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# Making the **Most** of the Dog You Have

By Sandy Rogers

Many people would like to get a little more out of the dog they have. Discovering that you want or need more from your dog can put you on a bit of a slippery slope. For that reason, my purpose here is twofold. I'm going to give some training advise on working with the types of dogs that are typically lacking a bit of this or a bit of that when it comes to performance and I'm also going to give some words of advice to help keep you sane as you explore ways to get more out of the dog that you have.

If you are doing agility with a dog that does not have boatloads of natural

talent or the drive needed to excel, you have your plate full in more ways than one. Tackling the training challenges is only part of it. Your emotional investment in your dog's success can end up being a double-edged sword. The rich rewards of progress in training will leave you feeling hopeful and encouraged, but the times when the new behaviors do not shine through in competition can leave you feeling very discouraged.

## Great Expectations

You need to be invested in order to sink the required effort into the training end of the work, but if your investment road leads you to expectations for a consistent, higher level of performance you could be setting yourself up for bitter disappointment. Gandhi said, "Satisfaction lies in the effort, not the attainment, full effort is full victory." I interpret this to mean that satisfaction is available through your training efforts; don't look for it in the form of a qualifying run at the trial. Your goals should be based on making your bond with your dog stronger through better training, while you become a better trainer in the process. Success comes in all shapes and sizes; it can't all be measured at the trial.

## Things to Remember

- Always remember where your dog started. Give yourself credit for all progress made.
- Your progress may not show up when you want it to, that is just the way it is; unfortunately it is not determined by how far you just drove or how early you got up. Facing that fact is critical.
- Let go of terms like “blowing me off.” Dogs are giving what they can when they can or what they think they should. They really are not vindictive. Your dog is on your side, honestly.
- Give your dog the benefit of the doubt; if he is struggling with agility there is an excellent chance it is not his fault.
- Have varied goals for each run, not just a qualifying score.
- Understand that some of your training projects are works in progress for the dog’s entire career. Rome was not built in day.
- Never forget what you love most about your dog; it will come in handy when you don’t get what you want.
- Do what it takes for you to stay inspired to help your dog become all that he can be. See if you can create inspiration for yourself when you have failures.
- Cookie-cutter approaches may not work. Creative approaches may be needed. Seek out someone who has experience with your dog’s breed or issue when you need to.
- Expect nothing, seriously.
- At the end of the day the kindest thing you can do for yourself is to be honest with yourself. Are you able to accept your dog for who he is and take the bad with the good? Not everyone can. Don’t beat yourself up if the answer is no; life is short.

## General Considerations

The first line of my school’s philosophy is: “It is the handler’s obligation to un-

derstand the dog, not the dog’s obligation to understand the handler.” This means doing what it takes to inspire the dogs to excel. Go back and look for the *real* problem. Could your dog’s difficulties be based on balance, coordination, fitness, rhythm, lack of comprehension of a more basic cue (foundation holes), sight issues, physical sensitivity, mental sensitivity. It’s a big list but it is worth exploring.

## More to Consider

- Lack of physical ability can decrease drive. If the job is too physically demanding for your dog he will become discouraged. You may have to make some obstacles less difficult during training (most obstacles can be lowered).
- Lack of drive can decrease physical ability. Slower performers will have more of a physical challenge and this can be discouraging for the dog (think A-frame). Drive must always be monitored and tended to.
- Do not assume that a struggling dog is lazy. His lack of drive may be a physical issue; get him checked out by the veterinarian. Remember that not all issues are orthopedic. Internal issues can also be explored.
- Try to not make excuses for your breed/dog and at the same time be honest about his limitations.
- When in doubt decrease the degree of difficulty (make an aspect or two of the lesson easier).
- After you have success it will be your obligation to forever remember who your dog was (is) and reward and acknowledge his future efforts in that original problem area. Ignore the future good performances at your own peril.

## The Goose and the Gander

What is good for the goose is *not* always good for the gander. I have broken these training tips into what I think of as the three most common dog types that often are not putting out as much as we would like. Please notice I did not say as much as they *could* be putting out; they very well may be giving you all they have. You owe it to yourself to find out just how much influence you have, or don’t have, to make the changes you desire.

These tips are interchangeable and can help a variety of dogs.

## The Nervous, the Worried, and the Shy

Step one is being able to recognize an uncomfortable dog when you see it. In this case we are talking about mental discomfort, not physical discomfort. There is so much information on desensitizing dogs, seek out the help you need. There is nothing more rewarding than helping a dog overcome a fear. Each time you are successful that dog is better prepared for all of life, becoming a more well-rounded being. He is also learning to trust you while developing the coping skills that were lacking in the first place. When agility can facilitate that goal, both the dog and handler will reap the rewards for a lifetime. The problem is that sometimes agility is not the best avenue for reaching that goal. Stay objective as you explore what is best for these troubled souls. Remember, not every dog needs or wants to have agility in his life. Here are some things to remember as you explore what is best for the shy/worried and nervous dogs in your life:

- You must be totally present and focused when you have this fellow out; you have to learn all the subtle signs of discomfort and you can’t miss them when they happen.



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- Space is your dog's best friend. Use it to create comfort when needed. If the space you put between your dog and what is bothering him is not enough, give him some more. Repeat as needed.
- The leash is another good friend. It can create comfort and safety for these dogs. (Leash aggression is another kettle of fish.)
- Don't spend too much time giving strong or prolonged encouragement; it can turn into stress for the dog if you go overboard with it.
- Consistent and well-trained basic obedience skills are critical for these dogs. Too many people confuse being clear with a dog as being hard on the dog. In a misguided effort to protect the dog's feelings they do not practice being consistent with cues. Being wishy-washy with criteria is the worst thing for these dogs. Let the dog gain confidence by learning; he cannot learn if you are not consistent. It is the greatest gift you can give. It is possible to communicate errors (even just withholding a cookie is strong communication) without being harsh at all.
- If the dog is not comfortable enough to take a cookie, do a sit, or play a bit with you, then he is too stressed to work. And, even if he is able to take the cookie, it does not always mean he is able to work.
- Acclimate the dog to every new environment. I recommend taking these dogs to all four sides of a ring at a trial and having them do a bit of obedience and bit of fetch and with any luck at all some tugging. If the dog can't do it he is telling you he feels stressed. If he does not change his mind, it may not be in your best interest to show that day.
- Do not hesitate to seek out prescription medication for these dogs. Several years ago I was strongly against adding dogs to our over medicated population. Since then I have seen dogs have remarkable personality improvements from a little pill. Remember, you can always stop giving it if you don't like it.

## The Unmotivated Dogs

Lack of motivation will be either physical or mental in nature. Try not to assume, explore both. Start with the physical by seeing both a veterinary internist and an orthopedic specialist. I have a dozen stories to support this advice. Fitness level must also be looked at; dogs must be fit to do agility and that does not just mean thin. Cross training is critical. This list may help uncover issues that are more mental than physical:

- Your dog may be bored with your training style.



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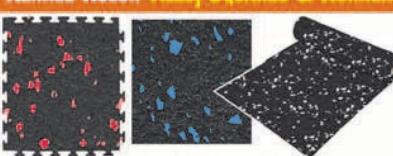
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**N**ot every dog was born to do agility, but marvelous things can happen in the hands of a dedicated, understanding trainer. Learning what we can change and accepting what we cannot change is not only the key to getting the most from our dogs, it is our obligation to them.

- He may not be getting paid enough to work.
- He may be getting paid too much to not work.
- Maybe he is overworked. Some dogs can't take much; use the dog's definition of "too much," not your own!
- Maybe the right key to building his drive has not been found yet.
- Learning how to play with your unmotivated dog is required. Learn how to engage your dog with food, toys, or even just yourself. Tug is still the best way to build drive. If you have thrown in the towel on it, you need to get back in the saddle and try tugging again, and again.
- I suggest building a routine with these dogs to wake them up and get them excited before you ask them to work. I call it foreplay. Start by watching what you do at home that lights their fire. What little silly games do you play that get him excited? What makes his tail wag? It may be the way (tone and words) that you ask him if he wants to go for a walk, or eat his dinner, or have a cookie. Maybe you whisper to him in a sing-song style voice (baby talk). Figure it out and then take that little fire-starter into your training sessions. When you use your fire-building routine you can't fake it, or rush it—you have to see the spark in his eye and the tail (or nub) wagging.

- If the dog isn't in the mood and the foreplay routine is not changing his mind pretty quickly, take a break and crate the dog for a few minutes. Try again but not too many times. You have to master the art of foreplay before you can go any further, and yes, I am still talking about dog training.
- Building drive through play can be a huge challenge but the rewards are amazing. If you are not having fun in the process it will not work. You can't convince your dog to have fun while you are not; it is impossible. That is the key to success in building drive through play. Have fun!

There are more tips for the unmotivated dog in the next section.

### The Independent Dogs

These dogs are typically not dying for a chance to work hard for tidbit of food or a chance to hang off a stupid chunk of rope. They are not necessarily unmotivated and they can be high- or low-drive dogs.

These dogs, and some in the unmotivated group, are probably getting their needs met through everyday life instead of getting what they need and want while working with someone. If they are to be successful agility dogs they may need a lifestyle change. I recommend that everyone read Susan Garrett's *Ruff Love*. Even if not every word applies, I think the book lends a perspective we should all understand, especially if you have an unmotivated or independent dog.

The single biggest tip I have for those of you with these types of dogs is to make them dependent on something that you can control. Try making their favorite activity only available when interacting with you. Withholding a meal or two and then hand feeding while working with you can also make a big impression. You will need something that the dog really wants and is not easy to for him to get unless he works. Read the book.

### Conclusion

Not every dog was born to do agility, but marvelous things can happen in the hands of a dedicated, understanding trainer. Learning what we can change and accepting what we cannot change is not only the key to getting the most from our dogs, it is our obligation to them. 

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 been a member of the USA team that competed 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.