

Agility

Between Agility dogs...



The retired girls and the upcoming upstart. Alison's three dogs: Milly (11 years), Dazzle (8 years) and Gus (18 months).

A fellow competitor once asked, "When are you going to get another puppy? Your dogs are getting older! You shouldn't have a break from Agility — it's too hard to get back into it."

At the time, I wondered what the big deal was. Convincing hubby to add to our family was never going to be easy. My plan was to get my third puppy when Milly retired and train it while competing with Dazzle. Life has a habit of throwing curve balls, and mine came in the form of Dazzle's disengagement from Agility at the age of eight. She no longer enjoyed it and I found myself retiring both girls at the same time. Those words came flooding back, as I faced the dark abyss of being between Agility dogs.

In the early days, the prospect of this was rather exciting. How fabulous it was to have all weekends back and vehicles largely free of show paraphernalia. But how soon did this fade, only to be replaced with a nagging anxiety about how to stay 'mind fit' and 'body fit' for the rigours of Agility. What if I went stale? Handling techniques were changing fast. Monitoring this was going to be tricky without regular contact with the show environment and the observation of fellow handlers.

Social media, an ever-present influence, announced the passing of shows which we would normally be attending, the missed celebrations of friends reaching milestones and attaining championship status, and the changing of regulations which can be hard to keep up with when not in the fold. The gap between the current me and the competing me was beginning to widen.

Many of us have had to face an enforced hiatus from Agility due to injury to our dogs or ourselves, unforeseen circumstances, or (as in my case) poor puppy planning. How does one manage engagement with our highly addictive and loved sport, when things don't go to plan? After communicating with others who have faced a break before, I have compiled a list of things which can be helpful. Some of them may sound scary but in reality, none of them are — except maybe the last one!

1. Become an instructor or team up with an instructor as an assistant at your club. This helps out your club, fellow club members, and keeps your brain sharp and in the game. Choosing courses and exercises, analysing handling techniques, and giving support to help build skills for your group also hones

and assists your own skills. I found this extremely rewarding, learnt an enormous amount from my fellow instructor (thank you, Tonka Watson), and helped keep me motivated to make a good job of training my puppy.

- 2. Attend some events as a helper.** Clubs are usually more than grateful to have you scribe, scribe assist, or run the call board. You are valuable as you do not need to leave the job to run a dog. These are much more pleasurable jobs when you are not facing the pressure of having to keep your eye on rings for walking and for when your dog may be running. Relaxed helpers are also good problem-solvers when sorting out those call board clashes. All you need to do is make the offer, turn up and enjoy the day.
- 3. Attend events to socialise and walk the dogs.** Keep in touch with your Agility family while walking your dogs or providing valuable exposure to the competition environment for your young dog or puppy. You will not be an imposter. Most people will be glad to see you. Be prepared for the questions though — when will pup be ready?
- 4. Enrol in Agility seminars.** Many providers offer spaces for spectators, meaning you do not need to have a competing dog to attend one of these. This can help to keep you in touch with the latest handling techniques. Some seminars offer spaces for puppies at varying ages, giving opportunity to build resilience in pre-Agility behaviours which will help with training later on. I attended my first seminar when 'between Agility dogs' with my pup.
- 5. Learn fitness techniques for your dog.** If you are the one who is injured rather than the dog, work with them to develop their balance, core strength, and keep their fitness up and their brain working. This is a great alternative to full-on Agility and helps maintain engagement and partnership between you and your dog.
- 6. Borrow your neighbour's dog (or your neighbour) or a club member's dog.** Keep your training skills up on the poor unsuspecting pooch next door. They will love it, while providing some brain and body work for you. Even better, if injured, train your neighbour to handle your dog for you. Great way to critique exactly what your dog is noticing and research suggests that we remember 90% of what we teach. Another suggestion is to ask at your club to see if anyone has a dog going spare, which you could attend training with.
- 7. Swap to another code until your new dog is ready.** Your retired Agility dog may enjoy a stint at Obedience, scent trailing, or learning new tricks. If you are the one injured, Rally-O seems to be a favourite alternative as the handler movement required is minimal. One contributor to these tips taught their dog to dance with them. Another great way to keep the handler-dog relationship alive and well.
- 8. Become a judge.** Yes, you read that correctly. Some competitors have used the 'between Agility dogs' down time to study to become a judge. This has got to be my all-time favourite suggestion. What a great use of the time!



Red Border Collie Monty who was trained by his neighbour while his owner Emma McKay recovered from injury.

It is super important to keep connected with Agility in order to keep your motivation for the sport active. Re-engagement with competition comes with some anxiety and is a bit different to when you first started. At one of my first shows back, I was struck by the fact that I had missed the passing of some of my favourite dogs. I found this emotionally challenging and found myself close to tears a lot. Try to keep realistic expectations of yourself and your new dog. After all, you were probably running senior courses with a well-oiled machine the last time you made an appearance as a competitor. Be kind to yourself.

Did You Know?

NZDAC entries are open go here:
www.showsec.co.nz/

To the wider Agility community, please take the time to encourage and support returning members of your club, those outside your club who you have noticed as they return to competitions, and those who appear to have dropped out of the fold for a while.

Many will be experiencing a disconnection and may be apprehensive upon their return, while others will bowl right on in as if they had always been there. It can be a lonely place being between Agility dogs. 🐾

Alison Derbyshire



Border Collie Rise doing fitness at Hybrid Training with owner Christine Longton.