



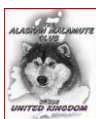
Introduction to Agility

Agility is an excellent activity that you and your Mal can do together. Even if you don't wish to compete, Agility allows you to achieve a closer working relationship with your Mal as they have to focus on you and the instructions you are giving them. It is also an excellent way of keeping your Mal (and you!) fit. Agility is not an activity I would recommend doing with a young Mal, it is perfectly acceptable to get them used to the commands you are going to use at an early age (especially directional commands) but that time is best spent getting them to focus on you and working on their training. Some flat work can be introduced but ideally you would not start jumping until your Mal was at least a year old, preferably more towards 18 months of age (certainly not full height jumps). By this time you should also have a good rapport with your Mal and be able to work well with them. In order to compete your dog must be a minimum of 18 months old, so there is no need to rush their training and in fact some clubs will require them to be at least a year old before joining given their size.

The different clubs

There are two routes you can take when looking for an agility class – there are several 'fun' clubs that teach you how to negotiate the different pieces of equipment and how you need to work with your Mal. These types of clubs are more for the casual enthusiast who wants to do a different activity with their Mal, one that gets both handler and dog working together and improves fitness and communication. These 'fun' clubs are an excellent choice if you want to do agility as a hobby. If you would like to compete, then you should look for a competitive club from the start, however you will need to have good recall and your Mal needs to work well off lead. A large number of competitive clubs have several classes running at the same time and the venues are not always enclosed, so several dogs could be running together in close vicinity of each other, therefore it is essential that your Mal is tolerant of other dogs and will not take off after one of the other dogs who are running their course. Fun clubs tend to have a smaller number of dogs in a class and are happy to allow you to work on a long line of necessary, however like a larger club, often the venues are not enclosed – if you have concerns about your recall then you would need to locate a club that trains in an enclosed area or be prepared to work on a long line.

For a list of clubs please check out the links at the bottom of this article.



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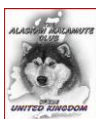
Getting Started

To start Agility I would get your dogs used to the commands you are going to use. There are several different pieces of equipment that your Mal will need to negotiate and therefore you will need to work on your commands to let them know what piece of equipment they are working on. The basic equipment is as follows:

Jumps – Upright, Long (Spread), Walls, Wishing Wells, Tyre – there are several different types of jump that you can encounter when running an agility course. Whilst the jumps shouldn't cause a problem for most dogs, it is advisable to use a different command for upright jumps as oppose to long jumps. This will inform the dog as to whether they need to go for height or distance when jumping. You will start out at a lower height and shorter distance, which progressively increase as you improve. The jump I have found to be slightly more complicated is the tyre jump – here the Mal will have to jump through a tyre positioned off the floor, this needs to be taught carefully. One way of teaching this piece of equipment is to start off by placing the tyre lower so that it is only just off the floor and with the Mal on lead, pass the lead through and encourage them to hop through the tyre. You can then increase the height of the tyre jump until your Mal is confident with this piece of equipment.

Contact equipment – A Frame, Dog Walk, See-Saw –You will notice that each of these pieces of equipment have different coloured areas. These are 'contact' points and your Mal must touch these otherwise it will be classed as a 'fault' and you will incur penalties for each missed contact, both on the up and down. One bad habit that dogs easily fall into is jumping off at the end in order to progress faster and thus missing out the down contact. This can be rectified by training the Mal to pause for a second at the bottom of the piece of equipment in a classic "2020" (2 on 2 off) position where their two front feet are on the floor but their back feet are still positioned on the obstacle, they then wait to be released. Running contacts are faster, however if you do choose to use running contacts then you need to be aware of a Mals larger stride and the possibility of missing contacts. With the See-Saw, the end should be touching the floor when the dog leaves the equipment else that is also regarded as a fault.

Tunnels – Rigid, Collapsible – there are two main types of tunnel used in an Agility course, these being rigid and collapsible tunnels. Rigid tunnels are the easiest to train as you can start off with a very short tunnel and encourage the Mal to run through it. You then increase the length and when the Mal is confident you can start introducing bends into this piece of equipment. The collapsible tunnel has a solid entrance, but is then followed by a cloth tunnel that the dogs have to 'push' their way through. Dogs normally aren't so keen on this type of tunnel as they are unable to see the end.



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To train, you need two people – yourself who is handling the dog and a helper to hold up the end of the tunnel. Once the dog has run through the tunnel and is confident, the helper starts to lower the end until the dog is confident in doing the equipment on their own.

Weaves – Dogs must enter the weave poles from the right (so their left shoulder must pass the first pole) – if they do not do this then they are faulted. There are different ways of teaching the weaves, some use ‘channels’ which guide the dogs through the weaves, others use ‘V’ weaves which open up to a V shape and make it easier for the dog to learn how to weave and then the normal upright weave poles. I have trained on V’s and uprights and personally find V weaves give a faster weave at the end of the day.

Table – Tables are not commonly used but they can be included so it is a good idea to at least get your Mal used to them. The table requires dogs to jump up onto it and remain there for a period of 5 seconds before continuing with the course.

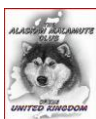
Walking the course

When you are running an Agility course, you need to walk the course first so that you are aware of the layout and any places where you need to send the dog on, change sides etc.

When you are just starting out the courses are easier and relatively straight forward, however these increase in difficulty as you progress. There will be a maximum of 16 obstacles in a KC course, however UKA tend to have a minimum of 17 obstacles and a maximum of 20 on their courses.

Height/Width of jumps

The height of the jumps will depend on the size of your dog however all Mals would be classed as ‘obviously large’ dogs. For the KC Competitions, large dogs are over 43 cm at the shoulder (16.9 inches) and for UKA Maxi (the largest size), dogs have to be over 50cm at the shoulder (19.69”). All Mals should fall into both the largest categories. The height they will have to jumps are as follows: Upright – 65cm for both KC and UKA Spread – 1.3m for UKA and 1.5m for KC.



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Competing and Grades

Both UKA and KC Agility have different 'grades', which you can compete in and you can go on to 'win out' of thus progressing up the grades. If you are interested in competing then check out the links at the bottom of the article, these take you to the websites of the two respective bodies to look further into the different grades and progression. Even if you don't win out of the grades you can still progress by achieving points from jumping clear rounds.

Use of Treats

In competition you are not allowed to carry food, so you will need to build up to running a course without food. In training it is acceptable to use food as a reward and Mals work very well for this, more competitive clubs tend to prefer toys as a reward as oppose to food. I tend to use food as a reward for the Mals, they enjoy getting their titbit after successfully completing either one obstacle or a series of obstacles. When training a piece of equipment I tend to use more food, then when that piece of equipment is learnt, the food is reduced so that they only receive it at the end of the obstacle. This is then built up so they only get the treat at the end of a series of obstacles so you can get them working on a full course without the need for a treat. Often clubs run displays at local events to show the general public what Agility is all about. Display. So find a local club and have a go – Agility is all about having fun with your Mal and they love it.

Useful Agility links:

AgilityNet – <http://agilitynet.co.uk/frontpage.htm> - A comprehensive site covering all aspects of Agility.

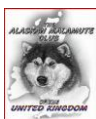
AgilityNet Clubs - <http://agilitynet.co.uk/clutch/clubs.htm> - A list of Agility clubs by region

Agility Warehouse - <http://www.agilitywarehouse.com> – an excellent place to purchase agility equipment from.

Kennel Club Agility - <http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/agility>

UKA (United Kingdom Agility) - <http://ukagility.com/Default.aspx>

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