

But WHY can't I get on Agility equipment right away?

This was taken from an Agility teaching List.....the topic was whether or not to train dogs straight away on the equipment or to start first with flatwork and foundation work without the equipment to build drive and focus, as well as train basic commands. Leslie Renaud, from Oregon, responded with such well written letters that I asked her permission to print it for you. Leslie is responding to a writer who said that she trained dogs to be "proficient" on equipment in 8 weeks!

Subject: RE: Basic Agility class ideas

Define "proficient" for me, would you please? Also, I would like to see your training plan, especially if it creates proficiency on all pieces of equipment, excepting the teeter and the weave poles, after just 8 weeks.

What about the confidence and enthusiasm foundation? What about building desire and drive? What about focus? What about relationship development? What about...well, you get the picture.

My footnote to all this is there is probably little chance I'll be convinced a dog can be "proficient" on *any* piece of equipment after just 8 weeks of instruction, much less be ready to handle 8-10 obstacle sequences. In order to do that, you'd need to have taught them a variety of crosses, directionals, etc., and I simply can't believe that can be done with beginning students by the end of 8 weeks.

All my beginning students would like to be sequencing at the end of 8 weeks, but that doesn't mean they are ready - at least not by my definition. There are other schools where they can go that will allow them to do that, and if that is their primary goal, I encourage them to go to those schools. What I will tell you is this...they generally come back to me with all kinds of issues - contact issues, weave pole entry problems, teeter fear...in some cases shut-down issues, or even disconnection.

However, I don't confess to have all the answers, and if there is a training program that allows for equipment proficiency and handling short sequences successfully by the end of 8 weeks, I'd love to see it.

Leslie Renaud

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This next paragraph was a note from somebody who is saying that you can train on equipment right away and that:

<<The only way this gets one into trouble is if, some time in the future, the participant decides he/she would like to compete. Then it's necessary to go back and re-train (I know. .. harder than teaching it correctly the first time).>>

Leslie responded with:

Imagine two groups of dogs/handlers. The first group is going to classes that are not designed with a foundation in mind. They are running over/across contacts, jumping and running through tunnels with no particular curriculum in mind because Joe Handler says, "I just want to have fun with my dog." After a year, they find they have a dog that has some drive, and desire, and people start to say, "Wow, that's a great dog you have there...too bad about the contacts, the weave poles entry problems and the teeter fear." Joe Handler thinks about this. "Hmm..." he says, "maybe I *do* have a great dog." **Now the re-training begins, and with it, the disappointments.** Fun has turned into frustration, and only if the dog is resilient and has great drive will it endure the frustration the handler is under-going, and no doubt, conveying to the dog. The re-training takes months, perhaps even a year or more. Let me add here that I was this person with my first dog. Thankfully he is incredibly resilient, and I was an intuitive trainer and driven enough to see him through the re-training process. He's now quite competitive, but it took **19** months to re-train him.

Now let's look at the second group. 80% of the people just want to 'have fun with their dogs'. They happen upon a curriculum that emphasizes foundation first. They spend the first 4 months doing ground work, focus exercises, and enthusiasm building. Then they begin formal equipment training. They do this for about a year. The dog is happy, confident, has a strong foundation and is ready to compete, if they so choose. They've never been 'frustrated' with their dog because a solid foundation was emphasized over anything else, the they have a dog that doesn't run off during a run, doesn't blow contacts, has a solid start-line stay, has great focus and a strong desire to work with the handler. The entire process has been 'fun' for them.

I believe it was Deb Richey who said **she spends the first several months working on the flat. I can't emphasize this enough.** Unless your school is turning out highly driven dogs month after month after month, and these dogs have a strong set of skills, you should take a look at more ground work for your beginning classes. It will make handling for your students all the easier, and more rewarding. After all, you can't 'handle' a dog that doesn't under his job fully and completely.

Leslie Renaud www.agileactiondogs.com

It is our observation, here at Every-Buddy's Agility Fun! that some agility training problems are close to irreversible. You might be able to change the behavior to some degree, but you may not cure it, particularly when the dog is excited or stressed. Spinning is one of them. (We know!) **Remember that what you learn first, you learn best! If you see a behavior you don't want in your dog (on or off the Agility field), *immediately* figure out how to train the dog to do something else. **DO NOT** expect the dog to grow out of it on its own. Expect that you will have to **replace the behavior** and that it may not be able to be just stopped. Be sure you aren't accidentally training the unwanted behavior. Get help from more experienced people. If you need professional help, spend the time and money *early* and it will cost less, both emotionally and financially.**

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