

Agility

NZ vs Aussie: A judge's perspective

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Cam judging at the Sydney Royal.

Judging Agility in Australia is an interesting experience. For the most part the judging and the obstacles are the same, and there is a similar trial format. I thought it would be good to give an idea of the subtle differences from how we compete here in New Zealand versus Australia and some of the variation in rules.

We have had several New Zealand judges invited overseas throughout the years, some multiple times. The contracting process for judges is the same in New Zealand, with all the pre-arrangements such as flights, accommodation and the classes selected.

As mentioned, there are some slight variations to the rules. Refusals and faults are mostly similar, but specific obstacles, such as weaves, cannot be redone when faulted. So, if your dog enters correctly and then pops out you get five faults but you must carry on: you can't fix the error without receiving a DQ. So it does speed things up a bit. There are a few handlers that will take the DQ and go back to fix it but generally would leave the ring after.

Australia's Agility and Jumpers competition classes have a similar format to ours in New Zealand, except their Agility is broken down into three classes rather than four. In both Agility and Jumpers the three classes are Novice, Excellent and Masters, similar to C, B, A in our Jumpers or Novice, Intermediate and

Senior classes in our Agility. In Australia, there isn't a Starters class. It's straight into Novice and you only compete in one level of Agility class, not two.

All classes in both Agility and Jumpers have mandatory obstacles which I will go over a bit later. There is a fairly new addition to the class structure which is an Elite class. This class isn't often used and isn't mandatory like the others, but it has been designed for those that have gained a 'Masters Title'. However, it appears that the Elite class hasn't seen much uptake because it's another class to have to add to the competition, entailing set-up, course-walk and run with another set of prizes. The timing and introduction of the Elite class was unfortunate: COVID-19 restrictions meant that most dogs which may have run it retired through the lockdowns.

There are the Games classes — Snooker and Gamblers — as well which are all very similar to ours but they have a strategic Pairs rather than a Jumpers Pairs which is different in that you have to work with a pair and have multiple changes of handling rather than just the one change. It's incredibly fun to run and I think most here would love it more than our current Jumpers Pairs (in my opinion).

The other standard class is Open Agility and Open Jumpers, which are seen at most trials. As the name suggests, the class is open to

everyone. It's usually quite big and takes a while to get through. It is set at the Excellent (Intermediate) level and has a distance challenge which can be anywhere in the course. There is brightly coloured tape pinned to the ground which no part of the handler may cross during that part of the course. The distance challenge can be three to five obstacles long and between five and seven metres away at some point. There are only certain obstacles that are allowed to be used in the distance challenge as well.

The biggest observed difference is the graduation of dogs into the next class. As most of you know, for the most part to graduate out of Starters/Novice into Intermediate and then into Senior, you need to win. Similarly in Jumpers, wins progress you through the classes. Once you win (more than once) you can move up and it's a pretty automatic process. If you don't win, you stay in that category (I know, as my 10 year old BC is still in Novice).

In Australia, once you have received a certain number of passes (clear round certs) under a variety of judges, you can apply for the graduation to the next class. It isn't a high quantity needed either. Unlike the 25 required from JC to JB here, Australia only requires five to seven passes at each level. You don't need to win to move up. This causes a couple of issues that we in New Zealand don't experience: you may have to move up even if you are not ready just by going clear, and the classes can become top heavy with dogs just getting around to get a pass and beat the clock rather than other competitors. So, many compete with a toy or what they call Not for Comp (NFC) and are automatically DQ'd at the start. This isn't to say that this is always the case... There are some amazing dogs in top levels who do go out to win and are impressive to judge, just like NZ! They also have permanent splits for all five heights for every class no matter the quantity entered. But since you don't need to win to graduate, it's not really a big deal. It's just a race against the clock for a qualification or a pass.

The other thing is the mandatory equipment in all classes. In Agility the Novice class must have the Dog Walk, Scramble (A-Frame), Tyre, Weaves, Spread and Long Jump. Excellent and Masters is the same, with Seesaw as a mandatory addition. In Jumpers classes, the Long Jump, Spread Jump and Tyre are also mandatory. Note that the Spread Jump isn't the ascending multi-bar we have become accustomed to in New Zealand in the last few years, but the older style we used to use.

They can't split their weaves up either: a full set of 12 must be used. There are also minimum distances between obstacles like ours (five metres) but they also have a maximum of 10 metres between obstacles. This is a real struggle on some courses given my design style. There is also a maximum course length on each of their classes which I know for a fact many NZ judges would struggle to keep under! Their Masters Agility and Jumpers (our Senior and Jumpers A) have a maximum length of 220m. I know some competitors reading this would be stoked given my longer course style. With the 25 obstacles to play with, some of us would find it really difficult keeping under that maximum length.

Their height groups are much the same as ours but I've found them to be labelled better. They have simply called their heights 200, 300, 400, 500 and 600 rather than 240, 320, 380, 500 and 600. They haven't adapted their system to have permanent numbers which I think

shows our advantage with record-keeping. The records we have in our system for each dog are pretty exhaustive and we can track everything easily. It's amazing that most of our entries and results are automated with the history we have. I have to say a big kudos to everyone that has assisted in that process over the years, getting it to where we are today. Over the ditch, they get a new number for each event and have to keep their own records for graduations.

I struggled to adjust to the expected judges briefing they have at the beginning of every class. Prior to walking the class once it has been built, set, checked and measured, the judge calls all competitors over to the start line for their brief. The brief would normally contain things like number of challenges, the course length and time and how many metres per second you used to calculate it. You can explain the distance challenge in Open classes and/or anything specific about your course or the way you judge that you want to share.

Unlike our scribes that watch the judge and take the faults down as they are called by the judge, the scribe in Australia receives that detail at the end, so as a judge you need to remember exactly what faults you gave and report back at the end. I tend to continue to call it with my standard hand signals for my own benefit and habit. Due to COVID-19 restrictions they have introduced a rule that you may/should take your lead in the ring with you, wrapped around your waist or in your pocket. This has benefits but it can actually slow things down slightly with handlers taking more time at the start line to do that rather than simply passing it back or dropping to on the ground. Saves on lead runners though!

This year I have been lucky enough to have four invitations to judge in Australia, three of which would have happened by the time you read this. I will have done a trial in Wollongong, Hawkesbury and the Sydney Royal Easter Show. I have attached a picture of the crowd that started to gather at the Royal. It's an event which is similar to our A&P shows but on steroids. It is the biggest ticketed event in Australia each year, taking about 80,000 people a day over 12 days.

In October I will be heading over to Canberra to judge the State titles as well. A few years ago I was invited over to judge in Adelaide at their Nationals (similar to our NZDAC) and be a part of the judging team for the finals too. As mentioned there are a number of our New Zealand judges that have been invited over and by all accounts talking to the Australian competitors, they really enjoy the New Zealand judging style. So count yourself lucky New Zealand to have some great and talented judges right here! 🐾

Cam List



Sydney Royal Easter Show

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