

BETSY'S QUICK TIPS – Dog Agility

Seven Tips for Agility Success



I got into agility 14 years ago as a futile attempt to wear out my mixed breed wonder dog Mathilda! She had amazing stamina and courage up to the day she joined the Rainbow Bridge in 2023 – and Mathilda continues to be my agility inspiration.



I compete locally with my All American dog Oliver (border/corgi mix) and my rescue, Barcleigh, an adorable corgi. My recent rescue, Henry, is deaf – we don't know yet if agility will appeal to him or not. Professionally, I am Director of the Center for Plant and Life Sciences campus with St. Louis Community College. Be it biotechnology or dog agility I enjoy teaching and getting other folks excited about both. I have taught agility locally at the Happy Dog Spot in Rock Hill and introduced agility to SWCDP members through various SWCDP events since 2017. I am excited about SWCDP Dog Sports Center amenities and dog sports future at the dog park.

If you ever have questions, feel free to email me. And when you see me on the SWCDP playground – know that I am always interested in talking agility – let me know how your 4-Legged is doing on the SWCDP agility course.

[**k9lookingglass@gmail.com**](mailto:k9lookingglass@gmail.com)

Dog agility is an exciting and increasingly popular dog sport . . .

But the real focus should be the teamwork between you and your canine best pal. As an agility instructor and in working with my own dogs, I always want to make sure the dogs are having a good time. It's true, some Dog Agility Venues can be extremely competitive – but that is not the scenario at Southwest City Dog Park. We hope you will use the SWCDP amenity to spend time with your dog; the experience will surely strengthen the bond between you while you build their self-confidence and trust in you – and – provide some brain work, too. The agility course is also a good place for a short break from group play; a good way to re-direct energy when play gets too rowdy or too boring.

At times you may feel frustrated as you and your dog go through the practice. After all, you are both learning new things, developing new skills. I can relate – been there, and still go there from time to time. But, do not let that frustration creep into your interactions with your dog. No one is perfect. And your dog is not either! Enjoy spending time together and building your bond! And know, the average, complete run time in an official agility competition is a mere 30-40 seconds. So, enjoy the time, have fun and keep it all in perspective!

1) HAVE FUN

You must have fun, and your dog must have fun. Your dog wants to play with you, but YOU are asking him to play a game that YOU want to play. If you are reprimanding or getting mad at your 4-Legged, you are ruining it for him (or her). If you are in a bad or impatient mood or just downright crabby and tired – it is not an agility moment. Skip it until you have the right mindset. Remember, your dog picks up on your energy, good or bad.

My personal example of learning the hard way: My dogs (*especially Mathilda*) are very in tune with my emotional state. I am very task oriented, but even if agility is on my To Do List, if my frame of mind is not right, the session will be a disaster and may move us backwards. Mathilda is actually unwilling to work at all when she senses I am in a “mood” because she knows at some point, for some reason, I am going to get mad. So if I am going to get mad anyway, she is just going to opt out.

2) BE DRAMATIC

Flamboyance may not come naturally for everyone, so force yourself, if necessary. The more elaborate your hand signals & motions are, the easier it will be for dog to understand what you want. And the dramatic moves create another element of fun and expectation. You can make signals more subtle later, as the two of you learn your agility language.

3) NO “no”

Forget the word “no” when on the agility course – you need a new word! When your dog is trying something new and makes an error – use something else to designate that was not exactly what you were looking for, like “oops” or “whoops”. And say it in a happy tone. “No” can be used for cases of aggression towards another dog, or peeing on the obstacles (*really, you should avoid any pottying in the agility area*).

4) REWARD, REWARD, REWARD

Always reward your dog. Initially, your reward rate will be extremely high – that’s ok. Some dogs are picky eaters, so find out what they LOVE for a snack and only give that to them when they are working agility. And don’t forget the vocal reward, too. Most dogs love attention and praise – so praise as you hand out the snack. For me personally, I still reward my dogs after all these years. More rewards in practice – the more reliable their performance will be at an agility trial.

SPECIAL NOTICE: St Louis City Ordinance 66595 as well as SWCDP Rules forbid food and treats of any kind on the dog park grounds. SWCDP has made arrangements for two exceptions: 1) SWCDP sanctioned, managed events 2) short sessions on the Agility Course. This means, respect the rules overall – and only bring enough treats for one brief agility session. Keep treats tightly wrapped in your pocket until you are inside agility with the gate closed. If you have any left over – you must take it to your car. Never walk around the dog park with treats – and never give treats to other people’s dogs. SWCDP recommends lots of vocal praise, too.

5) BE PATIENT

This is a sport that LOOKS deceptively easy, but in actuality, it is not. As you and your dog become more adept with each obstacle, you will eventually be in a position to “run the course” and go from one obstacle to the next, in a pre-planned order. Part of the training involves you and your dog working together to speak exactly the same language. Fluency takes time and effort, but most of all patience. The dogs you see on the Incredible Dog Challenge at Purina or at any other dog Agility trial have been perfecting their skills for a long time. They make it look easy!

It’s worth it! Just know . . . there is nothing, NOTHING like it, when you and your dog come off of a great run! It is a wonderful feeling to achieve a goal together.

6) HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Give yourself (and your dog) a break!

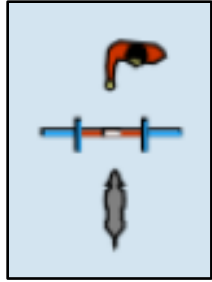
Be reasonable about expectations for both your dog and yourself. Keep your goals small – and attainable – and repeatable. We all make mistakes, none of us are perfect. But the truth is – 99 times out of 100, when the dog screws up, it is actually the PERSON that has given a wrong signal or turns a split second too late. Your dog will not get mad at you if you mess up; we should give them the same wiggle room.

What I have learned over the years, when we do not qualify for a trial, most of the time it is MY fault. When it IS my dog messing up, dropping a bar, misjudging something or who knows what, I just accept it. If I can mess up and blow a run, well, they can too. I am not an athlete and have never played sports. So, I have never had to worry about performance details like speed, body position, signals, etc. – but I sure think about that now. I try not to be too hard on myself, but, well there are days! During the early years in learning agility, I tended to totally blame my wonderful mixed breed monster Mathilda for anything that went wrong. *Thank goodness she forgives me for this.*

7) KEEP IT SHORT

By doing short, quick training sessions, your dog will leave wanting MORE dog agility! Keep it positive. My border collie/corgi mix learned everything about dog agility with 2-3 minute training sessions, seriously!

Obstacles: **BAR JUMP**



SWCDP has several bar jump sets. To encourage your dog, initially set the bar on the ground, and just let him “walk” over the bar. Then, begin with bar set on lowest rung and lure over the bar using a tasty piece of his favorite snack. You might need to be on one side of the jump facing your dog, with him on the other side. Call him over the jump by holding the snack out in front of him, and moving it slowly forward. As soon as he is over the jump, **REWARD**. **You have just started building HIGH value for the jump!**

Once your dog feels comfortable walking over the jump, rewarding him every time, you can raise the bar. Repeat, as before - jump, reward. After you do this several times, you can raise the bar to appropriate jump height for your dog. To minimize impact on the dog’s joints, I prefer to practice and teach using very low bar heights. But, always, work within the AKC jump guidelines to reduce the risk of injury to your dog.



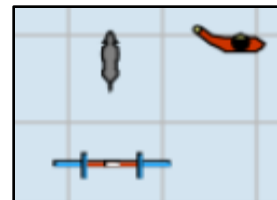
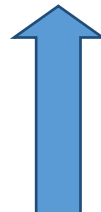
AKC Jump Height Guidelines

Dog Height at Withers	Jump Height
10 “ and under	8 inch
10” up to 14”	12 inch
14” up to 18”	16 inch
18” up to 22”	20 inch
22” and over	24 inch

Once your dog reliably jumps the jump (*80% success rate*), you should move off to the side. Use an open hand, arm up (90 degree angle) and say “jump” as you take a step past the jump. *Whenever you are handling, you should be signaling to the dog with the hand closest to the dog.* Your dog will hopefully move forward over the jump. **REWARD**.

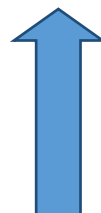
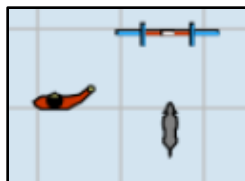
Work both sides. Once the dog is to the side of you and jumping the jump, make sure you are working the left and the right. So, this means, maybe initially you had your dog on your left, and you were to the right of the dog. You set the dog up with the jump directly in front of it, with you off to the right maybe 1-2 feet. You step forward, tell the dog to jump with your *left* arm extended and your hand open, the dog goes over the jump and you meet and reward on the other side. Now, switch this. Have the dog to your right, you are on the left side of the dog, and do the same thing. This time it will be your *right* arm extended, and you are working the opposite side of the dog.

DOG
On the left



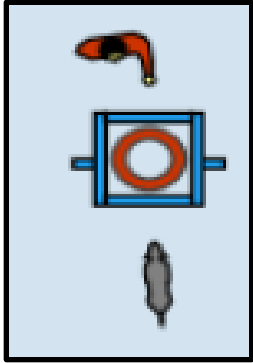
Move together, over and past the jump, with your arm extended left

DOG
On the right



Move together, over and past the jump, with your arm extended right

Obstacles: **TIRE JUMP**



Training for the tire is actually almost identical to the bar jumps. To encourage your dog, initially you will want to set the tire very low, almost touching the ground. Lure him through using a tasty piece of his favorite snack. You might need to be on one side of the tire facing him, with your dog on the other side! Call him through the tire by holding the snack out in front of him, and moving it slowly forward. As soon as he is through the tire, REWARD by giving him the snack.

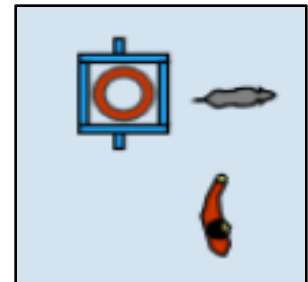
Now you have just started building HIGH value for the tire!

Once your dog feels comfortable going through the tire, with you rewarding him every time, you can raise the tire height up a bit. Repeat the entire exercise. Throughout, reward. After you do this several times, you can raise it to an appropriate height for your dog. Again, as with the bar jumps, I tend to practice and teach using very low heights.

Once your dog is reliably jumping through the tire (*80% success rate*), now you should move off to the side. Use an open hand, arm up (*90 degree angle*) and say “tire” as you take a step past the obstacle. *Whenever you are handling, you should be signaling to the dog with the hand closest to the dog.* Your dog will hopefully move forward through the tire. REWARD.

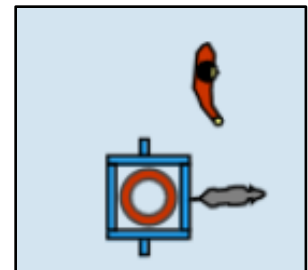
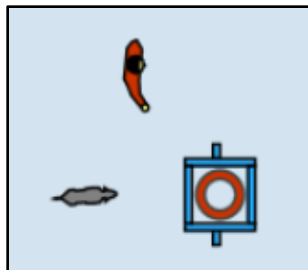
Work both sides. Once your dog is to the side of you and jumping through the tire regularly, make sure you are working the left and the right. So, this means, maybe initially you had your dog on your left, and you were to the right of the dog. You set the dog up with the tire directly in front of it, with you off to the right maybe 1-2 feet. You step forward, tell the dog “tire” with your *left* arm extended and your hand open, the dog goes through the tire and you meet and reward on the other side. Now, switch this. Have your dog to your right, you are on the left side of the dog, and do the same thing. This time it will be your *right* arm extended, and you are working the opposite side of the dog.

TIRE JUMP
Dog on the left



Move together, through and past the tire, with your arm extended left

TIRE JUMP
Dog on the right



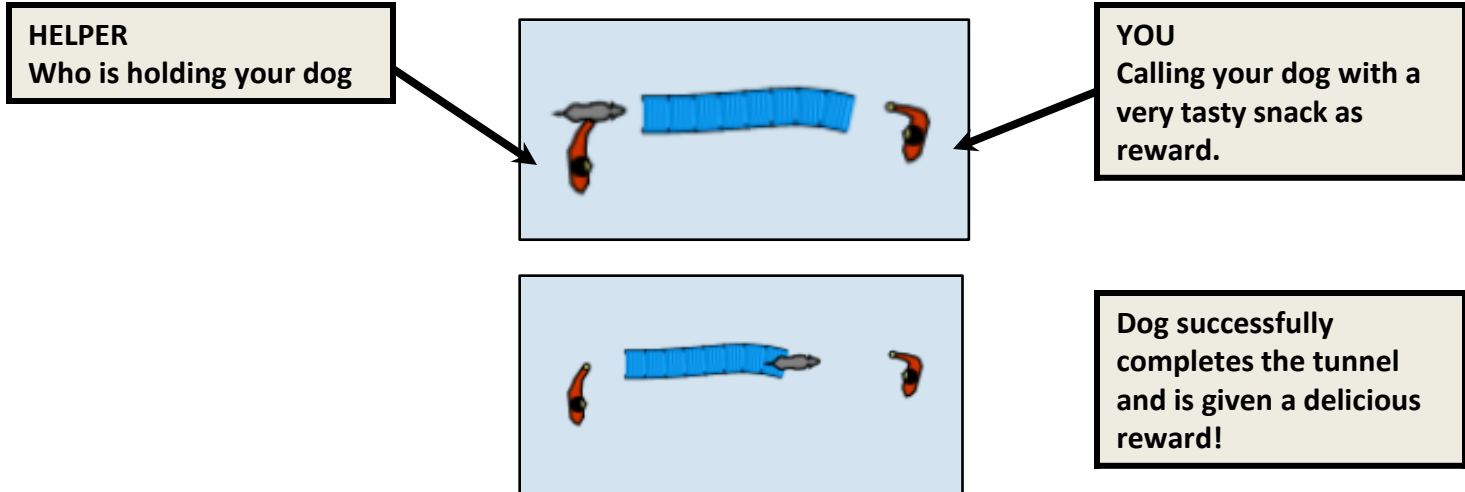
Move together, through and past the tire, with your arm extended right

SWCDP Safety Feature – The Break-Away Tire

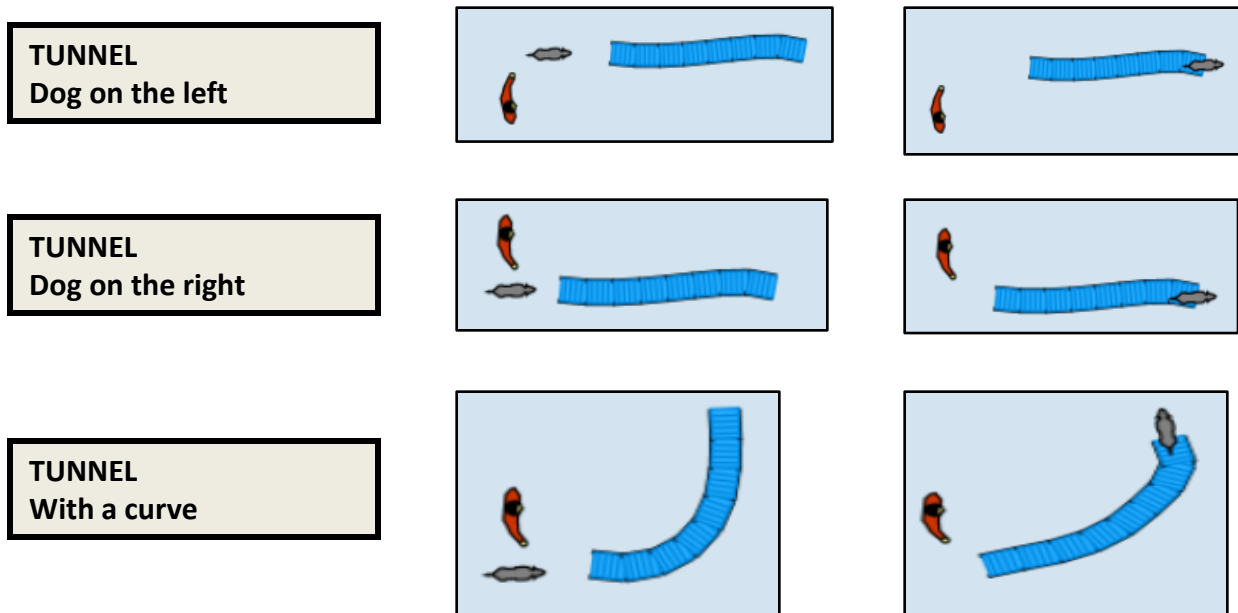
Because we have mostly beginners at our dog park, SWCDP opted for the break-away tire. This means it is connected by magnets – and if your dog hits the tire as he goes through, instead of the dog getting hung up on the tire, the tire will open so the dog can fall out easily reducing stress or injury.

Obstacles: TUNNEL

Starting out with the tunnel, it is best to have the tunnel as short as possible, just push it together to shorten it. This way, someone can hold your dog, and you can go to the other end of the tunnel and call them. Initially, he might actually run around the tunnel to get to you. If the tunnel can be made short enough, you can use a leash to encourage him to enter and go through the tunnel. DO NOT FORCE your dog, but rather using a tasty treat and a gentle pull on the leash, encourage him into the tunnel. Once he realizes how harmless it is, he should do fine. Most dogs absolutely love the tunnel! It is a great obstacle to use for all sorts of agility exercises and drills.



As your dog continues to complete the tunnel, you can gradually make it longer. Once there is success with that, you can start adding turns into it – having your dog change direction before or after the tunnel. The sky is the limit here. Next you could add a jump before the tunnel...you can see how fun this could get, and how quickly this could happen. Again, you will want to work both sides, having the dog enter the tunnel with you on its left and its right! And remember, whenever you are handling, you should be signaling to the dog with the hand closest to the dog. And to shake it up occasionally – you can bend the tunnel so that it has curves and is no longer a straight shot through it.



Always use yellow sand bags & black straps to keep tunnel in place; otherwise it will roll all over the course.

Obstacles: **PAUSE TABLE**

Training for the table is actually not too difficult; most dogs do not really object to jumping up onto it. However, the key with table training has to do with when you are rewarding. At an agility trial, there is a count of five from the trial judge before you can move along to the next standard agility obstacle. If you come off the table too soon, you are penalized. Many folks make the mistake of rewarding the dog once they release the dog from the table. The dog interprets this as “off the table means GOOD” which is NOT what you are going for. **You should be rewarding only when your dog remains on the table.** This can be in the form of food, praise, pats or all of it. He should remain on the table until you release him. As you progress with your agility training, you should be able to take a step or two away from the table, and the dog should remain on it, waiting for your signal. This is important – sometimes a lead out from the table will make or break a run.

Depending on your dog, and how excited or fast he is, you will need to be adjusting your speed when approaching the table. If he bounces on the table and then back off, you would be penalized in a trial. He needs to hit the table and STAY on the table for a count of five, with the judges usually counting it off, five and four and three and two and one and GO (*you should wait for the go before going*).

As you run up to the table, say “table” or “pause”. You may need to adjust your approach speed to get your dog on the table in one try.

Again, work approaches from both sides.

Once successful 80% of the time, start adding a little distance from the table as your dog waits for the count.

You can use the break at the table to adjust your position for the next obstacle.

If you turn completely, the dog should also turn to change direction, but should remain on the table until command is given.

Obstacles: **WEAVE POLES**

A Word About Weave Poles. Of the variety of agility obstacles, the weave poles will likely be the greatest training challenge for the humans and the dogs. It is important to remember, this obstacle is extremely unnatural for the dogs. They would jump and climb on stuff in the wild, but weave? What the heck! They would NEVER do that, and seriously question our sanity for asking them to.

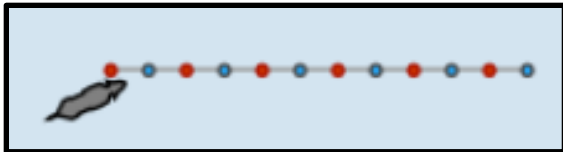
There are a number of different training methods available. SWCDP uses the luring/wire method; we have a set with 6 poles secured into a metal base with metal lawn staples (*for stability*) – and this set uses the training wires. SWCDP also has 12 individual weave poles that individually push into the ground – no wires with this set – they can be moved around as needed. Novice level only uses 6 weave poles, but at higher levels of competition, there will always be 12. Until your dog reaches a more experienced level – you should probably stay with the six weave poles with the wires.

All of the methods eventually teach the dog how to weave, but it will take a bit of regular training before proficiency will be seen. Do not overdo it with this obstacle. Have your dog weave once or twice during an agility session. No more, especially in your early stages of learning. If you overwork this obstacle initially, your dog will always dread and hate the weave poles. Don't let that happen.

In the beginning, reward as your dog goes through every pole (*luring with the wires on*). Once he seems to be doing ok with that for 4 or 5 sessions, with an 80% success rate (*i.e., he doesn't jump or pop out of the poles*), reward every second pole. It is important to always keep the reward level high if you expect excitement and love of the weave poles. Ten years into the sport, I still reward Mathilda every time she does them correctly.

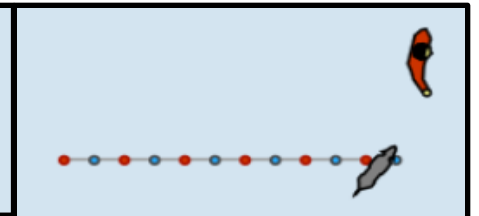
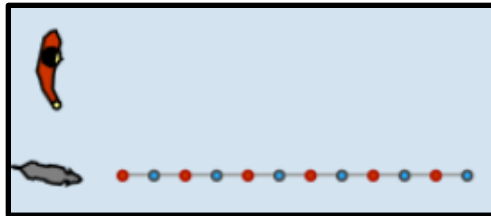
Remember the Agility Tips - take your time, have patience, and reward .

Dogs must *always, always, always* enter the poles with the dog's left shoulder at the first pole. Your dog should weave in and out of the poles until he completes them (*6 or 12 depending*). Be sure you have the wires set correctly, otherwise if you switch this up, your dog will be very confused as to what the proper entrance should be. In competition, there is only ONE WAY that the dogs will enter this obstacle. Be consistent in your training to minimize confusion on the dog's part.

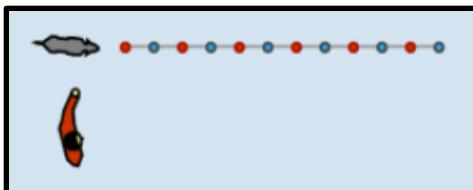


Dog will always wrap around the first pole with the dog's left shoulder next to pole #1.

Your dog should "weave" back and forth around each pole until he reaches the end. As he becomes more proficient with this and you are rewarding less, you can alter your position and distance to him. Be sure to work both sides again as with all the other obstacles. As your dog becomes better and better, you will want to adjust angles and work different and more challenging entrances for him.

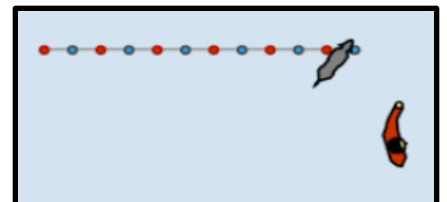


Weave!



Regardless of the side the handler is on, the dog will always enter the poles the same way . . .

Left shoulder at pole #1

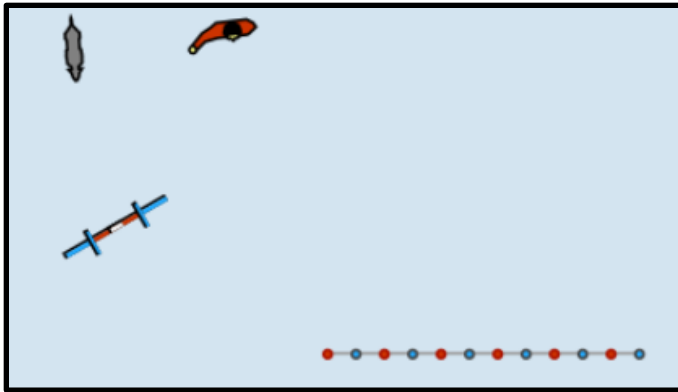


More Weave Maneuvers

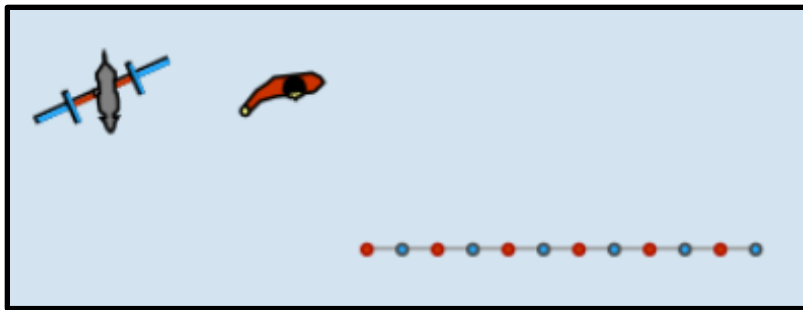
And here is an example of a more “challenging” weave entrance following a jump. This sequence is jump/weave. In this example, handler is on the Left of the dog (*a more challenging weave entrance*).



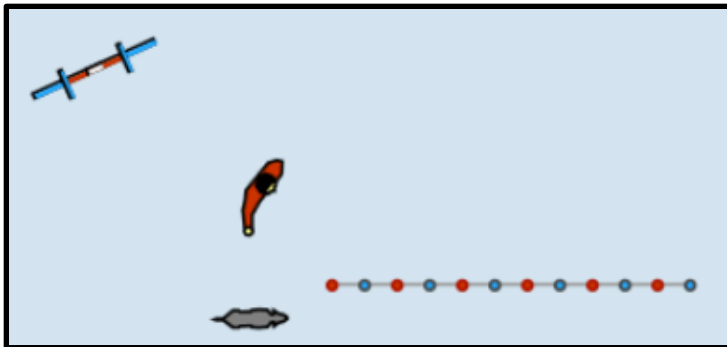
Oliver



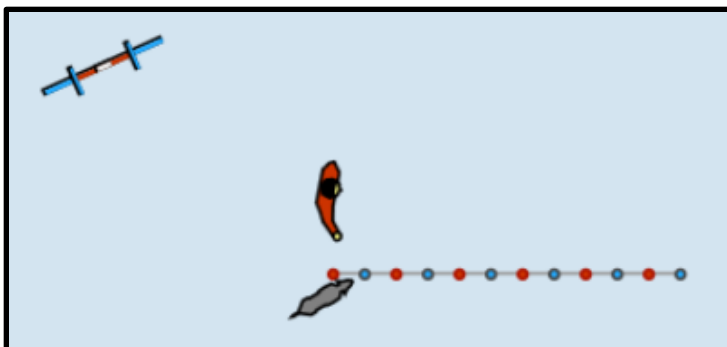
Dog is lined up to see the jump, but then will need to adjust significantly upon landing.



Dog will take the jump and then land....



Handler will need to “push” the dog out (*by providing motion and direction to indicate that to the dog*) to put the dog in a better location to hit the entrance to the weave poles correctly. Notice handler remains on left of dog. Many other handling options exist here for this sequence, including a front cross which puts the handler on the other side of the dog and weave poles.



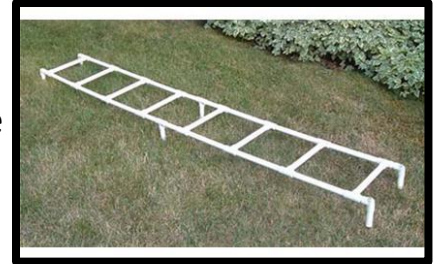
Note: Correct Entrance – Dog’s left shoulder/pole #1

SWCDP also provides a couple great training tools
Very easy to use – for both the 2-Leggeds and 4-Leggeds. Try them!

Training Tools: **LADDER**

Many dogs don't know they have back feet!

They go where their noses and eyes lead them, and everything else just kind of follows. While a Ladder isn't a regular agility obstacle (*not used in trials*), many trainers use the Ladder as the very first obstacle for beginner dogs, to encourage their confidence. Trainers will also use the Ladder for advanced dogs to help them space their steps and place their feet down more accurately. By learning to pace himself inside the Ladder's rungs, your dog will gain confidence on the dog-walk, teeter, or any obstacle where it must use all four feet quickly and accurately.



Training Tools: **ROCKER BOARD**



Let's Rock!

Especially good foundation training for those who may get into agility beyond what is available at SWCDP – great preparation for advancing to the dog walks, teeter totters, etc.

A Rocker Board is used to teach dogs to be more confident with movement under their feet. Show your dog how to make it wobble (*in a rocking fashion*) to get your dog accustomed to a moving surface.

Perfect training piece for introducing puppies to the challenging aspects of agility, or for building more confidence in a hesitant dog. It is far less intimidating than a "buja board" or "wobble board" which rotates on all 4 sides. It can also be used to work on contact zone performance. Because of the Rocker's minimal movement, you can repeat the exercises without tiring your dog.

About SWCDP Agility Course

From SWCDP Management

SWCDP offers a variety of amenities & activities – more than many area dog parks. We offer this variety so that there is always something special for everyone. Whether it be pools, balls, Frisbees, winter climbing maze, dog wash, or use of Alternate – different dogs/people like different things. And, some enjoy the challenge of our upgraded agility course. We ask everyone to help us keep our dog park – and agility course – in good condition by following SWCDP rules and guidelines.

Gate	Keep the gate closed at all times. No dogs or children are allowed on the agility course without adult supervision. If you see members breaking this rule, please ask them to abide by the rules; report repeat offenders. Equipment has been broken by lack of supervision and piles of dog poop left all over the course. This disregard creates extra work on our volunteers and increases operating costs.
Safety	Always top priority at SWCDP. Follow the AKC jump guidelines so your dog uses the jumps appropriately. We have a yellow ruler at the agility entry. Also, follow strict treat guidelines, another safety element.
Treats	Agility Users Have Special Privilege. Please do not abuse this. If members get sloppy with the treat usage or disregard the rules, we will have no choice but forbid treats on the agility course. <i>One person could ruin it for everyone!</i> Be a responsible agility participant; <u>follow treat guidelines exactly as written</u> . Keep bait tightly wrapped until inside gated area, only bring a few treats for that day's agility, never, ever give treats to other dogs or carry treats around the Main or Alternate areas.
Kids	Kids & Dogs Can Thrive Together. <u>With adult supervision</u> , kids (8+ ages), can learn handling techniques, responsibility, leadership, and enjoy the bonding experience with their family 4-Legged. Kids must not get on the equipment. SWCDP is a park for dogs – our 4-Leggeds have priority. Use equipment appropriately and responsibly.
Maintenance, Equipment	Taking Care, Making Changes. Supplies for agility are kept in tall storage unit in agility area. Designated volunteers will move equipment before/after grass cutting and to occasionally re-arrange course to keep it interesting for the 4-Leggeds.

Agility Benefits

Companion Activity – Strengthen Relationship

Self-Confidence – Coordination – Brain Work – Trust

Great Foundation for Self-Control & Obedience. Is your dog full of energy, or just bored or in need of more exercise or quality time with his human? Well, just as Betsy discovered agility to focus young Mathilda ten years ago – so can you. SWCDP Secretary, Joan, inherited a wild child, Caika, and together they found a purpose for Caika's strong willed attitude. Caika loves to run



Caika



Bisky

and jump, so the excitement and challenge in agility was a great fit. And, Bisky is only too happy to do agility or anything else to please her human. Agility basics may be a good foundation for learning other elements of obedience discipline. Your dog is having fun while learning to listen to you and follow your commands. Everybody wins!