



BMDCA Info Series

Bernese Mountain Dogs And Agility

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Introduction► Agility is one of the fastest growing and most popular dog sports in the U.S. To the spectator, it appears to be an obstacle course for dogs where they go over jumps and through tunnels, climb A-frames, weave back and forth through upright poles, and go over a teeter-totter. And yes, it is as much fun as it looks like for dogs and handlers alike!



As with most sports, there is more to agility than first appears. The objective is to complete the course as accurately and quickly as possible. While one might think the dog and handler would be experts once they mastered how to do the obstacles; in fact, that is only the foundation to this challenging sport. There is much more to it.

The course layout and order of the obstacles are different at every show. The exhibitor doesn't know what the course is until the day of the show. The dog and handler team must maneuver through the course as designed at a high rate of speed, often not taking the obstacle that is directly in front of them. This requires good training, strategy, and understanding of how your dog will react to the course.

Prerequisites► First, the dog must be healthy and sound. Agility is physically demanding. The dog might jump up to 20 times in a single run. There is also a lot of tight turning at fast speeds. It's not fair to ask a Berner, or any dog, to do that if it is not physically able and fit. This includes having sound orthopedics, with healthy joints and muscles, and the physical maturity to safeguard against injuries. It also includes being at a healthy weight. You need to take an honest look at your dog regarding its weight. Most Berners love to eat and will gladly be at a weight that is not good for their well-being and certainly not appropriate for agility. Asking an overweight Bernese to compete in agility is not being a responsible handler. Competing in agility has health and fitness considerations for the handler as well. You must be able to maneuver around a course with your dog at a speed that is suitable and safe for both of you. Handlers competing in agility come in all "shapes and sizes." There is great diversity in terms of fitness, age, and physical ability. Many handicapped individuals greatly enjoy this sport. The challenge is to compensate for any handler health-related

limitations with additional training.

Second, the dog needs basic obedience training before starting in agility. Some schools will make this a requirement. But regardless of the rules, your dog must be able to perform such commands as coming when called, waiting on command, getting out of the way of other dogs by verbal control and more. The dog will be asked to perform a lot of commands while off leash, even in the learning stages. It's not fair to your dog or others in the class if the focus can't be on agility itself. Fortunately, Berners tend to have a strong desire to want to please and learn with you. Usually they will find you more interesting than other tempting distractions. This isn't true of all breeds.

Berners and Agility► Many people's first reaction to thinking about competing in agility with a Bernese Mountain Dog is that the two don't mix. The immediate images that come to mind when thinking about the word "agile" and the physical traits of a Berner (e.g., sturdy bone, full body, deep and capacious chest) is that they don't seem to line up. However, the Bernese breed standard also does say, "agile enough to do the draft and droving work for which he was used." While the AKC views the sport of agility as being open to every breed of dog, not every dog is suitable for agility work. This applies to Bernese. Berners can do agility successfully, although there is little denying that upper-level titles are very difficult for the largest boned Berners to achieve.

Most Berners, in fact, turn out to be very good at agility. Their intelligence, confidence, and willingness to please are traits that are important to successful agility training. Many of the handlers showing Berners in agility are surprised at the speed and agility that their own dogs ultimately prove to have. Part of the allure of agility is that faster dogs normally take a longer path between obstacles. This creates a more even playing field between various breeds than people think. This is especially true



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as the levels get higher and the courses get tighter, for the time differences between breeds tend to get smaller.

Safety Considerations ► People thinking about getting involved in agility are often concerned about the possibility of their dogs getting injured. This is a valid concern for there is risk of injury. Young Berners, novice handlers, and inexperienced instructors can be a recipe for disaster, especially for rapidly growing puppies and adolescents. Even as adults, the Berner's physical structure also increases the risk factor when compared to many other breeds. Caution, good judgment, and basic knowledge of the sport and the breed are prerequisites for responsible and safe agility training. On the positive side, agility training and showing provide quality time for the dog and handler. Since agility training should be very positive, it can improve a dog's confidence and social skills. The pros and cons associated with agility must be carefully considered, much like a parent considers the risks when a child plays sports.

Where to Start ► Assuming that your dog is trained in obedience basics, the next step is lining up responsible and competent agility training. Many areas have agility clubs and schools. More and more AKC-sanctioned clubs are offering agility training as well. If not, they should be able to direct you to local places that do. You might also attend an agility show and ask the exhibitors to recommend schools and trainers. To find out about shows that will be held in your area, go to the AKC website and search through the upcoming events information. The site also lists AKC-sanctioned agility clubs.

About Competition ► In the U.S., there are a number of organizations that run agility shows. Some of the most popular organizations are: American Kennel Club (AKC – www.akc.org); United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA – www.usdaa.com); North American Dog Agility Council (NADAC – www.nadac.com); United Kennel Club (UKC – <http://www.ukcdogs.com>); and, Canine Performance Events (CPE – www.k9CPE.com). The rules and levels vary between the organizations but are very similar to each other.

"The AKC offers three types of agility classes. The first, Standard Class, includes contact objects such as the dog walk, the A-frame, and seesaw. . . The second is Jumpers with Weaves. It has only jumps, tunnels and weaves poles with no contact objects to slow the pace. The third is FAST, which stands for Fifteen and Send Time. This class is designed to test handler and dog teams' strategy skill, accuracy, speed and distance handling." In the FAST class, the handler has choices about which obstacles to perform to earn the necessary points to qualify. All classes offer increasing levels of difficulty to earn Novice, Open, Excellent, and Master titles.



The AKC also has created a class that may be of special interest to many Berner owners, the Preferred Class. In this class the rules are the same as the regular classes except that each dog jumps 4 inches lower and has an extra 5 seconds to complete the course. A MACH (Master Agility Championship) cannot be earned through the Preferred Class, but there is a PAX title (Preferred Agility Excellent) for dogs competing at Excellent levels in the Preferred classes. Another agility class, Time 2 Beat (T2B), is both "hybrid" ("built primarily from obstacles from Jumpers With Weaves, with the option of having one to two contacts included on the course") and unique, "as each dog has the chance to set the "Time to Beat" for each jump height division."

Agility trials are usually very social events. People are friendly and there to have fun with their dogs and other enthusiasts. The sport has remained highly interactive, and participants are most supportive of their fellow handlers. The focus of agility is about how you and your dog perform as a team. It has less to do with how you compare to others. It is inherent that, by the breed standards, some breeds will always be faster than others. It is also inherent that within a breed, some dogs will always be faster than other dogs. These distinctions are easier for competitors to accept than one dog being "smarter" than another, which is the incorrect but common perception in some other dog sports. Therefore, in agility, most everyone can understand and celebrate each team's accomplishments.

About Training ► As you might guess, there are some special issues with respect to training Berners in agility. Training should not be a one-size-fits-all type of proposition. Therefore, choosing the right program will be an important decision for you and your Berner. Talk to the trainer. Ask about his/her experience in and approach to training Berners and other large-breed, working dogs. Watch a beginner's class or two before signing up. Talk to the handlers of other large-breed dogs taking the class.

It is imperative that the trainer be sensitive to and accommodate the issues surrounding Berners in agility. For example, the trainer must understand that, because of their build and working gait, a dog walk is a more difficult obstacle for Bernese than many other breeds. S/he should understand that a Berner's landing path for a jump is going to be longer and straighter. Ask the trainer if s/he will train differently for this if necessary. Many trainers tend to show border collies and other fast, flexible breeds. But do not discount them on this basis alone. Many started with other breeds and, if not, many still have become excellent trainers for diverse breeds. Do, however, pay attention to what breeds they have in their upper level classes.

The good news is that mainstream agility training is usually positive versus corrective in technique. Because speed is an important aspect of the sport, shutting down behavior through correction is not usually consistent with being at your fastest. Still, there are correction-based programs and they are not likely to prove successful with a Bernese Mountain Dog. So take your Berner and run to the best local training club, and jump into agility! You both will have a blast!

Agility References ► Agility "must" reading is the magazine, *Clean Run*. (Clean Run Productions, LLC, 1-800-311-6503; info@cleanrun.com; www.cleanrun.com). Additional information and links can be found on the websites of the organizations listed under "About Competition."