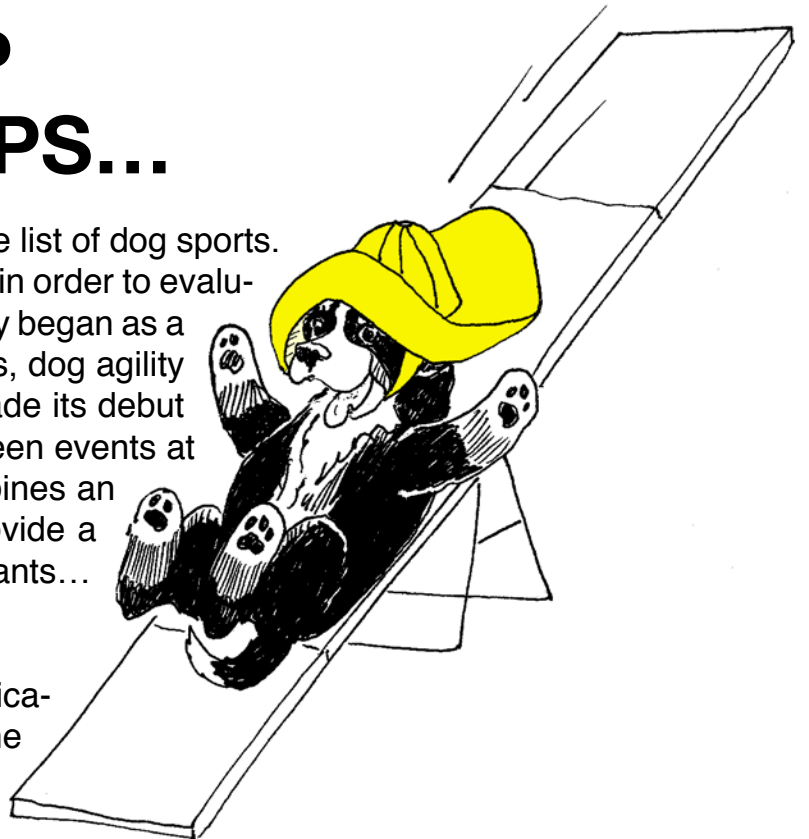


BERNERS JUMP THROUGH HOOPS...

Agility is a relatively new addition to the list of dog sports. In contrast to most events which evolved in order to evaluate functional attributes of the dogs, Agility began as a form of entertainment. By most accounts, dog agility dates back to the late 1970s, when it made its debut as a way to entertain the audience between events at a dog show in England. The sport combines an obstacle course and a stop-watch to provide a challenging and fun event for all participants... including the audience.



In Agility there is a great deal of communication between dog and handler (watch the body language of both) yet the dog is also working quickly and making decisions on its own. Berners tend to be very comfortable with independence and often bring their unique sense of humor with them to the agility ring. Watch for a touch of *vaudeville* as the excitement of running the course seems to bring out the ham (and the *grin*) in many a Berner!

What's all the cheering about?

Today you will see Berners competing at three different levels: Novice, Open, and Excellent. Within each of these classes, the dogs are separated into height categories so that the jumps can be adjusted accordingly. For Bernese, this usually means two jump heights are required, 20" and 24". Finishing the course with a qualifying score (85 pts or above) and no disqualifying deductions earns the team a 'leg' towards the title they are working for; Novice Agility (NA), Open Agility (OA), Agility Excellent (AX), or Master Agility Excellent (MX). Dogs can also compete for similar titles at a "Preferred" (lower) jump height.

The Course...

Using a variety of mandatory and optional obstacles, the judge creates a different course for each class. As the classes advance from Novice through Excellent the number of obstacles, degree of difficulty and penalty for time or course faults increase while the time allowed to cover the distance decreases. Watch for the placement of 'attractive' (read: fun) obstacles in close proximity to other obstacles. Look also for elements requiring calm and control (like the pause table) to be placed after the all-out-go-for-it-build-up-speed type of obstacles.

What the heck are they doing out there?

Ever watch a downhill skier body language his way through the course before getting in the starting gate? Same thing in Agility... before each class, the handlers have the opportunity to familiarize themselves (but not their dog) with the layout and sequence of obstacles. This is

the time for strategic decisions like what speed and approach for each obstacle would be best for their individual dog. The thought process tries to balance risk vs. speed, ie: Should I make a wide arc so Bernie approaches the broad jump he hates, head on and without temptation or should I risk coming in on an angle with his nose pointed at the tunnel (...loves tunnels!) to save those valuable seconds?

They're Off!

Actually, the start's pretty quiet and you might miss it if you're not paying attention. The handler can position herself anywhere she chooses and start anytime after the timekeeper gives the nod that the judge, scribes, and stewards are ready. The clock starts when any part of the dog crosses the starting line and ends similarly. In between, the handler directs the dog around the course taking each obstacle in the sequence mapped out by the judge. Verbal and hand signals can be repeated and used in any combination but handlers may not touch either an obstacle or their dog.

Why is that person waving?

The judge watches each dog throughout the run to be sure that all obstacles are taken in correct sequence, that none are refused, etc. For each infraction the judge flashes a hand signal to 'announce' what fault has occurred. One Scribe's sole job is to watch the judge for these signals and call them to a second Scribe who posts them to the score sheet.

Typical Signals

Closed Fist ~ 5 pt. Deduction for a refusal or a runout (dog starts towards the obstacle then goes around).

Two Fingers ~ 2 pt. Deduction for not doing the pause table properly.

Open Hand ~ 5 pt. Deduction for performing obstacle incorrectly or out of sequence.

Two Hands ~ N.Q., Dog is eliminated. This varies with each class, for example: In Novice a dog is allowed two refusals/runouts whereas in Excellent, any refusal/runout means elimination.

Whistle ~ Dog is excused for fouling the ring or has exceeded the maximum course time. The whistle is also used by the Timekeeper to signal a false start.

The scoring system

Each dog enters the ring with 100 points, the goal being to finish the course with as many of those 100 pts intact as possible. Points are deducted for course faults and for exceeding the standard course time (established by the judge). The four highest qualifying scores in each class are awarded placements with ties being decided by the fastest time.

So, that's it! Agility incorporates training, athleticism, communication, and strategy in a package that's fun for the dog, the handler, AND the audience. Enjoy!