

Agility

To run or not to run

by Kelly Daniel, Hybrid Training (<http://hybridtraining.blogspot.com/>)

Now you might think from the title we are going to talk about running contacts... However, unfortunately it's not something that fun! This is a topic that is difficult to broach, and difficult for some to discuss, but I believe that it is a very important issue in Agility.

When should a dog NOT be able to do agility? At what point do we say no, that dog should no longer run, and whose responsibility is it to make these decisions?

There is a lot to consider, and this is very much to be considered on a case to case basis, as every dog is different. Here are the key factors that I think need to be considered:

Structure in relation to performance.

Now I don't mean if your dog would be able to show in the conformation ring, or meets breed standards. I'm taking a balanced structure without major faults that could negatively impact sporting performance. A performance dog needs moderate angulation front and back, but more importantly balance between the front and back end of the dog. The topline should be strong, and length of leg should be relatively similar to back length. Legs should be in line with the body with no major turning out or in.



Hob Nob Perfect Schemer (bred by Janice DeMello and owned by Carol Schiefer) shows balanced structure, which shows in his excellent performance and soundness.



Bingo (Sarah Sharratt) has a weak topline, as evidenced by the dips and bumps in his back. His back is very long relative to his leg length, and his front legs have bends in the radius / ulna, and are toeing out.



Zip (Amanda Mckennie) has long legs relative to back length, and an imbalance in angulation. He has a very straight front compared to his rear. His topline is also weak, with a dip in his back at the end of his ribs. Zip was retired relatively young due to ongoing back and stifle issues.



Samarai (Barbara Scanlan) is roaching significantly through his back. After further investigation it was found this was a compensation to take weight off luxating patellas.



Abbie (Naomi Shaw) has weak pasterns that hyperextend, and she rotates her hips to compensate for this and shift her weight.

Age

We all know the 'legal' age for beginning agility competition. But the reality is that at 18 months many dogs who are on the larger side may not have finished growing. In some dogs, growth plates will not have completely closed by two years, and other aspects of physical and mental development may have not reached maturity. Putting physical strain on growing bodies can do irreversible damage, and cause ongoing compensations, causing significant issues later in life. Also in the period leading up to 18 months, many puppies are practising agility skills too much, and too early. This has serious implications for their development and long-term longevity.

Did you know that in the canine fitness world if your dog is seven years or older, it is considered elderly? As dogs age they are unable

to maintain muscle mass like they can when they are younger. It is important to add muscle strength work (under supervision) to an older competing dog's routine to ensure that they maintain their strength and form. My 'line in the sand' for older dogs is their obstacle form, and overall speed in the agility course. Did you know that the Show Sec website (www.showsec.co.nz) has this great function where you can see your dog's rate of travel over time? This is a fantastic way to monitor your dog and how it's moving in agility competitions. If an older dog's speed significantly decreases, along with a decrease in form or increase in faults, it may be time to consider retirement.

Serious injury or illness

Obviously orthopaedic injuries can have serious implications for agility performance. Anything that was serious enough to need specialist assessment, or surgery should be regularly assessed by a professional experienced in performance dogs, to check for functional movement, compensatory issues, or early onset arthritis.



Maisey (Rachael Banks) had an accident early in her life that resulted in the loss of a front leg. She has clearance to compete in agility, and moves extremely well with no obvious compensatory issues (photo by Emily Taylor).

It is also important to consider the impact of other chronic conditions, and the medications that may be prescribed. For example, Prednisone (sometimes prescribed for inflammation or arthritis for example) can cause muscle atrophy, and inhibit building muscle. Prednisone can also impact potassium and water balance in your dog, which could have implications in exercise. For this reason you should discuss any possible considerations with an expert familiar with the physical challenges involved in agility.



Rosie (Jan Evans-Freeman) had an injury as a young pup that resulted in the loss in a bone in her toe. Her owner has very carefully worked with rehabilitation and fitness professionals to ensure she is in the best shape as she gets ready to start competing.

Stress

Stress impacts many of the dogs competing in agility, some exhibit over arousal related stress, others 'low stress', which may include slower speed, avoidance of obstacles, or sniffing. It is important to consider stress when assessing your dog's performance. Physiological stress can have long-term health implications, as well as making agility not enjoyable. Therefore it is just as important to address stress related issues, as orthopaedic or other health issues.

Lameness and gait issues

This is my number one issue. At every single agility show I see dogs competing that I consider lame. Yes this lameness may be subtle, and not everyone may be able to notice it, but you know what, some are super obvious!

Common gait issues and signs of lameness include reluctance to trot or walk (pacing), bunny hopping in a normal gait, switching

lead legs to consistently use one front leg, a head bob indicating leg lameness, extra steps in front of a jump and/or reluctance to extend legs whilst jumping, and reluctance to complete obstacles that dogs are normally reliable in such as weaves.

So whose responsibility is it to decide when your dog needs to be referred to an expert for additional help? And who should decide when it's time to retire from competition and training? I would like to think that the more experienced competitors, trainers, and judges would feel comfortable advising a less experienced competitor to get their dog checked or get some extra help, but in all honesty I don't think that's happening enough at the moment.

Of course ultimately the decision is yours, but I urge you to think of the long-term health and wellbeing of your canine partners. They are just so good at masking pain, and personally I want my dogs to be here, and happy, for as long as possible. How long they are able to continue competing in agility is pretty low down on my list of priorities in the grand scheme of things!

Signs

Obvious lameness, unwillingness to take obstacles, significant structural abnormalities, taking pain or anti-inflammatory medication such as Metacam, body score of 1, 2, 8 or 9, and stress that is inhibiting normal functioning behaviour and affecting the health and wellbeing of the dog

Jumping or weaving in a different way to what is normal for the dog, going around obstacles, stutter jumping, taking off extremely early or late, taking a number of rails, minor structural abnormalities, taking any medication other than standard vaccinations / antiparasitics, aged 7 or older, body score of 6 or 7, a serious orthopaedic injury at any stage in the dog's life, and significant signs of stress.

Dog is confident taking obstacles, is not on medication (other than flea / worm / vaccinations), is aged between 2 and 7 years, and moves well.



What Should Happen?

The dog should immediately stop training and/or competing and should seek specialist assessment from a professional experienced in performance dogs (OR an experienced trainer in stress related issues)

The dog should be checked as soon as possible (within a month), preferably by a professional experienced in performance dogs (OR an experienced trainer in stress related issues), and given clearance to continue in agility.

Run and train the dog, while monitoring for orange and red light signs.

Recommended professionals experienced in Performance Canines

- Aqua Paws Ltd - Louise Marsh and Krystle Kelly https://www.facebook.com/Aqua-Paws-Ltd-162702517660761/?ref=py_c
- Steph Bonner - Red Dog Rehabilitation <http://www.reddogrehab.co.nz/>
- Vicki Cordier: <http://www.activepaws.co.nz>
- Sarah Cruickshank: www.vetphysio.co.nz
- Rachel Dellar: <http://www.hydropaws.co.nz>
- Kirsten Gollan: [Animalfsio.co.nz](http://www.animalfsio.co.nz)
- Kirsten Laurence: <http://www.equinoxchiropractic.co.nz>
- Sarah Massingham: <http://www.animalphysio.kiwi.nz/>
- Steve McGill - Veterinary Referral Centre, working out of Matamata Veterinary Services. Special interest in orthopaedic surgery and neurology. 027 555 4580.
- Karynne Penfold: K9 Aqua <http://www.k9aqua.co.nz/>

- Deb Prattley www.acuvet.co.nz. Chiropractic, osteopathy & vet.
- Elena Saltis & Kelli Koga: <http://www.animalphysionz.com/>
- Sarah Taylor: <http://athleticequine.co.nz>
- Sarah Wisson: <http://www.canterburyosteopaths.co.nz/services/animals>

Recommended reading

- <http://hybridogtraining.blogspot.co.nz/2017/12/posters-about-stress.html>
- <https://www.purina.co.uk/dogs/health-and-nutrition/exercise-and-weight-management/dog-body-condition-tool>
- <http://www.breedingbetterdogs.com/article/structure-and-movement-pt-1>
- <http://www.breedingbetterdogs.com/article/structure-and-movement-pt-2>
- <http://susangarrettdogagility.com/2009/10/helen-king-on-structure-evaluation/>