



Agility Expert Articles

Building an Agility Career in the Ring

What's the second most exciting part of obtaining a new dog to compete in agility? I guess queuing with your rookie dog for the first time would cut it for most.

Excited, nervous, daunted that's how many of us feel, but what about your new dog? Your expectation of a clear round is high; you've been training for many months, and finally feel that the dog is ready for some ring experience. The prospect of entering your first class, is extremely tempting, however, could this competition prove too much of a challenge for you and your dog, could it affect your future in agility?

That's where the UKA system is pro-active in helping you and your dog to adjust to an agility career in the ring. Look at it like a new job. Would you like to be given the opportunity to start with a few basic learning techniques before being thrown into more complex situations? Most would agree to this and take on a new role, understanding that training opportunities would be given, and would be a definite benefit.

UKA therefore gives you the opportunity to start in the Nursery or Casual classes, and whilst in these classes you and your dog can benefit from the time to practise specific criteria within a course environment.

You and your dogs' initial bond and relationship are key to your future handling skills. Building steady solid blocks to your future as an agility handler is a must, but these blocks can be so easily crumbled during your time in the ring. This is where the UKA system is so beneficial. Not only are there specifically tailored Nursery, Steeplechase and Casual classes for new dog and handler combinations, but there is also every chance to enter a class and choose to run a dog NFC (Not For Competition).

Consider that if in your first ever run with your dog, they perform a contact piece of equipment exactly as you wished or

enter and complete the weave without fault, using a reward at that most crucial point can prove invaluable. A dog will remember an experience in the ring whether it be a brilliant or an awful one. So by having the NFC opportunity to take a toy into the ring; and use as a reward each time the dog perfects a cue, or completes an obstacle correctly, this enables you to perform your positive reward in the correct manner and their first exposure to the competition ring will be a brilliant one. You should both be able to imbed the "brilliant" round you have just achieved into your memories, and take away from the time spent in the ring, pointers on how your training regime is progressing.

Having taught your dog many skills away from the excitement of the ring, the next progressive step is to enter into the ring environment, which is the perfect place to test these out. Training rounds are increasingly popular throughout the levels, and many handler and dog combinations from Nursery to Champion classes, use these occasions on a regular basis as they are offered at all of the shows UKA hold.

We all often watch competing dogs from the sidelines, and feel that encouragement is needed during a round. There are a few lucky ones who at their first ever show, with their first ever dog will achieve that "brilliant" much sought after clear round. But what has that partnership gained from their first time in the ring? They will be pleased to return home with a rosette or maybe even a trophy for their endeavour, but is this enough? How difficult is it to repeat that success time over, week in week out at regular shows? Taking the time to reward the correct behaviour we expect from our dogs, in the correct place is crucial and so beneficial to continued improvement.

After competing in the ring, timing slips are inevitable, sit waits could fail, weaves can become inconsistent, or missing contacts can be a regular occurrence. These points are regularly trained in the agility sessions attended; but are they regularly re-iterated in a ring environment?

Our own personal eagerness for success can sometimes cloud exactly what we are trying to achieve. Once a bond with your dog has been secured in the training environment and it now understands what is expected, you have gained valuable

knowledge about your own dogs' ability. It is then crucial to replicate that bond in a competition environment. After a time, statements of "my dog does it brilliantly at training", could now be "my dog understands what I need of it, and regularly does it brilliantly, at training, and consistently in the ring"

Practise in the ring will enhance your skills, and nurturing these skills will eventually produce the perfect combination of dog and handler. Your confidence will grow, and by using the opportunity given at the UKA Shows over a period of time, your dogs' confidence will improve too.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and how many of us would admit to wishing to have another chance to train or shape our dogs in a ring environment. Agility is progressing and transforming all the time. In order to keep up with the changes UKA are at the forefront of this sport, and understand the necessity to continue offering training in the ring facilities.

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