

Agility

Emotion and its importance in Dog Sport

by Kelly Daniel, Hybrid Training

<http://hybriddogtraining.blogspot.com/>

I'm going to describe some common scenarios we see at every agility competition in New Zealand.

- A. The dog starts the run, and then starts sniffing and slows down. The handler cheerleads the dog a little (claps, and talks more in a high pitched tone), and then grabs the collar and pulls the dog along, usually off the point on the ground where they are sniffing. Someone comments 'wow there must be some rabbit poo there.'
- B. The dog slows significantly in the weaves (or any other obstacle) in the ring, despite having reasonable speed in training.
- C. The fast driven Border Collie runs extremely fast, and takes a couple of rails due to high speed. At the end of the run the dog is drooling with some spit around their mouth. The dog is identified as a dog that has a jump issues because of constant rails in the ring.
- D. The dog is warming up in the marshalling area. When it retrieves its tug toy it shakes it vigorously and smacks itself in the face and neck. The dog is very reluctant to release the toy, and its mouth clamps onto the toy, and will not take food rewards.
- E. The dog goes at a pretty slow pace through the majority of the course, but accelerates significantly over the last few jumps into the end area.
- F. The dog blasts past the weaves, jumps off the dog walk, or freezes on the top of the A-frame. Something they 'never do in training'.

In each of these scenarios the dog in the example is exhibiting stress, to the extent in which not only performance and behaviour



Key salivating profusely in the weave poles (photo Emily Taylor)

is being affected, but also physiologically inside the dog's body there is a myriad of biological responses occurring.

Stress can be defined as "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances". While in some situations stress is required for improvement, such as in a fitness aspect (unless the training puts the body into a slight stress state then adaptations AKA improvement will not occur), there are many negative aspects both physiologically and psychologically when an organism is put into a stressed state outside of the optimum range.

Stress

When the body undergoes a stress response, there is a hormone response that then not only affect the dog's physiology, but also their emotional state. This initial stress hormone response is adrenalin. This feeds their fight or flight response, and in some dogs is maintained for some time in certain environments. These are the over adrenalised, or worked up dogs, that we see typically barking, spinning, streaming saliva, dilated pupils, viciously tugging or shaking toys, and often unable to perform criteria adequately.

Cortisol, aldosterone, and testosterone are also stress hormones that are required to best prepare a dog's body to battle the stressor. Not only do these hormones change body function, but they can also impact behaviour. It is important also to consider that hormones are generally a longer acting body signal, and can take many hours to 'wear off'. This is why in the show environment a dog can still exhibit stress related behaviours after the stress stimulus. Stress, and the recovery from it, is physically tiring for dogs.



Tank freezing on the top of the A frame during competition (photo Penny Bushell)

Facial Expressions of STRESS



LOOKING AWAY



WHALE EYE



CLOWN MOUTH



BROW FURROWED



EARS ALERT



EARS BACK/FLATTENED



EARS SIDeways



GRINNING



CHEEK PUFFING,
TEETH CHATTERING



SQUINTING,
BLINKING

Vet Behaviour Team
Phone: 0432881174
www.vetbehaviourteam.com



Stress Scale

Extreme Fear			Neutral			Extreme High Arousal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Refusal to take treats. Refusal to play. Inability to perform any known cues. Gets up frequently in the night and moves/paces.	Refusal to play. Does not reliably perform all known cues. Stirs at night occasionally.	Hard bite taking treats	Normal bite taking treats. Will play and let go of the toy. Reliably performs know cues Sleeps though the night.	Hard bite taking treats.	Reluctant to let go of toy. Does not reliably perform all known cues. Stirs at night occasionally.	Refusal to take treats. Refusal to let go of toy. Inability to perform any known cues. Gets up frequently in the night and moves/paces.
Exhibiting 5+ signs of fear or extreme stress, e.g. frozen, cowering, running away, chattering, dog or people reactivity, leaning away, zoomies	Exhibiting early signs of stress such as whale eye, clown face, panting, lip licking, shaking, scratching, paw lifts, sniffing and other avoidance behaviours etc.		Rarely or never exhibiting stress signs.	Exhibiting early signs of stress such as whale eye, clown face, panting, grinning, alert ears, chattering teeth, jumping up and mouthing.		Exhibiting 5+ signs of fear or hyper arousal, e.g. hyperactivity, inability to sit still, jumping up, death shake of toys, mouthing, biting
In agility this may look like:						
A dog that never runs at full speed and frequently does not complete a run due to stress and fear.	A dog that mostly completes runs, but may sniff, or not go at full speed 'like in trainig'.		A dog performing agility to the level of training that has occurred.	A fast run with the occasional issues at obstacles, such as blasting past weaves, breaking startlines of contacts, dropping rails.		A dog that cannot hold any control position, frequently spins, runs past obstacles, knowcks rails. Rarely goes clear.
Negatively affecting performance and learning			Optimum performance and learning		Negatively affecting performance and learning	

hybriddogtraining.blogspot.co.nz/2017/12/posters-about-stress.html

Stress spectrum: from low stress to high arousal

Like most biological systems, the stress system is a spectrum. As dog owners, our aim is to keep dogs within the optimum range of stress where it does not negatively impact emotions, behaviour, the body, or learning. Both low fear related stress, and high over arousal stress can push a dog outside this optimum zone. Individual dogs may be more predisposed to being at a particular end of the stress spectrum. This can be because of a genetic influence, lack of socialisation, traumatic events, or sometimes medical issues.

Emotion as a criteria

Stress outside the optimum zone can have impacts for learning, and can condition an emotional response to environments or particular skills. This can have a significant long lasting impacts for the show or training environment.

Just as a 'high drive' dog can be conditioned for that adrenaline fuelled feeling when they do agility, conversely the low stress dogs can become conditioned for the show environment, or particular obstacles being scary or stressful.

So what can be done with a dog that is under stress?

The first step for trainers and handlers is to be aware of the emotional state of your canine training partner. Where are they on the stress spectrum? Are they able to take food? Are they performing behaviours they know well to the criteria and level of which they are capable? What signs is their behaviour telling you about their emotional state?

If your dog is NOT within the optimum range for stress then what can you do to get them back to a reasonable level? While the behaviours can look very different at the top and bottom ends of this spectrum, often the tools we can use to help can be the same. If you have identified your dog as one that falls outside the optimum range then enlisting a trainer that is experienced in this area would be very helpful.

Here's some tools that may help:

- Sweeping the environment: you will be surprised how many dogs are much better, when given a chance to check out new environments before they have to work. This can be as simple as a lap or two around a ring at a show before your run. The key is to allow your dog to explore. Encourage sniffing. Let them check out that weird shaped chair ring side. Just be sure to keep your sweep time separate from your working time.
- Consent signals: This is particularly helpful for dogs at the lower end of the spectrum, but in my opinion a tool that should be integrated into all training. Consent is a behavioral signal, or trained consistent behaviour that gives the dog a choice to participate in any subsequent behaviour or training that will occur. It's also an indication to you of the emotional state of the dog. It can be as simple as 'do you wanna do some agility?' Or as complex as teaching a dog to hold their nose on a target when they are consenting to brushing or nails. People are always concerned that using consent will mean that their dog always chooses not to work on the particular behaviour, but most commonly the dog won't opt out, provided you are producing a well set up and reinforced training environment and actually

listening to your dog's consent signals! You can also use several, for instance when working on cooperative care:

- 'Do you wanna train?'
 - Walking to the training area - does the dog lag, sniff, have to be called? If yes they are opting out.
 - 'On your platform' - does the dog lag, sniff, have to be called? If yes they are opting out.
 - Rewarding with a treat off the platform - if they are slow or don't jump back on they are opting out.
 - Nose touching a target for brushing - the second the nose comes off the target the brushing stops, until the dog consents for it to continue by putting their nose back on the target.
- Start button behaviours: These are simple behaviours at the start of a known skill or sequence that give you a read on your dog's emotional state. Can they do a chin rest with normal speed and pressure? If not then they may not be in the right emotional state to be able to do agility.
 - Soothing with sniffing: The emotional and olfactory centre in your dog's brain are closely linked. Sniffing and foraging are natural soothing behaviours for your dog. They are like your dog's version of a book and wine (or beer and sports) on the couch – relaxing. You can use this to bring stress and arousal levels down by using tools like a snuffle mat, treat scatter on the ground, cookie trail, or nosework.
 - Soothing with chewing: chewing relaxes your dog, as it releases specific hormones that help your dog feel relaxed and calm. So think about using this – why not give your dog a bone or other safe chew in their crate?
 - Calming patterns: just like children (and adults!) dogs respond to calm movement based patterns. Slow, rhythmic movements especially when scent is added, can really work to relax stressed dogs. Try having your dog in front of you, and slowly rhythmically tossing a treat in the grass to the left, and then right, and repeating. Another version of this is the Tellington Touch walking patterns.
 - Still thoughtful behaviours: There are some behaviours, when well trained that help lower stress and arousal levels. These are generally still behaviours that involve a constant sustained pressure like a chin rest, or sustained nose target.

How can we prevent a dog having issues dealing with stress?

Stress is an everyday aspect of life for all living organisms. In some respects stress is vital to survival. However, in the world we expect our performance dogs to live in, it is their ability to recover from stress events that is important. As our canine teammates caregiver it is our responsibility to try to keep our dog's stress within the optimum range.



Koda showing signs of stress and fear in the agility ring. Shortly after the long jump she left the ring as she was scared of the judge (photo Penny Bushell)

To help ensure that your dog is able to cope with stress events:

- Choose a dog from lines with a genetic predisposition to cope well with stress. Stress or anxiety in dogs often has a strong genetic component, which is inheritable.
- Choose parents of a litter that have not had major traumatic events, which affect their behavior. Studies have shown that a fearful events in the lifetime of the dog, often produces puppies born to fear that same stimulus that caused the event in the father.
- Ensure that your puppies have had a wide exposure to stimuli in the 'startle' reflex stage of puppyhood, where they recover quickly (see Puppy Culture for more information listed as reference).
- Ensure that puppies are restricted from stressful events in their early fear period. This is the reason that some breeders are now keeping puppies until 10–12 weeks instead of the more traditional eight weeks.
- Ensure puppies are exposed to a huge range of places, people, and things in the critical socialisation period. In this time dogs only need one exposure to something to learn that it is not scary. After this critical period fearful stimuli may need hundreds or thousands of exposures at a low threshold using counter conditioning and desensitisation to ensure the dog is able to deal with this stimuli (see Puppy Culture for more information).
- As you are training, ensure that you are clear and consistent. Both in how you train and cue behaviours, and also how you mark and reward these behaviours.
- Work delayed and differential reinforcement into training in preparation for the ring.
- Ensure that a dog's ring experience is consistent with training.

Please note many of the concepts discussed in this article are from Sarah Stremming of the Cognitive Canine. I highly recommend her courses if this is an area you are interested in (or need to) pursuing.

Resources/further reading

- <http://www.doglistener.tv/2015/05/stress-in-dogs-what-we-cant-see/>
- [http://agilitynet.co.uk/training/](http://agilitynet.co.uk/training/effectsofstressonperformancedogs_audreyferrel.html) effectsofstressonperformancedogs_audreyferrel.html
- <http://www.crossbonesdog.com/blog/distracted-agility-dogs-environment/>
- <http://baddogagility.com/eureka-stress-and-zoomies/>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2017/02/15/how-does-stress-affect-sports-performance/#19d92a7b205d>
- <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/20320967.pdf> (Stress—Its Effects on Health and Behavior: A Guide for Practitioners)
- <https://thecognitivecanine.com/2017/07/26/how-much-do-we-risk/>
- <https://thecognitivecanine.com/2017/08/30/emotion-as-criteria/>
- <https://thecognitivecanine.com/2017/09/13/worked-up-world/>
- <https://soundcloud.com/sarah-stremming/emotions-in-sport-dogs>
- Worked up Fenzi course: <https://fenzidogsportsacademy.com/index.php/courses/10999>
- Hidden potential fenzi course: <https://fenzidogsportsacademy.com/index.php/courses/12707>
- <https://www.puppyculture.com/>
- <https://seattletouch.com/walking-in-balance-with-your-dog/>