

Papillons and the Sport of Agility

By Beth Nolley

Most papillon owners have witnessed their dog's natural athletic prowess in everyday life, be it jumping in place (often two or three feet high), leaping on and off furniture in a single bound, or running "zoomies" around the yard with lightning-fast speed. The sport of agility harnesses this energy and channels it in a constructive manner on an obstacle course, while teaching your dog to communicate with you using both verbal and non-verbal cues. Agility is the fastest-growing dog sport in America, not just among human/dog teams who compete in agility trials, but also among average pet owners who want a fun activity they can do with their dogs in their own backyard using some basic pieces of training equipment that can be purchased fairly inexpensively over the Internet or at a local pet shop.



Shirley Murphy began participating in agility in 1992 with her Papillon, Willie, who has since earned numerous championship titles. Willie, aka MACH2 UGRACH Calypso Oui Willie Wonka U-CDX UDX2 NF RA VPA, qualified for and participated in the AKC National Agility Championships three times, finishing the 2007 competition in the top 25 percent of his jump height. (Dogs of similar sizes may perform jumps at variable heights, depending on the class in which they are competing. For example, the AKC Preferred class allows dogs to jump four inches less than the height they "measure into.") The prefixes and suffixes surrounding Willie's

registered AKC name may seem like a secret code, but each abbreviation represents a title he has earned (*see definitions at the end of this article*) and are analogous to the CH prefix of champion conformance dogs.

“I believe that any sport you become involved in with your dog will enhance the relationship, because the dog becomes more than just ‘someone to come home to,’” said Murphy. “In both obedience and agility, you are partners with this wonderful pet, and you spend a great deal more quality time with him or her than most people do with their pets.”

Jennie Larkin caught the agility bug about 12 years ago with her Canaan Dog, Tycho, and remains extremely active in the sport today with her Papillon, Bo. “You learn to work together as a team,” Larkin said. “As a trainer, you have to learn how to read your dog even better, know what motivates your dog, and how to handle him in many different situations. From the dog’s end, he learns how to read you and perform consistently even in new and sometimes trying situations, which requires a deep level of trust.” Bo (U-CD Waytogo Fuligin Beau Tay CDX RE NA OAJ NF SSA SJ) has earned six agility titles, winning his first big agility weekend at the 2008 Papillon Club of America National Specialty in Frederick, Md. Larkin’s retired Canaan Dog, Tycho (CDCA-DOTY-2001 Fuligin Ged Tycho CDCA-HC CDCA-V CDX RE AX AXJ NAP NJP), also has a proven success rate in agility competitions.

Not everyone who participates in agility goes on to compete in trials to earn titles. For example, some of the members of the Northern Virginia Papillon Meetup Group, who want to learn agility with their dogs purely for the fun of it, have signed up for a papillon-only basic agility class with trainer Anne Davis, of Rudy’s Friends Dog Training, Inc. Davis, who utilizes positive training techniques, explained, “This is a great training experience, which helps to strengthen the bond between yourself and your dog. Agility is a wonderful way to build confidence in dogs and to make training fun. The goal is to enjoy a new activity with your dogs so they will better understand that good things happen when they respond to you.”

One member of this class, Natalie Rainey, joined purely to increase her dog’s confidence. Rainey’s pap, Cozy, was born deaf and is socially awkward both with humans and dogs. “Cozy often misses the ‘warning’ signs from her packmates that she is not behaving in a way that they find acceptable,” Rainey said. “So she is often startled by the ‘suddenness’ of their stage two warning, which is usually physical.”

Rainey discussed Cozy's handicap with Davis prior to signing up for the basic agility class. Davis utilizes hand signals in all of her training, which is a perfect fit for a deaf dog. "It is my hope that by involving Cozy in agility training using non-verbal cues, I will help her to focus and fine-tune her visual observation skills so that she will become confident about knowing what is expected of her in a given circumstance," said Rainey. "Obviously, I can't decipher for her the non-verbal cues her pack gives her – and save her from future 'oops' moments – but I hope that agility training will give her an area where she feels in-the-know and will serve as a foundation for confidence spreading into other aspects of her life."

Murphy and Larkin offer some words of advice for pet owners who are just getting started with agility. "Find great trainers to help teach you and make sure that the environment is safe for your small dog," said Larkin. "Get your Papillon a full veterinary check-up before you start training to clear his patellas and heart [two potential health problems for paps]. Keep him in lean condition, as carrying extra weight – even a few ounces on a Papillon – can make the running and jumping much harder work. Build 'play drive' in your dog. And most of all, have fun and don't worry."

Murphy stressed the importance of using positive training. "When you use such methods, the dog performs because he likes to and because he gets rewards, in the form of your attention and love, as well as play and the ever-popular 'cookies,'" she said. "As much as I would like to believe that people are leaving the old methods behind, I know there are still many people who get their dogs to perform through intimidation and physical punishment, and I believe in that case, many of these dogs are performing out of fear, not out of pleasure and joy," said Murphy. She also advised not to rush the training or skimp on foundation work. "Wait until the dog is around one year old before you do full-height jumping, full-height A-frame and any extensive drilling on weave poles," Murphy said. "Always think of your dog, his safety, and your relationship first and the competition second. When you have a training session, plan what you want to train on... front crosses, rear crosses, distance, independent contact performance... and set up a course to accomplish that," Murphy said. "Don't just run a course with no purpose to it."

Definitions:

As for the “secret code” of prefixes and suffixes encompassed in the AKC registered names of the paps mentioned in this article, the list below includes definitions of agility titles and websites for the various canine groups that offer agility competitions:

American Kennel Club (AKC)

www.akc.org

Agility Levels: Novice, Open, Excellent

AX: Agility Excellent

AXJ: Agility Excellent Jumpers

CDX: Companion Dog Excellent

MACH: Master Agility Championship

NA: Novice Agility

NAJ: Novice Agility Jumpers

NAP: Novice Agility Preferred

NJP: Novice Agility Jumpers Preferred

NF: Novice FAST

OAJ: Open Agility Jumpers

United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA)

www.usdaa.com

Agility Levels: Starters, Advanced, Masters

SSA: Starters Standard Agility

SJ: Starters Jumper

Australian Shepherd Club of America (ASCA)

www.asca.org

Agility Levels: Novice, Open, Elite

Canine Performance Events (CPE)

www.k9cpe.com

Agility Levels: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, C

4-H Dog Agility

www.4husa.org

Agility Levels: Beginner, Elementary, Intermediate, Senior, Advanced

North American Dog Agility Council (NADAC)

www.nadac.com

Agility Levels: Junior Novice, Junior Open, Junior Elite, Veterans Novice, Veterans Open, Veterans Elite

Teacup Dog Agility Association

www.k9tdaa.com

Agility Levels: Beginner, Intermediate, Superior

United Kennel Club (UKC)

www.ukcdogs.com

Agility Levels: United Agility I (UAG1), United Agility II (UAGII), United Agility Champion (UACH), United Agility Champion Excellent (UACHX), United Grand Agility Champion (UGRACH)

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