

Agility

Did You Know?

Under 'My Profile' on the Agility website, you can edit and update your details.

www.dogagility.org.nz/comp/myprofile.html

Sumo Wrestler or Point Guard?

Canine athlete body features

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Two heavier-set dogs. Which do you think is more suitable for Agility, and why?

How do you know if your dog is physically suitable for Agility? How do you pick a dog physically suitable for Agility? And what do you do if your dog's body isn't particularly suitable for Agility?

We know that for different human sports, athletes have different body types. If you watch the opening ceremony for the Olympics, you'd probably be able to pick a sumo wrestler, a weightlifter, a gymnast, and a marathon runner out of the lineup. There are body traits in each sport that make it easier for an athlete who has those traits to be successful.

It's the same for dog Agility. There are body types, and specific traits, that make it easier for a dog to successfully perform Agility. This doesn't necessarily mean that a dog without these traits can't do Agility, just that you may have to make some extra considerations with them.

In this discussion, we are considering the overall shape and body features of dogs, rather than looking at size relative to jump heights or breed of dog. Try not to focus on the individual dog in pictures. Instead let your eyes blur a little to look at shapes and proportions.

In general, regardless of the breed of a dog, the general features that we are looking for in an Agility dog include:

- Balanced and moderate angulation in the front, and rear limbs
- A tall rectangle: dogs should be slightly longer, than they are tall
- A strong, smooth and straight topline (back)
- A low-to-moderate weight-to-height ratio. Not too slim, not heavy-set.
- No structural faults such as a sway back or turned-out legs.

Each individual feature has a biomechanical reason why it provides an advantage in Agility. For example:

- A dog with moderate angulation in the front limbs is able to reach by striding over jumps, and can have more flexibility

through the front making them more suitable for turning

- Good rear-end angulation allows a dog to have leverage, which results in power jumping
- A dog that is balanced in angulation can move smoothly and their bodies naturally stay straight when moving
- A dog with a moderate amount of mass in relation to height, is able to build sufficient muscle, without having a large amount of weight force acting on the body.

What features may make Agility tough on a dog?

There are a number of features of a dog's body that make aspects of Agility more physically difficult, although these are not a hard and fast rules. Many dog's that are very successful in New Zealand Agility might have one of these less-desirable body features. However, a dog that has multiple body features that are not as suitable for Agility will not only find Agility more physically difficult, but also potentially have more potential for injury. The following is a list of body feature red flags:

Brachycephalic face: This shorter muzzle makes it easier for dogs to overheat. They often have smaller airways and nostrils, making it more difficult to get air into their bodies, and they can also have more difficulty panting.

Heavy body in relation to height: A dog with more mass, relative to height has more weight to lift over jumps, which means they also land with more weight force. This makes jumping physically difficult, and puts stress on joints on landing.

A very light body in relation to height: Dogs that are very fine have less capacity to hold muscle. This means that there is less muscle support around joints, and also less muscle to provide power for jumping.

Long back relative to leg length: Dogs with a relatively long back, compared to leg length (particularly dwarf-type dogs with very short legs), can struggle with jumping, or alternatively can look OK jumping, but have stress points in their long back that get sore.

A short back relative to leg length making a 'square' body shape: Square dogs tend to have a somewhat erratic jumping style. They tend to have a relatively small chest and pelvis for their height which makes muscle development and cardiovascular fitness more difficult.

A very straight front limb assembly, compared to the rear limb assembly: Dogs with a straight front end lack the 'reach' in the front end. This means that their striding in the front is much less than in the rear. They also often have a restricted range of motion in the front meaning that they struggle to lift their front legs as high when jumping.

A very straight rear limb assembly, compared to the front limb assembly: Dogs with a straight rear end often drive their movement with their front end, which makes jumping difficult. They also often roach their back in an effort to produce more of a range of motion in the rear end, and can have more potential for rear-end joint issues like luxating patellas.

A significant structural fault (severe roach or sway back, bending of the front legs, turning in or out of both front or back feet, a significantly shorted/dock/bobtail): Each of these major structural faults mean that that part of the dog is more at risk of injury. Each of these faults puts biomechanical stress on a joint or joints. This not only puts those joints at risk, but also can mean a dog will change its gait to compensate for the issue, and make themselves sore or injured in other areas.

So what if your dog has a number of red flags?

There are a number of things that you can do, to help a dog with less than desirable body shapes, or features. These include:

- Having a thorough orthopaedic/health check with an appropriate healthcare professional that understands Agility. This is not many 'regular' vets, because while they may be able to do thorough joint examinations and radiographs, many have no understanding of the intense physical requirements of Agility training, and competition.
- Keeping your dog lean and muscular. Fat is not functional, and puts additional weight force on your dog's joints. My goal is to keep my dogs as light as possible, while they maintain

muscle. This (to some extent) includes puppies. Dogs that were overweight as puppies, are more likely to be overweight as adult dogs. With our attentiveness as knowledgeable owners, and access to excellent vet care I think the old 'keeping fat on the puppies in case they get sick' is just not valid these days.

- Ensure your dog is functionally fit for Agility. With the physical pressure that we put on Agility dogs to train and compete, it's our responsibility to ensure our dogs are fit enough to jump, not fit enough from jumping. Athletes are required to cross train for their sport, as should your Agility dog. This should include cardiovascular exercise (both endurance and sprint), strength, power, balance, and flexibility. It is important that dogs with red flags, or previous injuries, get individual and personalised help with building an appropriate fitness program. This could be from a qualified hydrotherapist, physio, sports/rehab specialist, or certified fitness trainer.
- Be thoughtful about how much Agility you do. If your dog has red flags, it is likely that its Agility career may be shorter than a dog of optimal body shape and features. I often say that your dog only has a certain number of jumps in its career, and you don't know what that number is. Be thoughtful about how much Agility you enter. No dog should be doing Agility every weekend. Think about using your runs... If you fault, is it worth continuing that run? Will your dog gain anything from that? Also consider when, and how much, you train.
- Support your dog's physical health with appropriate diet, and joint supplements with supporting science.
- Do not compete or train your dog if they are sore or on medication for soreness.

And lastly, and most difficult, consider if your dog should be doing Agility. Do they enjoy it? Is it physically difficult? Are they getting sore constantly, or injured? Will doing Agility potentially have a negative impact on their long-term health? Then perhaps you need to make the decision to be a team together in another sport.

It's us, the human team member, that has decided to do Agility, and it's up to us to honor our dogs to make the best decisions for their long term health and well-being. 🐾

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Overall body type...

Here's a cheeky look at the overall body shape of some dogs. Can you identify the body types that might be more suitable for Agility? Remember we need speed, flexibility, rapid turning ability, acceleration and deceleration, and vertical jumping.

What type of athlete commonly has to do these things?



The sumo wrestler



The body builder



The high jumper



The runner



The point guard



The basketball superstar



The rugby superstar



The couch potato