

Making Strides in Canine Agility



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**Agility offers happier clients and healthier pets,
but building profits requires taking a leap.**

by Jen Reeder

Since the United States Dog Agility Association introduced its international form to the United States in 1986, competitive agility programs have grown. The association now counts more than 25,000 registered competitors representing more than 200 dog breeds. As dog owners increasingly participate in agility with their dogs, whether for competition or just for fun, more veterinary practices are adding services to meet the needs of canine athletes.

“Everybody that takes [agility] loves it,” said Pam Gillette, who teaches agility classes at AAHA-accredited Fairview Animal Clinic in Fairview, Tenn. “Our clients are happier.”

Two years ago when Fairview Animal Clinic started its first agility class, only three people enrolled. Now there is often a waiting list for the 6-week course.

The practice advertised its agility classes only on its website and an outdoor marquee, but demonstrations at community events have proven very successful in attracting new clients. Fairview has found that sending a letter about the agility classes to new puppy owners is also helpful.

“We started the agility classes as an outgrowth of puppy classes,” said Russ Anderson, DVM, owner of Fairview Animal Clinic. “It was really an effort to give people a way to bond with their dog [and] more training.”



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—Russ Anderson, DVM

The practice is located on a 10-acre property in a semirural community, so there was plenty of room to build a fenced exercise area next to the clinic, with agility equipment such as jumps, chutes, tunnels, ramps and a teeter. Anderson is a woodworker, so he built much of the equipment himself, which cut down on the initial costs.

He did invest in specialized training in canine agility for Gillette; she is paid a percentage of the class fees, similar to arrangements between veterinarians and on-site groomers.

The practice has limited its retail sales of agility products to low-calorie treats. As the program expands, Anderson says he might add how-to DVDs or books. While the classes at least break even, he is less concerned about profitability than helping his clients have fun with their dogs.

His advice to other veterinary hospitals considering agility: “Design it to where everybody has fun. It’s all about fun and strengthening the human–animal bond.... Eventually profitability and other things like that will follow if you have a good time with it.”

Word of mouth

Fun and helping her dog with his behavior issues is what motivated Karen Raffey, a resident of White Bluff, Tenn., to try agility classes. She took her border collie, Max, to agility classes at Fairview Animal Clinic because he was perpetually frightened after a breeder abused him with a cattle prod as a puppy.

“He was raised to be a farm dog, a herding dog,” Raffey said. “He was so petrified. It just broke your heart.” But after several agility classes and positive reinforcement, “He just brightened. You wouldn’t believe the change in him. [With] agility [classes], his personality just popped.”

This type of word-of-mouth promotion generates plenty of interest in recreational agility. Because of its reputation, Brian Hurley, DVM and co-owner of AAHA-accredited Gardner Animal Care

Center in Gardner, Mass., has offered agility classes at the practice for 7 years. However, there hasn’t been as much growth as he and his partner expected.

“It was almost that ‘If you build it, they will come’ mentality,” Hurley said. “It just hasn’t quite been that way. We’ve never gotten off of one or two classes a week.”

His practice’s agility trainers are paid a percentage of the enrollment fees for teaching classes year-round at Gardner Animal Care Center, which has an outdoor agility ring as well as a 3,700-square-foot basement for indoor agility in winter. While the clients who have taken one class tend to take it again, finding new clients has been the largest challenge.

Hurley said part of the problem is not having time to commit to promoting the service; advertising is limited to a phone directory ad and the hospital’s web and Facebook pages.

He believes the potential to grow the agility program, as well as other services such as grooming and boarding, is strong, so they plan to hire a practice manager who can devote more time to expanding the hospital’s business.

“I’m excited about the potential of getting a person in there to manage the hospital because I honestly do think the potential is there. It’s just not going to grow on its own,” Hurley said. “I manage by fire. If I’m not in surgery, if I’m not in appointments, then that’s my time to manage. It’s hard when you’re limited by your total time to develop all of these things.

“If I wanted to develop agility and obedience, I’d have to forego everything else. And that’s why we’re excited with this shift, where we’re going to bring somebody in to help us run the practice. If we find the right manager, the potential is there to grow to what we envisioned.”

Partner with agility trainers

Another option for veterinary hospitals is to share space with independent businesses that offer complementary services. AAHA-accredited Worth Street

Veterinary Center in downtown Manhattan, N.Y., shares a roof with businesses that offer agility training, grooming, daycare, boarding, and physical and water therapy.

"It's a mutually beneficial process," said Francisco DiPolo, DVM and owner of the center. "You can only benefit as long as it's done correctly and philosophically matches the approach to the care of the pets.... It expands the scope of what we can offer."

In a city like New York, where transporting a dog can be a challenge without a car—subways allow only service dogs, and many taxi drivers refuse to pick up pets—pet owners value the convenience of having a variety of services offered in the same building. All of the pet businesses in the building refer clients to one another.

DiPolo appreciates being able to confidently refer clients to the agility trainer down the hall when clients have dogs with behavior problems as a result of boredom and confinement in small apartments. Likewise, the physical therapist with a swimming pool helps dogs rehabilitate but also helps them release stress while building muscle mass.

"You get feedback from the clients that the dogs are happy and more comfortable at home," DiPolo said. "As veterinarians, we can't effectively accomplish covering all these needs, so I feel that it's better to just have individuals that have their own businesses and find ways to partner with them. I just want to make sure that my patients get the best quality of care in my practice and beyond it." ■

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder enrolled her Lab mix, Rio, in agility classes while researching this story.



Check out canine agility in action at *Trends Today*—
<http://tinyurl.com/3stn9la>

Get Hopping!

Veterinary hospitals planning to include agility training should anticipate considerable initial start-up costs for equipment, according to Julie Winkelman, CPDT, CDT and owner of Alpha Canine Academy in Durango, Colo. Some basic agility equipment includes:

- Dog walk: \$1,200–\$1,600
- A-frame: \$950–\$1,100
- Teeter: \$400–\$500
- Weave poles (one set of 6, two sets of 3): \$250–\$400
- Pause table: \$150–\$200
- Tunnel: \$250–\$300
- Jumps (need 5 minimum): \$50–\$75 each
- Tire jump: \$150–\$300
- Chute: \$200–\$300

This equipment should be competition-grade. Cheaper gear can be far less safe and will not last as long. Other items that are not included in the basic list of agility pieces but are necessary to run a class include:

- Stick-in-the-ground weave poles: \$40
- Weave guides: \$50
- X-pens: four at \$60 each
- Cones (10): \$5 each
- Saddle bags for the tunnel (three sets): 40 each

A regulation American Kennel Club agility field is 5,000 square feet. The field has to be safe, too; people running around with their dogs can trip on tufts of grass or rocks. Withstanding weather is a must, and providing storage is wise; since this is a large investment, sun and water damage is a constant worry.

There are also very specific requirements for paint color, surfacing material, height, size, etc. Don't forget to have your lawyer draw up a tight, agility-specific liability release. To find a qualified trainer in your area, check with local agility clubs and online agility forums, and get references.

For more information, visit:

- usdaa.com
- akc.org/events/agility
- apdt.com

Source: Julie Winkelman, CPDT, CDT,
owner of Alpha Canine Academy in Durango, Colo.

