

Agility with the Japanese Spitz

Whilst breed showing is a very rewarding pastime, it isn't for everybody and there are many other disciplines in which Japanese Spitz excel, from Obedience to Heelwork-to-music and Rally to Agility. This article is aimed at providing an introduction to agility. Remember that any discipline you decide to participate in must be fun and achievable by both you and your dog, always consider checking with your GP and your vet if you have any concerns regarding either yourself or your dog respectively.

*Japanese Spitz -
Love to Please
Willing to Learn*

A Very Brief History of Agility

In 1974 a man named Peter Meanwell either participated in, or witnessed at a farm show, dogs being 'driven' around a course of obstacles. In 1978 Meanwell was approached by John Varley, himself tasked with finding suitable entertainment for the audience at Crufts in between the Obedience and Conformation competitions in the main ring. They provided a demonstration of predominantly jumps in an equestrian type format but with the addition of various obstacles which are still used in today's agility (albeit vastly developed and improved).

In 1980 the Kennel Club became the first organisation to recognise agility as a sport with a sanctioned set of rules. The first agility show was a team event at Crufts the following year. Originally smaller dogs were not well catered for, having to compete with larger dogs over jump heights set at 30 inches. This changed in the early 1980's with smaller or 'mini' dogs under the height of 15 inches given jump heights of 15 inches. Many regional clubs then began to form and the rest is history with agility evolving over the years into the worldwide extravaganza it is today with different official bodies, degrees of competitiveness and jumping heights.

Getting Started . . .

Whilst it is never too late to start, it is essential that your dog is receptive to training, wants to learn and is trained in a force free, positive, and reward based environment.

Whilst you could buy some basic equipment and have a go yourself, this is not advised.

It is best to find an approved trainer in your local area and enroll on a pre-agility course where you will be taught all the key foundations of agility.

Don't expect to be whizzing over jumps and flying through tunnels, it takes time to learn the basics such as a good start line wait, a reliable recall, learning to walk on different textured surfaces, your dog running off lead under control at both sides of you, and changing sides when instructed. That is just the start.

You do have one key advantage though; you already own a Japanese Spitz!

Your dog can start post-puppy classes and pre-agility classes at a young age but should not

learn the contact equipment at height or attempt any jumps or weaving obstacles until the musculo-skeletal system has suitably developed, generally from 12 to 16 months.

Full height equipment should be avoided until 16 months old as a minimum. Don't rush it, enjoy the journey and the friends you meet.



Why use an Approved Instructor?

Unfortunately, dog training is not a regulated industry and anyone can set up a training school without using the approved equipment or even being a competent instructor, let alone being industry approved.

Why avoid the untrained Instructors?

Some people are unfortunately of the opinion that they know how to do agility and therefore they are able to teach. It can be very damaging to the dog if taught incorrectly and can cause the handler to lose interest and feel inadequate.

What does a trained and Approved Instructor bring to the party?

Firstly, the instructor is aware of which equipment to use, what standard the equipment needs to be and how to teach that equipment in a controlled, safe and fun manner and in the correct sequence of learning. Agility training begins long before you even start to use the equipment you see at the likes of Crufts.

An experienced and approved instructor has usually developed from taking interest from their own training and developed that through investing their own time and money in various training courses and seminars to learn how to deliver agility training in a safe, progressive and fun manner.

Instructors/trainers who take the time to invest in proper training also tend to have more interest in the welfare and behaviour of dogs, with many trainers also attending behavioural and communication courses such as those offered by the Institute of Modern Dog Training (IMDT) and the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT).



UKA Medium Steeplechase Competition

The ultimate qualification, at present, is attending and passing the annually held KC accredited Agility Club instructor's seminar, a very intensive 3 ½ day course where you are being assessed almost from the outset, with many theoretical and practical tests and exams. You have to know your stuff to pass and just a very few individuals who are then able to maintain a 90% pass across all modules pass with a 1st Class award.

Clubs that offer trained approved instructors may well charge more than the unqualified 'back-street' set ups but you are getting proper, qualified training with proven and structured safe programs using the latest competition standard approved equipment.

The bottom line is that it is your money and your choice but taking the less experienced instructor route could cost dearly in terms of your fun and progress but, most importantly, adversely affect your dog's welfare, or ultimately its safety.

Agility Training - What to Expect

Now you have completed a pre-agility course then you have learned the foundations, which you will continue to develop and fine tune for the rest of your agility career.

You have probably built-up good bonds and met many friends and if you have found a good trainer then great, if not move on. Different trainers teach in different ways, it is

important to find one that suits your requirements and whom you are comfortable with.

Generally, agility training schools become a long-term relationship where you start with dogs and handlers of similar ability and experience.



Enjoying a Training Session

You will build new friendships, have many laughs, probably shed a few tears and then, assuming you and your dog both enjoy it, will become addicted before you even know it.

Don't feel obliged to strive towards competing unless it's what you really want. I can assure you that you can have just as much enjoyment attending your weekly fun classes.

However, it is also important that you don't try to flog the proverbial dead horse. If your dog doesn't enjoy it and doesn't respond enthusiastically to training, then please look for another discipline.

I have 3 dogs which love agility and one that has no interest at all, to force him to take part would be cruel. You will start by repeating much of what you learned at pre-agility but using more equipment.

What Equipment will I Start On?

In your early days you will spend much of your time practicing your lefts and rights, ins and rounds when landing a jump (which should at this stage be at lowest height. You are building and developing your skills, jumping at height will come with confidence later).

Jumps will then be placed in short sequences where you continue to fine fettle your directions.

Most likely your next piece of equipment will be a tunnel. These come in different lengths of 3M, 4M, 5M and 6M, all with a 600mm diameter. It is concertinaed to allow it to be easily reduced in length for beginners and then later to be curved for more experienced teaching.

Never force the dog through the tunnel as it will risk generating a fear of it. You will start with it short and with the aid of the trainer will then 'lure' your dog through using high reward treats.

Once this has been mastered with the dog going through having learned the 'tunnel' command then it can be gradually extended and curved round. This may take several sessions; you can't rush success.

What about the Rest of the Equipment?

So, jumps and tunnels are the back bone of agility and when used together in combination with no other equipment are referred to as 'Steeplechase'

Weaves - Probably the single most difficult equipment to learn. The dog must enter with the first pole at its left shoulder.

Added to the Steeplechase equipment to form 'Jumping' discipline (the long-jump, tyre and spread jump can also be used in a jumping course).

Tyre - Height adjustable circular jump.

A-Frame, - speaks for itself, 1.7M tall at its apex, has a contact area at either end, which the dog should always



Jump Training at Low Height

touch before alighting.

Most manufacturers facilitate height adjustment to encourage controlled gradual learning.

Dog Walk - approximately 36 foot-long and 4'6" tall (1.2M), again with contact areas. Again the trestles may be height adjusted to assist with the early training stages.

See-saw – Another item of contact equipment.

This is very difficult to master as many dogs are easily scared of it and it should be taught in a structured manner over time.

The see saw must 'ground' before the dog alights. More details on equipment later but again, most manufacturers allow the height to be adjusted to assist initial training.

So, What do I need to get started?

Well, the easy thing is to start with your dog. For competition you will need a flat collar that contains basic information i.e. owner's name and address (including postcode) and ideally a contact phone number. This must not be a dangly type id tag but must be flat with the collar (embroidered / printed items are ideal).

For practice and recreation level you can train with a harness if you wish but must make sure it cannot be snagged on any of the equipment. The Hurrita Life Saver harness, as an example,

provides good support and is also easy to unclip if you wish to use it when queuing at competitions.

That's it really for your dog, unless you want to invest in such things as a waterproof jacket, warm jacket or even a cooling coat for the summer.

Always ensure you have plenty of fresh water with you.

Now the Fun Begins

... the fun begins when it comes to sorting out your own attire.



You actually don't require any special clothing but from experience I would strongly suggest a good quality pair of sport trainers designed for trail use (More Mile Cheviots are excellent value but not waterproof, Karrimor are again good value and readily available with Salomon also proving very popular, particularly with their Gortex waterproof range).

One very important thing to remember is to avoid loose flapping clothing as this can confuse and even startle your

dog, particularly in the early training days.

In the winter-time, waterproof breathable trousers are an absolute godsend, as is a quality waterproof running jacket and also adhering to the proven layering technique.

In the summer, shorts and t-shirt are fine, with a baseball cap and sun tan lotion if required to prevent burning.

Any Special Equipment?

I would recommend obtaining a 'Pringles' style tube lid to use for 'touch' exercises and a good quality, easy access but secure pouch bag to use for carrying doggy treats (not to be used in competition).

This brings us nicely on to the subject of dog treats. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of rewarding your dog for success, particularly when teaching a new behaviour.

Make sure the treats you use are high reward and very desirable.

Some people use cheese for training, some use kibble or chicken but I have found that dehydrated meat products prove to be the highest reward. They can be quite expensive to buy (alternatively you can invest in a dehydrator and make your own from meat, liver, heart etc).

If your dog is toy oriented rather than food, then a 'tuggy' toy can be extremely beneficial. You can excite the dog whilst waiting for your go and use it for a reward when it gets it right.

Just be aware that if you go on to compete the use of toys or treats in the ring is prohibited, except UKA (and some independents) do allow non crumbly treats and toys for NFC (Not For Competition) training runs.

Isn't Agility Expensive?

Well, let's look at it in context. Your clothing will naturally cost but you can probably manage with existing outdoor clothing.

Training, well that does vary considerably. However, you will find that the majority of training schools run group sessions. Ideally you have no more than 6 dogs in a 1-hour class, this allows sufficient time for rest but still gives each dog enough time being active to stop them 'switching off'.

This typical class set up will cost between £6 and £25 per lesson depending on location, number of training facilities in the area and, the standard, experience and profile of the trainer.

As you advance and 'catch the bug' you may want to attend specific training camps . . .

or workshops (this is where it gets pricey) or even attend special training days with top trainers visiting local training schools (about £20 - £45 per dog per hour in a class set up).

For a one-to-one with your current trainer expect to be charged in the region of £15 - £25 per 30-minute session.

*Training School
Agility Classes
Cost between £6
and £25 per hour
in shared session*

If you get really hooked and pursue competing then the costs are very reasonable, especially when compared to conformity showing.

Typically, you will pay between £3 and £4.50 per class (steeplechase, jumping, agility are examples of classes), car parking is usually free and if you wish to attend a weekend event then camping generally works out about £15 - £20 per night.

With a single dog, a family could have a full weekend of camping, entering six classes over the weekend for under £60.

Plus, of course, the fun and socialising that go hand in hand with camping.

Not too bad, Just 1 hour per week then?

Actually **STOP**, 1 hour a week in classes is just the start.

You are best advised to practice at home regularly in between classes to ensure that you 'proof' the new behaviours you have learned in class; good experienced trainers will often set exercises to develop your skills in between classes.

Some skills and behaviours are constantly practiced throughout the early part of learning agility and even now after many years of training, competing & instructing, I still practice the wait command at our meal times, I also continually develop the recall, work on my directions and other such similar commands.



Japanese Spitz Clearing a Tyre

The people that develop their handling skills fastest are those that practice outside of class.

Even everyday walks can be used to proof behaviours. Goal posts make for great equipment to practice 'rounds' and changing handling sides. Bollards at the beach or car parks can be used to develop the touch command, kerbs and pavements can be used for getting the 'contact' position practice (I even use broken groin uprights at the beach for weave entry practice).

Don't overdo it though because your dog must be enjoying what it is doing and always finish on success (don't forget to use high reward treats when conducting any form of training).

A word of warning, be careful using 'natural jumps' as they will not provide protection to your dog if they get it wrong and never do any more than proof what you have already learned in class.

Your trainers are experienced and follow a structured training development plan, don't try to short cut your way, it will only end in tears.

Fancy taking it Further than Recreational Fun?

At the age of 16 months your dog can take part in nursery classes (and steeplechase at UKA) and may enter standard classes applicable to its height and ability from 18 months. I would strongly recommend attending as a spectator at a couple of shows to decide if it's your cup of tea or not.

The two governing bodies in the UK are Kennel Club (KC) and UK Agility (UKA). There are also many independent shows but they tend to follow either KC or UKA rules.

I also run a league for all Spitz breeds to compete, called Agility League for Spitz (ALFS), which can be accessed via Facebook.

On the next two pages I have listed the two main organisations, their differences and specifics but should you require any further information please do contact me.

Stay safe and have fun

Best Wishes

Mark

Mark Bunyan

BCCSDip.FDAg

Agility Club Approved Instructor



Early Training at Low Jump Height



A-Frame in Competition



Exiting Tunnel in Competition

Article & Photos

Courtesy of:-

Mr Mark Bunyan

(Solent Agility)

