

What Makes Your Dog Go?

– by Becky Dean

So! You've decided to sign up for agility classes with your best friend! Congratulations! Before exploring what makes your dog go, who motivated you to start on this life-long learning experience? Was it a neighbor, a good friend or perhaps even a co-worker? Perhaps you were watching an agility demonstration or a trial? Or, by chance, did your dog drop you an email note suggesting this was a great idea? Chances are you were the part of your agility 'team' who took the initial step to contact someone to find out when and where classes are held. And while it isn't important how you became interested, it is important to note that although **you** know you're going to start learning to play the agility game, quite frankly, your canine friend doesn't have a clue.

I once heard an agility trial judge state, "Agility is a game that our dogs are willing to play with humans." She continued by stating that she has yet to see dogs play this game on their own or when running wild in packs. The points of her statements were for the exhibitors to treasure our teammate's willingness to learn and participate in this human created team sport.

Our job, as the human part of this team, is to provide our canine partners with a positive attitude, unconditional love, constant consideration of safety, and MOTIVATION. A motivator is the 'what' one attains when a task is complete. Some of the more common human motivators are, in no particular order, fame, money, power, pride, adventure, life-long learning, and self-respect.

So what motivates your dog? The primary canine motivators are toys, food, and praise. Various dog breeds have specific breed characteristics that handlers can capitalize on when tapping into a dog's motivation. For example, some dogs enjoy the chase, others food, and others, simple praise. And within each breed there are many different personality types—as many different personalities with likes and dislikes as us human types.

The above are all, when correctly applied *positive* motivators. There are also *negative* motivators (not to be confused with punishment), and should be applied only in cases when a dog demonstrates aggression towards other dogs or humans. Negative motivators are used to extinguish inappropriate behavior, and if used incorrectly in an attempt to bring to a dog's attention the incorrect performance of an agility obstacle could easily make a dog unwilling to try to give the correct performance.

Our job as handlers is to take into the agility game all the knowledge we have about our canine friend, and experiment to find what makes and keeps our dogs interested and happy when playing the agility game. This is where your ability to try different positive motivators has no limits except your imagination. You may find that the toys/food that your dog adores at home don't work at all in a different environment. That certainly doesn't mean your dog doesn't enjoy them at home, just that you need to find something different (e.g., 'better') as a motivator when playing the agility game.

As you progress through your classes, you may find that you need to change the motivators or add new motivators. Some additional motivators include the tone of your voice, arm and hand cueing, and over time, playing the agility game is on its own a motivator.

Relax and enjoy this special game with your dog... you may well find that you learn quite a few lessons about yourself in the process of playing this wonderful game. One common anecdote commonly found on pillows and bumper stickers is that we (humans) want to: "Be the person your dog thinks you are". Agility provides us with that opportunity, and so very much more.