

IS THERE AGILITY AFTER 50?

By Diane L. Bauman

A quick glance into the agility rings during a “walk through” reveals what many of us already know. Most agility competitors are middle age women wearing a brace of some kind. Knee injuries are an epidemic in agility. Those of us who have been running agility now for ten to fifteen years feel that while our minds are very clear about how to negotiate a course, our bodies are wearing out. Simply put, running has become painful even when we rely more on rear crosses than front crosses. We have well trained, fast dogs but are forced to rely on handling from a distance because of our physical limitations.

I have enjoyed agility for the past 15 years and watched it evolve into an amazing sport; exciting and positive for all dogs and people. The mere thought of having to give it up because I can no longer run is very depressing.

While we all clap for the efforts of children and young people in the agility rings, the reality is that agility is not a kid’s sport. Only the mature handlers have the time and money to play the game in today’s economy. What will happen to all the entries in agility as the population of “baby boomers” age?

The “Preferred Classes” in AKC agility make provisions for the older dogs that can no longer jump as high as they used to. What are we planning for the aging handlers?

The truth is that when agility first came on the scene, it was viewed and trained more like an exercise in distance control over obstacles. Participants like JC and Hazel Thompson rarely ran around the ring. It has only been since the introduction of World Team Competitions that the United States has witnessed the value of running with your dog (common in Europe) and adopted it as the preferred style of handling.

Some may argue that the FAST classes serve the purpose of encouraging agility from a distance but there is still a lot of running required in the FAST ring if you are to be competitive in earning points before the distance part.

While I think the AKC is a long way from introducing a new class to agility, I would like to propose an idea for the future.

We need a distance skills class where there is a circle/square marked off in the center of the ring and the handler must direct his dog through the course without leaving the roped off space; little to no running. This would involve a lot of training and would be a worthwhile challenge for the dedicated people of the sport who can no longer sprint. I would like to see this concept carried to the Nationals level, thus offering good trainers with failing bodies a reason to continue to enter and attend Nationals. Distance handling is always exciting to spectators and I think this ring would draw a lot of attention.

The absence of the Table obstacle and a judge in a stationery position (perhaps standing on the table) would make this class a wonderful choice for “sensitive” dogs learning to work with strange people in the ring or dogs learning to deal with “table issues.”

It is important for the sport of agility to continue to evolve if it is to remain popular and challenging. I would like to believe that there is room for handlers of all ages and handicaps.

I would appreciate hearing your comments on this topic.

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