges, or just making disparaging remarks about their own dogs' ability to negotiate a course.

I'm not truly surprised or even saddened by the changes I've seen. I actually believe it's an inevitable part of the evolution of any event where people compete against one another. As humans, we seem to have a remarkable ability to take anything—be it a dog sport or a hot-dog-eating contest—to an almost comical level of competitiveness.

In the short time I've been involved in dog events I've seen agility evolve from a sport with just a couple of sanctioning organizations to the most popular dog sport around. There are so many sanctioning organizations these days I don't even know what some of the acronyms stand for. When I started training my first dog in agility there were only two people in my county who offered lessons. Today I can reel off the names of no fewer than 10 trainers who teach within a 20-mile radius of my house.

I don't doubt in the next 10 or 20 years a new dog sport will emerge—something that hasn't even been thought of yet. And, in its infancy, I wonder if the people in this new sport will point a finger at the world of agility and say, "We'll never be like that."

Kristine Gunter

Kristine Gunter lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband Eric and three Cardigan Welsh Corgis. She has put almost 50 performance titles on her dogs in agility, obedience, rally, freestyle, herding, and flyball. Her website is www.cardigan-corgis.com.