

Staying Connected to Your Dog

by Jacque Hoye

Staying connected to your dog! Sounds like a simple idea and easy to execute, right? Not so much. What does staying connected to your dog mean in terms of agility?



1) Are you aware of everything your dog does on course? For example if your dog misses a weave pole are you always aware when it happens or do you sometime finish your run not knowing a mistake happened at the weaves? Does your dog some times go around a jump without your knowledge? Has your dog come out of a tunnel and cut behind you to take another obstacle? For example U shape tunnel dog comes out and needs to go to a jump that is to their right but the dog walk is directly in front of the exit of the tunnel? Has your dog ever chosen the obstacle that has been extremely highly rewarded (dog walk) over taking the jump?

2) When you finish with a sequence in class do you IMMEDIATELY reward your dog with food or praise or do you talk to the instructor first? Or do you simply walk away as the sequence was done? OR are you a GREAT handler and take the time to REWARD your dog for a job well done?

3) Does your dog go away from you to sniff or find something to roll in during a sequence? If so when do you realize they are going to disengage from you, after they are already rolling or do you sense when they are going to leave? I want to stop the “thought” process of rolling, sniffing, leaving to chase another dog etc... Before the behavior actually happens. I know when my dog isn't fully working with me by where they are looking if I see my dog look away from me, there is a good chance they are going to leave me to do something undesirable. I want to get the attention back before they actually do the leaving part.

4) Can you watch where you are going and still keep the dog in your peripheral vision? I think when we train we are SO worried on where WE are going we forget that the only way the dog knows how to navigate the course is by our directions, they cannot read numbers or maps so they totally rely on our body positioning and verbal cues. They need us to drive the jet plane 😊

Staying connected to your dog is an essential part of being a successful agility team. Most of the dogs I see ALL have the knowledge and ability and the skills to perform anything I can set up for them. Mistakes happen is when the handler disconnects from the dog.

I am just as guilty of this as anyone else. I have a video up on you tube where Sizzle went around the 2nd jump on course after the chute. I had no idea until I saw the judge's hand go up. So what went wrong there? Obviously I didn't connect to my dog out of the chute and she simply went wide out of the chute and missed the jump. Not the dog's fault, it was totally my fault as the handler not to connect & direct her to the correct obstacle.

Sometimes it is easy to take things for granted with a very well trained dog that they will go out and find the line of jumps and be responsible for taking them. I do want my dog to be independent enough so that I am not “babysitting” each obstacle however I do need to do my part as a handler and make sure I am directing her to the CORRECT obstacle.

I admit when Sizzle weaves I do not watch her do every pole, however I can feel the rhythm she is in and I know which way she is supposed to exit so if a mistake happens I am aware of them.

When I am training my dog I need to be aware of their every move--I want to be able to SEE them do every obstacle. If I do not see them take it, how do I know they did? You must stay connected visually as well as mentally to your dog. This doesn't mean I can not use distance work as you can be connect at 100 feet away just as easily as being connect at 2 feet away but you need to build up to that task.

When you finish a sequence the FIRST thing you should be doing is rewarding your dog. What is considered a reward to your dog is different for each dog. It might be a game of chase the handler, it might be chasing and retrieving a tug-n-treat toy, it could be chasing a ball, it might be strictly food from handler or it might be a game of tug. YOU need to know what your dog likes and will work for. The instructor will keep their feedback until you are done rewarding your dog. So many handlers want to know "What went wrong?" that they forget the dogs did so many GOOD things out there!



REWARD what you like! Did your dog give you exceptionally fast weaves in training? Take the INSTANT to reward them to reinforce what you like! I have heard but my dog is going fast so I didn't want to stop them, so what ends up happening is that you keep running until a MISTAKE happens then we have lost an opportunity to REWARD what was GREAT! Remember these dogs don't have to do agility--they do agility because WE want to do agility. We MUST make it worth their while and make the payoff high for the behaviors we like!

In Summary;

1. Stay connected to your dog! Play a game or have a routine that you use at the start of every sequence or run that you do. Maybe you have your dog spin, go through your legs as a figure 8, do a high five, speak, eye contact or hand touches. I use "READY" as my cue FUN things are going to happen. Any of these things is great as long as you are consistent and focused on your dog as well. IF my dog is looking behind them when I have lead out--their focus isn't right, they need to be watching me as I leave as a GAME ON cue! I would not release my dog until I knew their focus was with me.
2. If you need to re-walk a sequence in class, put your dog in a down stay as you rework it or have someone hold them. Do not leave them to their own devices to go off and sniff, if it is OK while you are walking then why isn't it OK when they are working? Dogs don't see that distinction. We need to make it black and white for them.
3. Keep your eye on your dog when they are working. You should see every mistake that happens--if you do not then your focus is in the wrong place! Use your peripheral vision to see them taking the obstacles-
4. REWARD your dog for behaviors that you like! Excellent dog walk performance--take the time to reward with praise, food tugs etc... Make it work their while to work for you!
5. REWARD and connect with your dog AFTER each sequence worked in class, praise them, play with them tug etc... Then ask the instructor for feedback. Do NOT just walk away from them when the sequence is over.
6. HAVE FUN with your dogs in class, in trials and in life! ENJOY!