

# Successful Motivation in Agility

**W**hen I started doing agility with my PBGV, I ran into people telling me, "Hounds don't do agility." My response to this was, "Why not?" I had already seen other people doing agility with their PBGVs, and while they had some issues to deal with — sniffing, poor motivation, lack of speed — I believed that would not be an issue for me. If it was an issue, I was confident I could work through it to get the result that I wanted: a PBGV with drive, motivation, speed and a desire to please. After all, I had started in agility with a boxer, a breed that some consider difficult to train, but I ended up with the No. 1 boxer in AKC agility. No, it did not happen overnight, but I believe with the right training and effort on the part of both the dog and person in the team, success can be achieved. Gy is now 11 years old, has earned his MACH2, OF, RN, MJP and CD titles, and has been invited to the Invitational every year. Gy has come home with the Top PBGV medal every year we have gone, including this past December.

**Obstacle number one: the nose.** I got Gy when he was one-and-one-half-years old. His agility training went great from day one. He learned the equipment quicker than any dog I had trained before, and he loved it. The obstacle that was a problem was his nose. As with any scent hound, especially one built with legs that keep the nose so close to the ground, the scents drew his attention. He would run up to jumps and stop to sniff the bar before jumping it (refusal called, of course). He would stop in the weaves and smell the pole if there was hair hanging on the tape. Often times this resulted in a refusal call too, even though it's not a fault. This led me to making sure that when I walked a course, I would wipe my hands up and down the poles to get the hair off the poles. Some people thought I was crazy, but they weren't running PBGVs.

In competition, Gy went straight up the line from Novice to Excellent B in a flash. If he didn't, it was usually due to sniffing. Once he turned three, the scent drive really kicked in and I decided I was not willing to just run agility "hit or miss," I had to do something about it. I pulled Gy from competition for almost a full year and worked on attention. I have always trained following the principles of positive reinforcement training. With this method, you reward the dog for the positive things they do and you ignore the negative. Instead of yelling "No sniff!" at Gy, which I've heard many people say to their dogs as they continue to sniff the ground, I decided I would teach him a "heads up"



command. I would not be yelling at him to not do something, I would be teaching him to do the opposite of what he was doing on his own.

To teach heads up, I took Gy outside on the grass where he loves to sniff for bunnies, squirrels and any other critter which might have run down the yard. I had a pocket full of treats and a ton of patience. I sat down in the grass with Gy on his six-foot leash and let him wander around and sniff. When I knew I was the last thing on his mind, I reached out with the treat, put it right in front of his nose and waved it upwards toward my face. As soon as Gy was looking up at me I told him, "Good boy!" and gave him the treat. I repeated this several times until as soon as I put the treat in front of his nose he would look up at me on his own. I then said, "Heads up!" in a very happy manner, gave him the treat and said "Good boy." Since I was teaching him an action, I only gave the command and treat once he was doing it quickly and on his own, thereby not rewarding a half-hearted effort.

Once Gy was looking up at me immediately upon hearing "Heads up," I stood and started moving around with him. I taught the command sitting on the ground so he would not be picking up on any body movement of mine as part of the command; I wanted him to only react to the verbal command. As I started to move him around, he continued to perform as expected. I use this command to this day and it works well for Gy. If he gets on a table and starts to sniff, a quick "Heads up" makes Gy raise his head, wag his tail and put all attention on me. Success!



Teaching Gy the turn-left (left) and turn-right commands (right).

**Directions and contacts.** With the long body and short legs of a PBGV, tight turns would be essential to good times. To accomplish this I taught Gy right and left commands (see photos above). To do this I had Gy sit behind me, then I would open my legs and lure him to wrap tightly around my legs with a treat. Once he did this easily I would give the command. Just remember that you are giving the dog a directional command. When you run the course you must see if the dog is turning right or left, not how you are moving — these two are not always the same and it can confuse some handlers.

For contact obstacles I have two different requirements. First, for the teeter and A-frame I teach running contacts. This I do with the obstacles lowered, encouraging the dog to run with a toy or treat as the reward. However, with the length of the dogwalk I do require that the dog wait on the contact for me. If I am in a position where the dog is ahead of me going onto the dogwalk, I don't want to have to worry about running the 36 feet to catch up and point to a contact. To do this, I start by just putting Gy on the contact, telling him "sit" and giving him a treat (see photo at right). I will move around and continue to proof this position before putting movement into it. Then I add the dogwalk onto the position by starting from the beginning. Eventually, I proof it with the dog running ahead of me, behind me, and using lateral distance, all to insure he gets on that contact and does not move until I say, "Okay."

**Weave Poles.** I train weave poles a little differently than some people. I devised my own method for fast, reliable weaves, and my dogs — especially Gy — are known for good weaves. The problem I have with my dogs and the weaves is that they will gladly choose to do them as an off course whenever the judge decides to give them the option. I start with 12 poles, a regular competition set. I use a clicker to shape the performance by standing back from the first pole and letting the dog do its own thing. As soon as he takes a step toward the appropriate entry, click and treat. Once the dog takes a step through, click and treat. I move ahead this way, gradually asking for more of a behavior, and holding off on the reward until the dog does what I want, but decides to do it on its own.

Once this has turned into going through the poles 12 at a time, I then add a second set of 12 about 18 feet away, but

not on a straight line. By doing this I can do a straight entry directly to a more difficult one. I will start to put in front and rear crosses between the two sets — this way they are used to the crosses at the start and finish of the poles. I always alternate doing this with my dog on the left and right equally; after all, I don't want them to only weave on one side.

The final key is that I do not reward immediately at the end of the final pole. I don't want to stop the dog's momentum at the final pole, I want it to be driving forward out of the poles. To insure this I use an audible marker when they are correct (click or say "Yes" — your choice), but don't reward until after we have run about 15-20 feet away at a good speed. I use that distance since that is where the next obstacle on course would be for the dog.

We have been running together for more than nine years now, and while Gy is not perfect — I don't think any dog is — he honestly does his best. I have a real feeling of being a team when I run with Gy, and the best part is that other people see it. My favorite compliment is when people tell me that it's easy to see my dogs are having fun. That's why we're here! Yes, occasionally there are times when Gy still thinks he knows the course better than I do and will go



off on his own, but for the most part, he sticks with me. Before a run his eyes are solely on me, waiting for that last thing I always say before we go in the ring: "Are you ready, Gy?" To this he always replies with a big "Woof!" and a bounce. He has learned that the big rewards from me come at the end when we finish together as a team, and the fun is about to begin. ■

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