



Excelling in Agility **Without** Competing

By Sandy Rogers

If you or someone you know loves agility but is on the fence about competing I'm writing to you. I see folks suffer needlessly about all that competing is or isn't or should be or could be. I also see dogs that love agility but don't love the trial environment. So I decided to write this in case someone out there needed or wanted to focus some time and energy into deciding if competing is going to be or continue to be in their future or not. I hope to provide some encouragement and support to anyone who is thinking about not competing in the first place or who may be discovering some good reasons to consider no longer competing.

Competition Virgins

If you have not done it before you are a virgin. Most schools and clubs are made up of people who have to one extent or another built their lives around agility trials. When you say you are not sure if you want to compete or not, they laugh and poo-poo you as if you have just said you are considering not drawing breath tomorrow. I myself have been known to say, "Sure, that's what they all say." This is how it all starts. You will get about 12 obstacles in sequence work firmly under your belt, way too early to even be thinking of competing, when your classmates will start the hounding. "So," they say, "when ya gonna start showing?" You won't hear that question just once.

They mean well, they are excited for you, they don't want to miss reliving the exciting time when they were virgins. The next step, the big one, comes later. That is when your instructor says you are ready to start "matching" your dog (going to mock shows to test the waters). This is the official graduation to the competition road. It's funny; you don't remember ever telling your instructor that you wanted to compete. It just seemed to have been assumed, from about the time you had spent roughly a grand on classes. This railroad approach is actually not all bad.

The truth is you probably can't imagine all the rewards that competing has to offer until you try it. You may love or hate it immediately, but more commonly it takes a little longer for the jury to come back. I think you will find that the positive aspect of trialing will far outweigh all the little things that you worried about in the first place. Fear of competing should never stop anyone from competing. If fear is holding you back talk to someone, get a grip, and go for it.

What I'm saying to you is that this article is *not* permission to not give trialing a chance. You owe it to yourself to try it if you love the sport.

Giving Up on Competing When You Still Love Agility

I know, I just said competing was the best thing since sliced white bread, and for lots and lots of people it is. But things can spoil and competing is one of them. Sometimes we let it happen by not changing what we can change, and sometimes the world just rains on our parade. Let's look at some valid reasons to stop competing from the human and then the canine perspective.

When the Human Wants to Pull the Plug

Life: Time and money issues and other weekend commitments can postpone goals; if you find yourself in that boat, think of it as temporary. It very well may be, even if you can't see it that way right now. Stay in class if you can, hone your skills so that when the roadblock is cleared you will be ready to shine.

Disappointment: If you want to quit because you are sick of feeling disappointed in yourself or your dog, or if you are struggling with some of the social aspects of competing, hang on for another month—I've got an article just for you coming up in the next issue called "Overcoming Disappointment When Competing." The disappointment path has lots of twists and turns to travel before a logical destination can be reached.

Priorities: I once had a student approach me and say, "I'm not going

to show anymore, I'm giving up agility." She missed the weekends with her family and did not feel like the time and money she was investing in showing was worth it. Her dog seemed uncomfortable at the trials and did not run nearly as well as she did in class. It did not take much to convince her that it was crazy to quit agility all together. Both she and her dog loved their classes. She had just not thought the decision through. Once she made the choice to continue training and just stop trialing she found she could still train hard and enjoy excelling and improving. Her classmates were very supportive (another concern she had). She did have a few friends who loved her company at the trials try to talk her out of it, not realizing that they were not doing her any favors. That was the worst part for her. She is now very happy not trialing and her dog is, too. Agility was starting to go sour for both of them because of trialing and by focusing on training over trialing she saved her real love, the sport itself.

Health Concerns: Perhaps you have health limitations and full-size courses are not within your capabilities. You can still go to class and do shorter drills. You may even find someone who is willing to run your dog in competitions so that only you give up trialing, not your dog. I have seen all kinds of really wonderful scenarios work when people help people and dogs stay in agility.

Fear of competing should never stop anyone from competing. If fear is holding you back talk to someone, get a grip, and go for it.

When the Canine Wants to Pull the Plug

It is easier for us to do what we want to do than do what we don't want to do in every aspect of life—agility is no different. It is hard to be honest with ourselves when our dogs are telling us loud and clear that competing is not for them, or no longer for them. It is easy to make excuses and solicit advice from the friends who will encourage you to keep going when you should not. Tell a nonagility person that you think your dog might not like competing and they will say, "So don't do it then," every time.

Now hold on a minute, don't get all teary-eyed and depressed on me yet. Your dog might be voting not to compete because he needs you to just make a change or two.

If your dog loves agility but not trialing you owe it to yourself to explore why. You might be able to fix the problem and you might not, but for your dog's mental and physical well-being it would be best to understand, as much as possible, why he does not like it. In many cases you will find links to other scenarios in his world.

Start by determining if your dog's discomfort in the trial environment is mental or physical. It could be possible that symptoms of discomfort are only showing up in that single environment. The dash or heap of stress the dog feels at the show can let the discomfort all hang out even when it does not show itself anywhere else. Signs of discomfort could be as subtle as just running a bit slower, leaving the poles, sniffing, sightseeing at the top of the A-frame, or not being able to maintain criteria in general.

Mental Discomfort: You will have a pretty good idea you are dealing with mental discomfort when you rule out physical discomfort by getting a check-up by an orthopedic specialist as well as many opinions from as many canine body workers as you can (acupuncturists, chiropractors, and masseuses). Seek out the help of a trainer who is familiar with your dogs breed and knows how to change a dogs mind about what he thinks. If you do not have access to someone, find a specialist who will consult on the phone and possibly even consult with your current trainer. Be realistic, honest with yourself, and understand that Rome was not built in a day.

If the dog's mental attitude can't be swayed enough for him to enjoy the trial environment spare him the grief. Let him shine in class and workshops (assuming he does) and take him to the beach or the woods on the weekend! Lots of dogs do not need agility and some dogs with less coping skills than others suffer from the pressure of it.

Physical Limitations: I can tell you there are lots of dogs trialing that are too out of shape, too old, not structurally sound enough, or just too beat up to be doing competitions. Most of those dogs have handlers who suspect it might be the case but have lost perspective. It is not okay and it is not necessary to keep these dogs in competition; there is no agility title or award worth it. Dogs should be competing because they love it

and because it is actually benefiting their bodies by keeping them fit, not breaking them down when they are past their prime.

If your dog has minor physical limitations consider avoiding full-length courses, drop the jumps way down, and stop doing some of the obstacles that are harder on his body in class. These changes may afford you a much longer and no doubt healthier ride!

Don't Quit Loving Agility

You can quit going to trials and still excel in class, still go to seminars and camps, still become a better dog trainer, still hone your skills in every way shape and form.

Do not quit agility just because the road to competition is blocked. Agility and competing are not one. Agility is about dog training and dog bonding and no one has to go to a trial to do that. I have some outstanding students who do not trial their dogs. They are respected for their talents and accomplishments the same as everyone else in their classes.

One last thought: If you have a friend who has good reasons to stop showing, please respect her choice. It may be the best thing for her or necessary for her dog and it may have been a very difficult decision. 🐕

Sandy Rogers founded ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California, in 1999. She has been competing nationally and teaching obedience and agility since 1991. She has made the US team selected to compete at the World Agility Open in 2011, 2012, and 2013. Jack Russell Terrier Quill brought home the individual gold and silver medals in 2012. Her dogs have competed in all the USDAA and AKC National Championship finals multiple times. She placed 2nd in the AKC Championships in 2012. Sandy also placed 3rd twice in the USDAA Grand Prix (12" Quill and 22" Brink) and won 16" Speed Jumping in 2007 and 2008 and Performance National Standard in 2007 with Brink. Sandy has two DVDs available Training the Extreme Dogs and One Jump Two Jump.

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