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Overcoming **Disappointment** in Competition

By Sandy Rogers

When one of my students is talking about quitting agility it is usually because she is tired of feeling disappointed at trials. By the time she is coming to me about it, she has really suffered; it breaks my heart to see it. Disappointment is a horrible feeling and in our sport we have the risk of not only feeling disappointed in ourselves (a chronic situation for some people), but we can end up feeling disappointed in our dogs. Guilt is right there on the heels of disappointment when that happens. And guilt feels just about as crappy as disappointment. If disappointment is getting the better part of you on trial days, you really don't have to quit agility to turn the train around.

You need to do what you need to do to stop being disappointed—the old “where there’s a will, there’s a way” gig.

Losing Perspective

I think it is easy to lose a healthy perspective in this sport. We aren't playing with balls that either go where we put them or don't. We are engaged with a living being that is supposed to love us, supposed to know what we mean, and supposed to understand us. We have this dog that we love to bits and we really want to share with the world how wonderful/cute/fast/well-trained he is. We want to be proud. We want our dog to look and be happy. We want to do well. We want, we want, we want. After we come to realize how much we want all these things, we start to think we deserve them. After all, we invested a bunch of our time and money and that was just the tip of the investment iceberg. We invested our hopes, we made goals, and we set aside our fears (or tried to). We believed if we played our cards right we would be victorious. Everyone else seemed to be. And if we didn't do well, who would care? We still would be having fun, right? This is almost a recipe for disappointment; we put so much on the pile. When we don't qualify it doesn't seem fair. We forget why we started to do agility in the first place. All those wonderful rea-

sons start not to matter and we start to feel disappointed more than we care to admit.

Get to Know It

Being able to label your crappy feelings as disappointment is important. Explore the feeling, recognize it, and don't dismiss it. Get very familiar with the actual sensation of the feeling, not just what you think about it. Maybe there is a pit in your stomach or a tightness in your temples, perhaps your breathing is more shallow. Let yourself ride the feeling, ride it all the way down the spiral. You may want to get somewhere and be by yourself. Doing this a few times will get you in touch with the feeling; this will give you a chance to own the feeling, to make it part of who you are instead of some foreign enemy to fight off who attacks and blindsides you.

When you get to know the sensations and recognize them, you will then be able to address them. You will be able to "talk" to the feeling. "There you are again disappointment; I know you and understand you and you will lose power over me as a result of that fact." Taking the feeling head on will give you power over it.

Honesty Is the Best Policy

You will need to determine if having the negative emotion of disappointment holds any value or reward for you. Sometimes the camaraderie born from commiserating with friends can be a bond builder with those friends. This is dangerous territory since the support feels good and becomes a reward for a behavior you thought you wanted rid of. Complaining is habit forming and contagious, and birds of a feather flock together. You will have to be really honest with yourself to determine if you have a vested interest in any way, shape, or form in being disappointed or negative about you or your dog. Take a hard look at how often you are happy with a run or even mildly satisfied. What does it take for you to be pleased with your run and express that to your trial buddies? What would it be like to stay positive all day? What would it be like to not criticize yourself or your dog, even to yourself? Once you decide there is

more value in having a positive day than a negative one, the train will begin to turn around. Be easy on yourself; habits are hard to break and behavior is often habit-based. Don't expect to re-wire your patterns overnight.

Get Determined

Have you seen *Silver Linings Playbook*? Great movie: the psychologist in the movie keeps telling the star with bipolar disorder that he "must develop a strategy" for his triggers. Sounded good to me, so I'm using it here. If you can develop a strategy for Snooker, you can take a stab at making one up for your own behavior. If it doesn't work, try another one and then another. Most people who lose weight or quit smoking were not successful the first time out, but they were determined. What if you were determined to not let disappointment ruin something you love? Think of the power that your determination would give you.

If your goal is to qualify at the trial, and it is your only goal, you are so setting yourself up for disappointment.

Choosing a Strategy

Here are a few strategies to try when disappointment rears its ugly head:

- **Have More Than One Goal:** If your goal is to qualify at the trial, and it is your only goal, you are so setting yourself up for disappointment. I can't imagine enjoying agility trials if I had my hopes wrapped up into a qualifying score and only a qualifying score. There is just too much that can go wrong to have all my happy eggs in one basket. I have *MANY* goals when I get to the show. There is no way I'm going home empty handed. I used to have students brag every week in class about their performance at the trial that past weekend. I was always surprised when any student would say they did not have a brag because they did not Q. I would say, "Wow! You mean he broke every start line, missed every pole entry, bailed on all the contacts, peed in the ring, bit the judge, and knocked every jump over?" If all of that did not happen, then there was something to brag about. I always have goals that include behaviors for each individual obstacle, perfecting my own timing and handling, eating well, staying focused, executing my plan or trying a move that I have been working hard on... all kinds of things. This makes it easy to leave the trial feeling good about a lot of individual things. You have to notice and acknowledge what went *right*.
- **The Big-Time Perspective Check:** Anytime you are feeling sorry for yourself because of something that happened on course try this: Go over to your dog, look lovingly into his eyes, and scratch his ears, rub his belly, and baby talk till his tail wags. There. That's it. If that doesn't work, remind yourself how short his career is and that the Qs don't mean squat to him and there will be day when he is gone and those titles and Qs won't mean squat to you either. Losing your first agility partner puts quite a twist on the whole perspective issue. That course you just ran, no matter how crappy it was, will beat the hell out of the first course you can't run with your dog because he is hurt or old. Talk about a perspective check. Go ahead and give yourself one some time and then enjoy the rest of your day with your best buddy.
- **Change the Subject:** When you hear the complainer who sometimes parades around, interrupt her. Change the subject. Compliment someone else's run that you just saw. Talk about how much you enjoy these particular show grounds or how glad you are not to be at work today. Just change the subject.

- **The 10-minute Rule:** My friends have a 10 minute rule. You can complain about your run for 10 minutes and 10 minutes only. It is a rule and it is enforced. If you want 11 minutes, you will have to beg and you will probably be told "NO." You can put yourself on the 10-minute rule or you can ask your friends to put you on it. As soon as you start complaining your friend looks at her watch and smiles. When 10 minutes are up she lets you know. Very simple, very effective.
- **Do Something Different:** Maybe you are not talking to anyone, you are just feeling bad. Do something! Just like teaching a dog an acceptable alternative behavior to replace an unwanted one: call an old friend to chat, one who doesn't care about the dog show; read something;

do some stretching; straighten up the car; go work a class... just take your mind off your performance until you feel better. Have a small treat if that can work for you in a healthy way.

- **Make Some Changes:** Maybe you need to face some facts about your goals and expectations to ward off disappointment. Perhaps you are struggling because you need to do more work on your fitness or your dog's skills. If these changes are not possible then face that fact and let yourself off the hook for the lofty goals. You may need to change the goals themselves in some circumstances. If these needed changes are within your reach, roll up your sleeves and make a plan to get that work done!

Give Yourself Credit

Success comes in all shapes and sizes and feeling successful is wonderful. Let yourself have that feeling, you honestly deserve it. Getting out of bed and getting your butt to the trial is more than a lot of people did on Saturday morning. Training a dog to the level of even being able to enter a show is a *huge* accomplishment. If you do not give yourself the credit you deserve, you can't reap *all* of the rewards this sport has to offer. It is that simple. If these simple ideas are not enough to help you, go see a sports psychologist; they grow on trees these days. Take comfort in knowing there is an entire industry out there because so many people struggle with getting and keeping competition in a healthy perspective. 🐾

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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