

# Agility Class Etiquette



## *A guide to your first agility class* by Tom Francis

Courtesy of



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<http://www.windycityagility.org/agilityetiquette.pdf>

## Acknowledgements

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In the process of working my way through beginner agility classes with my Aussie-Shepherd mix partner (perhaps better described as an aussie-shepherd MIX), I have been deeply impressed by the insights and willingness to share that characterized the instructors of Windy City Agility Club. Along the way, it also became clear, as for other sports, agility has many matters of etiquette that have evolved to make the entire experience more productive and enjoyable.

In the spirit of “wishing that I knew then what I know now” I volunteered to compile the many things I had learned through the generosity and patience of the instructors – and this document is the result.

Thanks are in order to:

*The Instructors of Windy City Agility Club* who taught me everything I know that is right about agility training (anything I know that is wrong is my own creation).

Special thanks to the instructors who contributed directly to the editing of this document:

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Tom Francis



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### **Before Class**

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#### Managing Meals and Treats

It has been said that “a hungry dog is a motivated dog”... so some people either do not feed their dogs before class (they get plenty to eat during the class)... or feed them a smaller meal or a meal at an earlier time than normal... or other variation depending on the individual dog’s feeding schedule. What is best for your dog can only be learned by trying different regimens. Keep track of what works and after a few weeks you will know the best schedule for your teammate.

Treats are one of the primary motivators for agility training (praise and toys being the others). Best choices are soft treats. These are less likely to cause choking when gulped by an excited dog. If your dog really prefers hard treats, break them up into small, easy to swallow pieces.

As a courtesy to other students, it is important to retrieve any treats that have fallen on the course during your run. Your dog will be glad to help!

Treat bags that hang from your belt are very handy. However, should you decide to enter competitions, no treats or treat bags are allowed in the ring. Your dog may take the absence of a treat bag as a clear signal of “no treats today” and act accordingly. For other dogs, this is not a problem... so you will see some handlers using treat bags regularly and some avoiding them.

*Note: Some dogs will pass up 10 treats for that special toy. If that description fits your dog, check with your instructor for tips on working with a toy as a “reward” during class.*

#### Managing Nature Calls

When arriving your dog will typically have been in the car for a while and be ready to visit nature. This is time well spent. If your dog does need to relieve itself after it is in the building you have two scenarios:

Best case – your dog will let you know it’s time for a walk – but you will lose some of the class time that you paid for.

Worst case – your dog will soil the course – EVERYONE loses course time... and guess who gets to clean up???

Note: Agility class is a new place with lots of new people, lots of new dogs and lots of neat “stuff” to do. This is VERY exciting and stimulating to a dog. Therefore, “they just went when we got here” will probably not be sufficient, especially in your first several classes. Watch for your dog’s signals and respond accordingly.

## During Class

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### Listen to the instructor

They have considerable experience and have become instructors because they love to see dogs and handlers learn, succeed, and have fun along the way.

### Watch and learn from others

It is very common for a class to have a beginner dog paired with an experienced handler. This is usually one of several dogs they have (agility handlers tend to have full households). Watching these people work with their dogs is a great learning experience.

### Manage your dog

#### Agility Class is:

A shared environment with dogs and handlers of different stripes, spots, patches, preferences and temperaments. Being aware of and respecting those differences is essential to a productive and enjoyable class experience.

#### Agility Class is not:

“Puppy Play Time”. There are other venues where direct interaction between dogs is encouraged. If that is what you are seeking – these venues can be great fun and we encourage you to go. But agility class is not one of them. To that end:

Be respectful of each dogs’ space – some dogs do not like other dogs in “their space”. Allow a minimum 3-4 foot buffer zone between dogs.

Leashes: dogs are to be on leash at all times, except when the instructor has given consent to be off leash for training on specific obstacles or running the course.

When you finish a run, your dog should be placed back on leash immediately after completion of its run (at this point, another dog is waiting to be taken off leash).

When it is not your turn... guide your dog to a neutral area either on or off the course where you will not be in the path of dogs running the course.

In the process of running a course, sometimes a course obstacle may point your dog directly at a group of waiting dogs... or an exit out of the ring. If you have concerns about this, let the instructor know and an assistant can be asked to play “goalie.”

*Note: The guidelines for managing your dog apply before class, after class, in the building, and out of the building. The dogs that need special attention in this regard are the younger dogs who “love everybody, including other dogs.” Their desire to socialize with every dog they see may result in their invading the space of a dog who does not welcome such exuberant advances.*

## Maximizing the actual training time during your class

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Take the mystery out of who goes first

During the class, each dog and handler get several turns. But... "Who goes next?"

If the dogs are all about the same size – anyone can go next in the first round. After that - keep it simple... just note the order you went in on the first round... then follow that order for the rest of class.

If the dogs vary in size enough to warrant adjustments in the equipment - the dogs should be grouped according to size – then follow that order for the rest of class.

Be ready for your turn

When your turn is coming up, get your dog in position and be ready to start when the instructor signals you.

Always wait until the dog that went before you is back on leash.

Keep your dog on a short leash or held by the collar until you get the instructor's go signal.

*Exception: If the finish line and starting line are the same area... stay clear until the previous dog finishes and is back on leash... but be ready to move into position.*

Help with course setup and changes

Obstacles get jostled, knocked down, or just have to be adjusted for different height dogs. The more people help with this, the more class time there is for everyone. Feel free to help out with these tasks. If you are not sure what to do... just ask.

*Exception: You may have a dog that has an issue with interactions with other dogs. If that is the case, it may be best to "stand down" with your dog while others are working on the course.*

Help others retrieve their leashes

As a dog progresses to running off leash, the leash gets tossed aside just before the dog begins its run (this is standard procedure in competitions). This takes less time than trying to fold the leash and stuff it in your pocket. However, since the starting and ending points of the run are rarely in the same area... you can save class time by helping other handlers retrieve their leashes.

Admonish the dog who wants to see the world, aka dogs who run off course

This is an important training issue that, when dealt with immediately, can almost always be nipped in the bud, to everyone's benefit. If it isn't, it rapidly becomes a self-rewarding behavior for the offending dog(s) and robs the entire group of precious class time.

When a dog runs off course (for any reason), in most cases they should (at least the first time) be given a second chance. As soon as it appears that this is developing into a bad habit (sooner rather than later!), they lose their turn and go to the end of the line. Or, very briefly, out of the ring for a time out. It is a rare dog that doesn't respond to missing their chance to "play." Although that may mean fewer runs for a few weeks, it is of great benefit long term.

## Other things to do between turns

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Attention games - help your dog learn to focus on you (Watch Me, Auto Check-in, Eye Contact).

Calm your dog - with everything going on it is a great time to work on calming techniques.

Tricks - downtime between turns can be an excellent time to work on fine tuning tricks and commands, especially of the obedience variety – long “sits”, long “stays” – in a new environment with new distractions.

*Note: If your dog is sizing up another dog... use one of the above to get your dog to focus on you. This is great training and reduces the possibility of a confrontation.*

## Thoughts to consider

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Agility class is not fair

Dogs and handlers learn and negotiate the course at different speeds. The emphasis in beginners class is familiarization and overcoming any fear a dog may have of an obstacle. Therefore, some dogs will get more time and attention than others. However, you can benefit by observing the training techniques that are being used for the other dogs... and also apply that down time to the “between turns” training techniques.

There are many positive and effective ways to train a dog

You will get different suggestions from different instructors. You will even get different suggestions from the same instructor. This can be confusing or frustrating.

However, the instructors have worked with many dogs (and handlers). Although we feel we “know” our own dog best – the instructors realize that we also are more likely to sell our dog short and that just trying something new and different is often “just what the agility doctor ordered.”

So when you have a challenge... be willing to try something different. The final test is “Does it work for you and your dog?” These differences are what account for both the challenge and the rewards of teamwork in agility training.

“In competition you will lose points if ...”

This is a phrase you will often hear during training class. So what *are* the rules? You can get guidance and clarifications from the instructors who have had many dogs in competition – or check out <http://www.ukcdogs.com/pubrulebooks.htm> for the Official UKC Agility Trial rule book ~ \$5.00.