

Agility—An Introduction



Japanese Spitz—Love to Please, Willing to Learn

A Very Brief History



Here is Blue (Houndbrae Fox-glove) in his early days learning the basics.

There is so much more to a Japanese Spitz than just a gorgeous white fluffy dog that looks great in the show ring. Whilst breed showing is a very rewarding pastime, it isn't for everybody and there are many other disciplines in which they excel, from Obedience to Heelwork-to-music and Rally to Agility. This article is aimed at providing an introduction to agility.

So, firstly what is agility

and when did it start? To answer this it is actually best to reverse the question.

Reportedly, in 1974 a man named Peter Meanwell either participated in, or witnessed at a farm show, dogs being 'driven' around a course of obstacles. In 1978 Meanwell was approached by John Varley, himself tasked with finding suitable entertainment for the audience at Crufts in between the Obedience and Conformation competitions in the main ring. They provided a demonstration of predominantly jumps in an equestrian type format but with the addition of various obstacles which are still used (albeit vastly developed and improved) in today's agility.

In 1980 the Kennel Club

became the first organisation to recognise agility as a sport with a sanctioned set of rules, with the first agility show being a team event at Crufts the following year. Originally smaller dogs were not well catered for, having to compete with larger dogs over jump heights set at 30 inches. This changed in the early 1980's with smaller or 'mini' dogs under the height of 15 inches given jump heights of 15 inches. Many regional clubs then began to form and the rest is history with agility evolving over the years into the worldwide extravaganza it is today with different official bodies, degrees of competitiveness and various jumping heights.

Agility -

- NOT JUST FOR COLLIES.
- GREAT FOR FITNESS
- BUILDS BONDS BETWEEN HANDLER AND DOG
- MENTAL STIMULATION
- FUN
- SOCIAL
- AFFORDABLE
- FACILITATED NATIONWIDE
- STRUCTURED LEVELS OF COMPETITION

Getting Started

The most important single aspect of agility is that it must be fun for both yourself and the dog. Whilst it is never too late to start it is essential that your dog is receptive to training, wants to learn and is trained in a force free, positive reward based environment. Whilst you could buy some basic equipment and have a go yourself, this is not advised. It is best to find an approved trainer in your local area and enroll on a pre-agility course. You will be taught all the key foundations of

agility over, normally, a 6 week course. Don't expect to be whizzing over jumps and flying through tunnels, it takes time to learn the basics such as a good start line wait, a reliable recall, learning to walk on different textured surfaces, your dog running off lead under control at both sides of you and changing sides when instructed. That is just the start. Full details of typical pre-agility training will follow at later time.

You do have one advantage though, you own a Japanese Spitz! Your dog can start post-puppy classes and pre-agility classes at young age but should not learn the contact equipment at height or do any jumps or weaving obstacles until the musculoskeletal system has suitably developed, generally from 12 months but full height should be avoided until 16 months. Don't rush it, enjoy the journey and the friends you will meet.

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Agility Training—What To expect



Kasper (Houndbrae Proud as a Peacock).
Training at 20 months.

Now you have completed a pre-agility course then you have learned the foundations, which you will continue to develop and fine tune for the rest of your agility career. You have probably built up good bonds and met many friends and if you have found a good trainer then great, if not move on. Different trainers teach in different ways, it is important to find one that suits your requirements and you are comfortable with.

Generally agility training schools are a long term relationship where you will start with similar ability and experienced handlers and dogs. You will build new friendships, have many laughs, probably shed a few tears and then, assuming you and your dog both enjoy it, will become addicted before you even know it. Don't feel obliged to strive towards competing unless it's what you really want. I can assure you that you can have just as much

enjoyment attending your weekly fun classes. However, it is important that you don't try to flog the proverbial dead horse though. If your dog doesn't enjoy it and doesn't respond enthusiastically to training then please look for another discipline. I have 2 dogs which love agility and one that has no interest at all, to force him to take part would be cruel. You will start by repeating much of what you learned at pre-agility but using more equipment.

What Equipment Will I Start On?

“NEVER FORCE THE DOG THROUGH THE TUNNEL AS IT WILL RISK GENERATING A FEAR OF IT” .

In your early days you will spend much of your time practicing your lefts and rights when landing a jump (which should at this stage will be at lowest height. You are building and developing your skills, jumping at height will come with confidence later). Jumps will then be placed in short sequences where you will continue to fine fettle

your directions.

Most likely your next piece of equipment will be a tunnel. This is generally 5M in length and has a 600mm diameter, is concertinaed to allow it to be easily reduced in length for beginners and then later to be bent for more experienced teaching.

Never force the dog through the tunnel as it will risk gen-

erating a fear of it . You will start with it short and with the aid of the trainer will then 'lure' your dog through using high reward treats. Once this has been mastered with the dog going through having learned the 'tunnel' command then it can be gradually extended and bent round. This will take many weeks, you can't rush success.

What about the rest of the equipment?

So, jumps and tunnels are the back bone of agility and used together in combination with no other equipment are referred to as steeplechase'

Weaves - Probably the single most difficult equipment to learn. The dog must enter with the first pole at it's left shoulder. Added with Steeplechase equipment to form 'Jumping' discipline.

Collapsible Tunnel -A rigid front and frame with a collapsible soft fabric tunnel, often used in 'Jumping' as well as 'Agility'.

Tyre-Height adjustable circular jump.

A-Frame, - speaks for itself , 1.7M tall at it's apex, has a contact area at either end, which the dog should touch before alighting.

Dog Walk—approximately 36 foot long and 4'6" tall, again with contact areas.

See saw—Another contact equipment. This is very difficult to master as many dogs are scared of it and it should be taught in a structured manner over time. The see saw must 'ground' before the dog alights. More details on equipment later.

So, what do I need?

Well, the easy thing is to start with your dog. For competition you will need a flat collar that contains basic information iaw Kennel Club rules and UK law ie, owner's name and address (including postcode) and ideally a contact phone number,. This must not be a dangly type id tag but must be flat with the collar (embroidered /printed are ideal).

For practice and recreation level you can train with a harness if you wish but must make sure it can not be snagged on any of the equipment. I use the Hurta Life Saver harness as it provides good support and is also easy

to unclip if you wish to use it when queuing at competitions.

That's it really for your dog, unless you want to invest in such things as a waterproof jacket, warm jacket or even a cooling coat for the summer. Always ensure you have plenty of fresh water with you too.

Now the fun begins when it comes to sorting out your attire. You actually don't require any special clothing but from experience I would strongly suggest a good quality pair of sport trainers designed for trail use (More Mile Cheviots are excellent value but not waterproof, Karrimor are again good

value and readily available with Salomom proving very popular, particularly with their Gortex waterproof range).

One very important thing to remember is to avoid loose flapping clothing as this can confuse and even startle your dog, particularly in the early training days.

In the winter, waterproof breathable trousers are a god-send, as is a quality waterproof running jacket and also adhering to the proven layering technique. In the summer, shorts and t-shirt are fine, with a baseball cap and sun tan lotion if required to prevent burning.



Salomon Gortex Trail Running Shoes

Any Special Equipment?

Well, basically I would recommend obtaining a 'Pringles' style tube lid to use for 'touch' exercises and a good quality, easy access but secure pouch bag to use for carrying doggy treats (not to be used in competition). This brings us nicely on to the subject of dog treats. I can not emphasise enough the importance of rewarding your dog for success, particularly when teaching a

new behaviours and to make sure the treats you use are high reward and very desirable. Some people use cheese for training, some use kibble or chicken but I have found that dehydrated meat products prove to be the highest reward. They can be quite expensive to buy (alternatively invest in a dehydrator and make your own from meat,liver, heart etc). If your dog is toy oriented

rather than food then a 'tuggy' toy can be extremely beneficial. You can excite the dog whilst waiting for your go and use it for a reward when it gets it right. Just be aware that if you go on to compete the use of toys or treats in the ring is prohibited, except UKA (and some independents) do allow non crumbly treats and toys for NFC (Not For Competition) training runs.

"ALTERNATIVELY

INVEST IN A DEHYDRATOR AND MAKE YOUR OWN FROM MEAT, LIVER, HEART ETC"

Isn't Agility Expensive?

Well, let's look at it in context. Your clothing will naturally cost but you can probably manage with existing outdoor clothing. Training, well that varies considerably. Most training schools run group sessions. Ideally you have 6 dogs in a 1 hour class, this allows sufficient time for rest but still gives each dog enough time being active to stop them 'switching off'. This typical class set up will cost between £5 and £9 per lesson depending on location , number of training facilities in the area

and, the standard, experience and profile of the trainer. As you advance and 'catch the bug' you may want to attend specific training camps/workshops (this is where it gets pricey) or even attend special training days with top trainers visiting local training schools (about £15 per dog per hour in a class set up). For a one-on-one with your current trainer expect to be charged in the region of £25 per hour. If you get really hooked and pursue competing then the costs are very reasonable,

especially when compared to Breed showing. Typically you will pay between £3 and £4 per class (steeplechase, jumping, agility are examples of classes), car parking is usually free and if you wish to attend a weekend event then camping generally works out about £10 per night. With a single dog, a family could have a weekend camping, entering 6 classes over the weekend for under £45. Plus, of course, the fun and socialising that go hand in hand with camping.



Camping really does make it fun, relaxing and sociable occasion, reducing the need to travel daily and giving you that all important lay in.

Not Too Bad , Just 1 Hour A Week Is It?



Actually STOP, 1 hour a week in classes is just the start. You are best advised to practice at home regularly in between classes to ensure that you 'proof' the new behaviours you have learned in class. Some skills and behaviours are constantly practiced throughout the early part of learning agility and even now after two years of training I still practice the wait command at meal times, continually develop the recall, work on my directions and other such commands. The people that develop their handling skills

fastest are those that practice outside of class. Even everyday walks can be used to proof behaviours. Goal posts make for great equipment to practice 'rounds' and running side changes (I use the Check command for this). Bollards at the beach or car parks can be used to develop the touch command, as can kerbs and pavements be used for getting the 'contact' position practice (I even use broken groin uprights at the beach for weave entry practice). Don't over do it though because your dog must be

enjoying what it is doing and always finish on success (don't forget to use high reward treats when conducting any form of training). A word of warning, be careful using 'natural jumps' as they will not provide protection to your dog if they get it wrong and never do any more than proof what you have already learned in class. Your trainers are experienced and follow a structured training development plan, don't try to short cut your way, it will only end in tears.



Fancy Taking It Further Than Recreational fun?

At the age of 16 months your dog can take part in nursery classes (and steeplechase at UKA) and may enter standard classes applicable to it's height and ability from 18 months. I strongly recommend attending as a spectator at a couple of shows to decide if it's your cup of tea or not.

Oh dear, starting to get a bit confusing, what now with different heights and abili-

ties. So what are they?, well that depends on whether you are attending a Kennel Club (KC) or UK Agility (UKA show). There are also many independent shows but they tend to follow either KC or UKA rules. On the next two pages I have listed the two main organisations and their differences and specifics.



Kim Bailey's Kishi, out the tunnel into the wind.



Kaspa (Houndbrae Proud as a Peacock) First competition, aged 18 months.

| | Kennel Club (KC) | United Kingdom Agility (UKA) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|--|--------|-----------|--------|--------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Pre-requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be KC registered (Breed or Activity). • Must have a KC Agility Record Book. • Must be KC height measured (first measurement after 15 months of age with a second between 12 months and 24 months after first. If measurements different then a third will be required within 2 months of second. Each measurement costs £4) • Entry in advance only | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be registered with UKA • Must be height measured at or before the first show. If dog is under 2 then must be re-measured at first show after 2nd birthday to be awarded permanent measurement. UKA measurements are free. • Pay on the day often possible | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dog Height Categories (measured at withers) | Small – 350mm or less Medium- 430mm or less Large- >430mm | Toy – 350mm or less Midi – 430mm or less Standard – 500mm or less Maxi- Any Micro (Nursery/casual only)- 350 mm or less. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Jump Heights (Hurdle) | Small – 350mm Medium - 450mm Large - 650mm | Toy – 300mm Midi – 400mm Standard – 550mm Maxi – 650mm Micro – 200mm | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tyre Jump | Small – 490mm centre to ground Medium - 550mm centre to ground Large - 800mm centre to ground Aperture Diameter=533mm | Toy – 450mm Centre to Ground Midi – 550mm Centre to Ground Standard – 700mm Centre to Ground Maxi – 800mm Centre to Ground Micro – NOT ALLOWED Aperture – Diameter minimum 457mm | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long Jump | Small – 2-3 units spread 400-500mm. Medium – 3-4 units spread 700-900mm. Large – 3-5 units spread 1200-1270mm. | Toy – 600mm Spread Midi – 800mm Spread Standard – 1100mm Spread Maxi – 1300mm Spread Micro – 400mm Spread (not allowed in casual) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Pipe Tunnel | Minimum Diameter 609mm Minimum Length 3048mm | Minimum Diameter 600mm Minimum Length 3048mm | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Collapsible Tunnel | Solid depth-minimum 457mm, height minimum 483mm. Length of material minimum 3048mm | Entrance height minimum 457mm. Length of material minimum 3048mm Material diameter 609-762mm. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Weave Posts | Between 5 & 12 poles, minimum height 762mm, diameter 32-38mm, 600mm between poles. | 6 or 12 weaves only. Minimum height 762mm, diameter 30-38mm, 600mm between poles. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| A Frame | 2 ramps each 2740mm x914mm. Hinged Apex@1700mm from ground. Each ramp, last 1067mm different colour | Toy – Height 1700mm, max spread(mm): <table style="margin-left: 40px;"> <tr> <td></td> <td>Beginners</td> <td>Novice</td> <td>Senior</td> <td>Champ</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Toy</td> <td>235</td> <td>260</td> <td>300</td> <td>300</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Midi</td> <td>265</td> <td>335</td> <td>400</td> <td>400</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Standard</td> <td>365</td> <td>455</td> <td>550</td> <td>550</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Maxi</td> <td>435</td> <td>540</td> <td>650</td> <td>650</td> </tr> </table> Each ramp, last 1067mm different colour | | Beginners | Novice | Senior | Champ | Toy | 235 | 260 | 300 | 300 | Midi | 265 | 335 | 400 | 400 | Standard | 365 | 455 | 550 | 550 | Maxi | 435 | 540 | 650 | 650 |
| | Beginners | Novice | Senior | Champ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Toy | 235 | 260 | 300 | 300 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Midi | 265 | 335 | 400 | 400 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Standard | 365 | 455 | 550 | 550 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Maxi | 435 | 540 | 650 | 650 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| See saw | Length 3660-4267mm Width 254-305mm Height centre pivot –ground max 685mm Contact area –diff colour 914mm | Length 3660mm Width 305mm Height centre pivot –ground 685mm Contact area –diff colour 914mm | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dog Walk | Height 1372mm Planks 3660-4267mm x 254-305mm Contact – bottom 914mm different colour. | Height 1372mm Planks 3660 x 305mm Contact – bottom 914mm different colour | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Grading Structure | Grades 1 to 7 | Beginner Novice Senior Champion | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |



| | Kennel Club (KC) | United Kingdom Agility (UKA) |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Types of Classes | <p>Jumping, - consisting of hurdle jumps and rigid tunnels, may contain tyre jump, long jump and collapsible tunnel but will not include contact equipment.</p> <p>Agility—In addition to the jumping equipment it must contain Seesaw, Dogwalk, A-frame (collectively referred to as Contact Equipment) and may additionally contain water jump , Wall Jump and Wishing Well.</p> <p>Special Classes - (Helter Skelter, Gamblers, Power and Speed, steeplechase)</p> | <p>Performance Programme (comprises Agility, Jumping and Games. Equipment requirements for Agility and Jumping are same as KC).</p> <p>NB, Games may include Gamblers, Snooker, Power & Speed, Snakes & Ladders and Time Fault & Out.</p> <p>Steeplechase Programme (pipe tunnel and hurdle jumps only)</p> <p>These are completely separate programmes.</p> |
| Progression | <p>Grades 1-5: 1 agility or 3 Jumping wins</p> <p>Grade 5-6: 3 wins, 1 must be agility</p> <p>Grade 6-7: 4 wins, 2 must be agility</p> <p>25 day qualifying period</p> <p>Points::</p> <p>G1-4: 100 points per grade.+</p> | <p>Performance Programme</p> <p>Novice – 24 points (min 12 Agility) from Beginners.</p> <p>Senior – 36 points (min 12 Agility, 6 Jumping, 6 Games) from Novice.</p> <p>Champion – 48 Points (min 12 from agility, 12 Jumping, 12 Games) from senior.</p> <p>Champion of Agility programme (CAP) – 60 points from Champion (min 12 Agility, 12 Jumping, 12 Games) from Champion</p> <p>Win Champion of Agility Performance (WCAP) – 60 points from CAP (min 12 Agility, 12 Jumping, 12 Games).</p> <p>Outstanding Achievement award – 5WCAPs.</p> <p>Steeplechase programme</p> <p>Novice – 24 points in Beginners</p> <p>Senior – 36 points in Novice</p> <p>Champion – 48 points in Senior</p> <p>Champion Of steeplechase (CSC) – 60 points in Champion</p> <p>Outstanding Achievement Award – 5 CSCs.</p> |
| Not For Competition Runs | Not Allowed | Allowed but must inform the judge when entering the ring if not pr-entered as NFC. |
| Further Information | http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/activities/agility | http://www.ukagility.com/ |



JAPANESE SPITZ -
LOVE TO TRAIN, LOVE TO PLAY