

# Dog agility:

## A team sport for people and their pups

By DWIGHT CASWELL

**T**he only Olympic event in which an animal other than man competes is dressage, which reflects the special relationship that has developed between the two species over the centuries. But what about the relationship we have with our dogs? Shouldn't they have an event, too?

If that ever happens, the sport will likely be dog agility, known to aficionados simply as "agility." Like dressage, agility requires close collaboration between animal and human, a partnership achieved by cooperation and understanding rather than through coercion.

"Becoming a smoothly choreographed duo takes a long time," says Astoria violinist Kim Angelis. "Dogs are masters at reading body language, and 99 percent of what goes wrong originates with you sending the wrong signal." Of the end result she says, "When things flow, it's an incredible rush, a dip into the right hemisphere of the brain as you and your dog share a feeling of exhilaration and love."

Agility hasn't been around as long as dressage, of course. Dressage traces its roots back to Xenophon, the Greek historian and student of Socrates, who wrote two treatises on training horses around



400 BC. By contrast, agility began in 1977 when a dog trainer designed the first course as entertainment to fill time at a dog show in England. The idea caught on, and agility took off.

Agility is a team sport, with each team consisting of two players, a human and a dog. Teams compete at shows, and make no mistake: If you and your dog get involved in agility, you will almost certainly want try out your skills against other teams. The idea is for you and your dog to run a course of obstacles together, and the course is different for each competition. Novice teams run courses of 13 to 15 relatively easy obstacles. Intermediate and advanced levels have 18 to 20 obstacles of increasing difficulty.

The first impression you have watching Angelis and her collie, Ramona, is one of amazing speed. Ramona leaps hurdles, runs through tunnels and up and over a teeter-totter, and whips through the "weave



PHOTOS BY DWIGHT CASWELL

**Above:** Kim Angelis and her dog Ramona have been working on dog agility for over two years.

**Far Left:** Dog agility obstacle courses include tasks like leaping over hurdles, running over teeter-totter, and whipping through weave poles.

**Left:** Agility is about having fun — for both humans and their canine companions.



poles." This last obstacle, Angelis explains, "is very hard for a dog to do, because it doesn't resemble anything a dog would do on his own."

Angelis was first introduced to agility at an annual demonstration given at the Clatsop County Fairgrounds by Sally Freeman, leader of the Classy Canines 4-H group. (This year's event is set for Nov. 12). Angelis had attempted the sport with her older collie, Paco, but he had spinal issues. She then got Ramona as a companion for Paco. Angelis didn't intend Ramona to be an agility dog, but when the 10-month-old puppy began scaling retaining walls the first day at her new home, Angelis recognized talent when she saw it.

Angelis and Ramona have now

been working together for over two years. Freeman introduced them to dog trainer Karin Haderly, who concurred that Ramona was an "agility savant." Four months later — after Ramona's growth plates had closed, necessary for agility — the team began working with Haderly at her Fido Beta Kappa training barn in Stella, Washington, near Longview. "We have a blast going there," says Angelis.

Having a blast is what it's all about for the canine half of the team as well as the human half. "You can't drill your dog," Angelis says. "You build a relationship, and you do so by playing. You go into their zone, you figure out what they want." In Ramona's case, "she wants to do what I want her to; she tries really hard." She also wants to

play tug-of-war with a cardboard tube at the end of agility.

It's not just a matter of Ramona's learning, either. "There are all these things a person has to learn," Angelis says. "I did all kinds of things wrong, and if I react Ramona will shut down. Agility is a cure for perfectionism. Things will go wrong, and you have to learn to laugh and be amused by it."

Angelis has plans, possibilities for the future. Agility parties, perhaps. Or after Ramona has won a few titles, perhaps her own training facility. For now though, the team is having the time of their lives.

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For further information about Classy Canines 4-H obedience training contact Sally Freeman at 503-325-7161. To learn about agility training at Fido Beta Kappa, call Karin Haderly at 360-442-0238