

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF PRACTICE

Prepare in Advance

- Before your first practice, review the safety rules below (page 3)
- Print out the course map and exercises in advance; they are posted weekly on the ARFF website (Sunday at noon preceding the Wed practices). Think about how best to use the setup for your dog. In most cases, a course or exercise will contain cones marked for novice level and for a more advanced level. When the field is set up as a full course, practices run like a trial, where you can walk the course and change jump heights according to the dogs attending practice. If a full course is too complicated for you and your dog, consider practicing it in small parts as an exercise when it is your turn, rather than all at once. Exercises generally are designed for all levels, and the handler can choose to practice all or parts of the sequence.
- Bring a leash or a crate to contain your dog while the course is being built and when other dogs are practicing.
- If you have a mentor, try to be at practice at the same time. If that's not possible, any ARFFer will be happy to answer questions at the field. Don't be shy.
- And don't forget plenty of water, treats, and poop bags.

What can you expect?

- 1) Even if your dog has visited the field before (for evaluation), with a whole new set of dogs, he will feel this is an entirely new—and distracting—place. For your first few times at practice, relax your expectations.
- 2) It's up to you now to decide how best to spend your time. You're the trainer and that requires a different mindset from being a student. Your progress here depends as much on improving your communication and relationship with your dog as it does on developing your skills as an agility handler.

What you can do

Check in: Check in with others. If you arrive on the early side, you are expected to help set up. If you arrive on the late side, you are expected to stay to the end and help put away.

Courses/exercises: Bring your own copy of the exercises, preferably with your own training plan.

Get your dog settled: A young or green dog may need to take a walk around the perimeter to get a sniff of what's going on. Practice a little obedience and especially some recalls, on-leash if need be. Is your dog OK with being left tied/crated? Does he have water/shade? Has he peed/pooped/run a bit? Is he nervous about that bouncy sheltie next to him? Another ARFFer should be able to tell you (especially if you're new) if there's a dog that has space issues or any other potential problems.

Look at the exercise options and walk the course: If you don't understand the point of a given exercise or how to do it, watch and ask. Walk it and plan what you want to do, thinking of timing of commands, body position/hand signals, and pace changes. This is excellent practice for real trials.

Set goals: What do you hope to accomplish with this exercise? A clean entry to the weave poles? A smooth cross in front of your dog? No barking? An exuberant chute performance? A push to the left? Going on ahead of you 6' to the table? Some combination of these? Be clear about what you hope you and your dog can do or work toward with several repetitions. It's often best to concentrate on one thing at a time. If the whole exercise seems too difficult, figure out some other way to use the obstacles: can you send your dog to a tunnel? Wrap a jump? Find a straight line of obstacles for your baby dog to run? You're not required to do what's down on paper.

Warm up your dog: If your dog has been lying around all day, take a few minutes to get him warmed up physically and mentally. What really motivates your dog so he is happy, expectant, and focused? Stretches? Obedience routines? Targeting? tug? Silly little games?

Keep your dog motivated/up/learning: Before you start running, make sure you have the dog where you want him to be and that he's focused on you. Don't settle for less, but don't spend 3 minutes setting up for each exercise either or the dog will lose interest. Remember the exercise doesn't finish when you stop running. Reward your dog if he tried as well as when he's successful.

Assess and reward progress: Did you meet your immediate goal? If not, what went wrong? If your dog lost focus, then why? Should you ignore, not reward, and simply try again? Was your dog trying and you messed up? Then he deserves a reward: tugging, playing ball (but watch where you throw it so that it doesn't interfere with someone else's run), good treats, a break for water, or greeting a friend. If your dog was unexpectedly dynamite — even if only for a second — immediately stop and jackpot that behavior with extra treats, *even if it means interrupting a good run*. Be clear with your dog about what you like and don't like. Take your time and don't rush your dog; build the basics slowly and surely through shaping.

Know when to stop—end on a high note: Even if you don't reach your goal for a given exercise, make sure that you set up your final repetition of an exercise so the dog can succeed. Maybe your goal was too high. Your dog isn't ready to go 12' away from you to do jump/tunnel, but he can do 8', with you standing by the jump and sending him into the tunnel. Help him succeed at the adjusted goal and he and you will be happy, and he'll be ready and eager to tackle the next exercise.

Use the buddy system to help each other: Ask for feedback and constructive criticism. In return, you can hold an antsy dog at the start line so a friend can lead out. This is a great way to learn by watching others. Keep body language/position, timing of commands, and handler pace in mind. And if you really pair up, the buddy system can carry over into off-site practice. The more you know how one handler-dog team works, the more you can help them.

In doing each exercise, think about your goal(s)

- how you're going to warm-up/motivate your dog
- what constitutes progress
- how you'll reward dog

Practice etiquette

- Do learn the exercises/courses. If others are running a longer course and you wish to do two obstacles in it, wait your turn and clue people when you're done.
- Replace knocked bars, adjust tunnels, and straighten weave poles after you've used them.
- Be aware of who else is running a dog on the field when you are and be sure you're not on a collision course.
- Wait until someone is through with an exercise before asking him/her a question.

To keep in mind while you're training

- In a new setting, relax your goals.
- Set your dog up for success.
- Dogs don't generalize very readily: What you may think is the same exercise isn't, because your dog has never seen that kind of tire frame before—or because you're approaching the same old tire from a slightly different angle—or because that high-energy border collie your dog has never met is playing Frisbee beyond it.
- So, think like a dog: What will your dog perceive as different or new about an exercise? How do you need to adjust?
- Vary only one aspect (distance, sharpness of turn, speed, etc.) of an exercise at a time. That way, it'll be easier to set your dog up for success and for you to see progress.

- When in doubt, keep moving. Your body speaks louder to your dog than do words, and stopping often communicates uncertainty to your dog and frustrates him and may fray his confidence. If you flub up, see if you can circle around and try that combo again.
- Always keep it fun. If you're not having fun, your dog isn't either.

Safety Rules and Guidelines

WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR MAINTAINING THESE RULES!

- These are intended to ensure the safety and pleasure of club members, visitors, and their dogs at all ARFF practices and activities. Please keep this list and refer to it frequently.
- All dogs must be properly vaccinated, in good health, and free from any deformity or injury that might affect physical or mental performance. NO BITCHES IN SEASON allowed on training grounds.
- All dogs must be under control at all times on the training grounds. Any dog that repeatedly interferes with another handler/dog team while working in the training area must be leashed until sufficient voice control can be demonstrated.
- To prevent injury, dogs must be restrained or crated while heavy equipment is being set up or put away.
- If a collar will be used on your dog during training, it is mandatory that it be a flat buckle collar with no hanging tags. This is for your dog's safety while working on the equipment. An agility lead or tab free of hanging attachments and with no loop on the end may be used. For dogs that are difficult to control, however, other training collars may be used in addition to the flat buckle collar, but not while working.
- A handler must work only one dog at a time, and only dogs that are working/training should be present in the training areas. All other dogs should be crated, restrained, or left in your car.
- Any dog that repeatedly shows aggressive behavior towards another handler and/or dog, or that bites or attacks any person or dog, may be asked to leave the training grounds.
- In consideration of dogs that may not enjoy a pre- or post-practice play session, handlers should check with each other before releasing their dogs.
- Any handler who repeatedly uses severe corrections and/or harsh punishment may be asked to leave the training grounds.
- CLEANING UP AFTER YOUR DOG IS MANDATORY. Bring plastic bags or other collection material.
- No alcohol, drugs, or smoking are allowed on the training grounds.
- At River Road Farm, to keep peace with the neighbors, all dogs must be kept quiet. Leave your dog in your car if needed, with adequate ventilation.
- If you are the last to leave a practice, make sure you triple-lock the gate. If you don't know how, ask someone to show you.
- You may park in the circular driveway up to the apple tree by the agility field gate, *but no further*. Do not block the driveway. You may also park along River Road and (head in) on Skelton Rd, but not on the corner. Don't block the barn doors on Skelton Rd. If you're parked on Skelton Rd down by the barn and returning to your car from the field, please go through the yard, and past the kitchen because some of the family dogs tend to follow you, especially corgi Sailor. He'll return if you go that way, but if you go around on River Rd, he may get out on the street.
- You may only drive *slowly* (5 mph) in the circular drive. Be on the lookout for Platais family, dogs, and cats. *Never* drive anywhere else on the property.