

Editorializing...



Training Agility Indoors vs. Outdoors

By Sandy Rogers

Since I opened my indoor training location five years ago, I occasionally have students asking about the need for outdoor agility training. The scenario is always the same: “someone” told them they needed to get their dog outside to do agility. I always ask “why?” and their answer is always the same. They tell me they lose connection with their dog outside and the dog might take off, run around sniffing, or get distracted easily. These are the best reasons in the world *not* to do agility outdoors. These issues are far better addressed away from the obstacles. Why have the dog learn that being disconnected and distracted is how outdoor agility is done? Early learning is best done *without* distractions, and indoor locations are wonderful for distraction-free learning for both dog and handler.

I always ask these folks this question: “How much time does your dog spend off leash outdoors, *not* in your back yard?” The long answer always boils down to none or just a little when the out-of-control dog can be kept from being run over by a car or from chasing after a cat or deer. In short, the dogs aren’t off leash because the handler doesn’t have control. *This is not an agility issue.*

In her book “Animals Make Us Human,” Temple Grandin talks about how desperately dogs need to do what she calls “seeking behavior.” You have seen dogs seeming to be looking for a lost contact lens every chance they get, right? Temple thinks dogs that can’t spend time being able to do this behavior in new places on a regular basis, go a bit nutty because they crave it so badly. She attributes the lack of access to off-leash roaming to many modern day behavior issues. It’s an interesting concept at the least.

Beyond dogs needing to “just be dogs” outdoors, and it possibly being unfair to ask them to perform for you the *only* time they are ever in a new place and off leash, we have the issue of good old-fashioned training. Dogs have to be taught to be responsive when they are in new outdoor locations and off leash.

I agree that the great outdoors presents all kinds of training challenges not found indoors, but all of those challenges can be and should be met *away* from the obstacles! We won’t even train our contact performance on real equipment because we want mistakes to be made elsewhere. The types of challenges the outdoors presents should also be addressed in an appropriate environment. This critical learning should be done in fields, at parks, at beaches, etc. Recalls, sends with front crosses and pulls, circle work, stay work, and fetch to hand and tug can all be done outdoors to create a dog that is responsive outdoors, while off leash.

If the outdoors is not novel for your dog, then it won’t be distracting. I’ve not seen a dog trained to do agility indoors, and provided with reliable general training outdoors, not have reliable outdoor agility performances. To them, doing agility outside is no different from doing it inside.

Quality instruction and the love of being outside with your dog in the warm sunshine are the best reasons to train outdoors. You do not have to train agility on a regular basis outside to have a reliable outdoor performance.

***Quality instruction
and the love of being
outside with your dog in the
warm sunshine are the best
reasons to train outdoors.
You do not have to train
agility on a regular basis
outside to have a reliable
outdoor performance.***

Quality instruction and the love of being outside with your dog in the warm sunshine are the best reasons to train outdoors. You do not have to train agility on a regular basis outside to have a reliable outdoor performance.

Sandy Rogers

Sandy Rogers has been teaching obedience and agility since 1991. She founded ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California in 1999. Her dogs have competed in all the USDAA and AKC National Championship finals multiple times in four jump heights. Sandy and Jack Russell Terrier Quill competed on Team USA at the World Agility Open in 2011, 2012, and 2013. They won the individual gold and silver medals in 2012 and bronze in 2013. Quill won the USDAA Grand Prix in 2013, placed third in 2007, and placed second at the 2012 and 2014 AKC Nationals. Border Collie Brink placed third in the Grand Prix in 2000 and won 16" Speed Jumping in 2007 and 2008 and Performance Grand Prix in 2007. Sandy has two DVDs available: Training the Extreme Dogs and One Jump Two Jump. Her new video, Feet First, will be released in 2015.