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Ring Etiquette in dog Agility competitions

*Whether you're a seasoned competitor or a newcomer to Agility, understanding and mastering ring etiquette is essential for a smooth and successful show. A good start line procedure ensures a smooth-running show and demonstrates consideration to fellow competitors, judges and event volunteers. As you prepare to enter the ring area with your dog, **Diana Gausden** offers this list of things to keep in mind:*

Approaching the Call Board: If you have your dog with you, keep them close and be mindful of others who are also endeavouring to see the board and their positions in the order. Let the call steward know you've arrived and ask them who you are following. Then move back, while remaining within calling distance should the order change unexpectedly. This area is always busy and some dogs will find this stressful. It is your responsibility to keep your own dog safe but do advocate for your dog if they require space.

Preparation in the Holding Area: As you enter the holding area of the ring, this is the time to prepare yourself and your dog for your run. Remove any gear that isn't permitted inside the ring, such as coats, headgear, and collars with more than one D ring and registration tags, and place them in the bucket provided. Do not drop food in this area as dogs following behind may pick up pieces missed and could be allergic.

Contraband Check: Before stepping into the ring, double-check your pockets to ensure they're free of any forbidden items.



Megan Landsdaal and MacGyver in the starting area (left) and the finish area (right).

Forgotten treats or a slip lead tucked away can inadvertently lead to a disqualification from the competition.

Giving your Dog's Number: This varies around the country. In the upper North Island, you'll be asked upon entry into the holding areas and then you'll be expected to confirm your number to the scribe before running. In the lower North Island and in the South Island, you'll be asked for your number which will be written onto a scribe sheet that is then handed to the scribe. If this is not done, it is imperative to call your number back to the scribe before setting off. No matter which part of the country you run in, it is the competitor's responsibility to ensure the scribe has the correct number in front of them before commencing your run. You can do this from inside the ring, right before you run and just before the judge indicates to you.

Judge's Start Signal: Some judges use a whistle to indicate they are ready to judge your run, others use a thumbs up or a verbal greeting. It's important to understand that these signals serve as an indication to start your run, not an invitation to enter the ring



and only then start preparing yourself. Competitors should already be prepared to run and heading to their designated start position as the previous dog exits — your dog may be on lead at this point if required. Once you have received your signal, you should start your run promptly.

Throwing Leads: Some handlers choose to throw a lead back from their start position. However, it's essential to do so with caution to avoid injuring the lead runner. Clear communication and awareness of others in the area are key to ensuring everyone stays safe.

Training in the Ring: Sometimes the run doesn't go the way it's supposed to and it's natural to want to correct unwanted behaviour, but it's essential to approach this with mindfulness. Consider the judge, who stands in the ring for the duration of the class and the competitors waiting behind you. While some judges appreciate prior requests to bring a toy into the ring for training purposes, some will decline these requests.

Your run has officially finished when your dog has completed the course and stopped the timers or reached the maximum course time. This is the end of your time in the ring and you should make your way to the exit point immediately.

Exiting the Ring: When exiting the ring after your run, always use the defined exit point rather than attempting to leave through the sides of the ring. Be mindful that another dog will soon be coming into the exit area behind you, so quickly reward your dog, put them on lead, gather your belongings and exit promptly. Again, do not drop food in this area as other dogs may pick up pieces missed. Please do not throw toys for your dog to chase into the area outside of the ring. Keep your dog under control on a lead, to ensure the safety of all participants and spectators. Failure to do so can lead to disqualification of your run.

Audible (Squeaky) Toys: While audible toys aren't explicitly prohibited under competition rules, their use should be approached with consideration for fellow competitors. Noise from toys can be distracting or unsettling for other dogs and handlers preparing for their runs. As a responsible competitor, exercise discretion and use audible toys sparingly to minimise disruptions and promote a positive atmosphere for all.

When You Are Not Running: Be mindful of your dog. Do not allow your dog to approach others without invitation. Shows are stressful environments — advocate for your dog's space if you need to and maintain a social distance from other dogs. Give your dog downtime from the show by retiring to your vehicle in between runs. Do not leave your dog tethered when unattended: utilise a crate if you cannot be with your dog (during course walks, for example).

Finally! It's essential to maintain respect for those generously volunteering their time for the benefit of everyone involved. This encompasses all ring crew members and, notably, the judge. Should you encounter any timing issues regarding your position on the running order or require specific accommodations, please approach the situation with courtesy. Requests made respectfully will be accommodated whenever possible. However, if circumstances prevent accommodation, it's important to maintain a positive attitude and make the best of the situation without allowing it to affect your demeanor.



Tracey Trotter and Breeze in the starting area (top) and Breeze with lead on ready to leave (bottom).



Frazer Delamer and Sam waiting for their turn to start.

In conclusion, mastering your start line procedure makes for a seamless and enjoyable experience for all involved. By following these guidelines and understanding the role of the judge's indicators, you'll not only adhere to competition rules but also demonstrate respect and consideration for your fellow competitors. No one wants our sport to be over-regulated, and these brief considerations will ensure that Agility stays light-hearted and offers a chance to showcase your handling skills. Have fun out there. 🐾