

# THINK **Outside** THE **Box** [AND THE RING]

By Rachel Flatley, photos by Clean Run except where noted

*You have all heard the saying, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” Well, this could not be further from the truth in agility competitions. What you do (or don’t do) outside the ring enters the ring with you.*

I am not referring to skills training or to the way the quality of the relationship you have with your dog will affect your run. Instead, I want to bring to your attention the ways in which the skills and behaviors we rehearse (intentionally or unintentionally) the day of the trial affect our performance.

Not only do we have the ability to rehearse skills that will help or hurt our efforts in an upcoming run, but we can also influence our dog’s mindset in ways that can complement or undermine our efforts. Consider some of the choices you make in both your warm-up routine and in your overall day-of-the-show conduct.

## WARM-UP ROUTINES

Let’s take a look at your warm-up routine first. Thankfully agility has evolved and the sport is well beyond the days when handlers would take the dog out of his crate, pop him over a practice jump or two, and then head into the ring. We know the importance of getting ourselves and our dogs moving, stretched, and perhaps even massaged before a run. But what about the remainder of that warm-up routine? Have you put enough thought into which warm-up exercises complement the type of course you are about to run? Have you considered how that warm-up routine should be modified to optimize your performance in subsequent runs? And, do you warm up your dog’s frame of mind?

Two elements of a good warm-up routine are often overlooked: practicing behaviors that will enhance, not undermine, your efforts in the run; and setting the proper tone for your run.

### *Practicing Behaviors that Will Enhance Your Run*

With a little forethought and planning, it’s possible to warm your dog up in a manner that increases the likelihood of desirable behaviors being repeated in your upcoming run.

Some handlers warm up their dogs with a game of Frisbee. In general, when dogs retrieve a Frisbee, they run out, grab it, and make a wide turn to set themselves on a path back to you. If the course you will be running is made up of tight turns, don’t rehearse wide turns beforehand. Choose a different type of warm-up or throw the Frisbee into a corner so the dog cannot turn wide on his return path. On the other hand, if you need to use sending skills in the upcoming run, then sending the dog ahead and throwing the Frisbee as a reward for making the choice to work ahead of you is a good option for a warm-up.

If you use the practice jump as part of your warm-up routine, how do you and your dog approach the practice-jump area? Is your dog required to walk nicely at your side, or does your dog lead you? Both styles of arriving at the practice jump (or the ring, for that matter) might be completely legitimate for the same dog at different times. For example, if I want my dog to work away from me on a course I might choose to allow my dog to walk ahead of me on the way to the practice jump. Conversely, if we are about to run a course that requires my dog to focus quite a bit on me as I direct him through an intricate sequence, he won’t be taking me to the practice jump. I’ll want my dog’s focus on me. We’ll examine the dog’s mindset later in this article, but since we are discussing methods for approaching the equipment, you should also consider your dog’s personality type so you can understand how the way you approach the practice jump or you enter the ring influences the dog’s mindset. A dog that likes to take charge, work away, or has problems with self-control (that may manifest in broken start-line stays or missed contacts) should not find himself in front of his handler on the way to the practice jump or the ring. Conversely, try never to discourage a shy dog, or one with less motivation, from dragging you toward the equipment.



*To begin their warm-up routine, the handler allows the dog to approach the practice jump with some independence.*



*The handler recognizes that she needs some lateral distance in jumping sequences during her upcoming run.*



*To prepare, she rehearses the behavior by sending her dog over the practice jump.*

How do you use the practice jump? Is it the same old figure-eight pattern over the jump you've used for years with every dog you own? Instead, look at the practice jump as a way to remind your dog of what you want from him in the approaching run. Does your dog have a bar-knocking problem? If so, use the practice jump to rehearse the exercises you use in training to remind your dog of proper jump form. Perhaps your efforts would be better served by using the practice jump as an opportunity to reinforce your stay on the start line. Are you about to walk into a course with a send or gamble? Send your dog ahead over the practice jump. Practice the skills you want to see repeated on the course.

Whatever the warm-up activity, you need to evaluate how it will affect your upcoming run. When your dog enters the ring you should be confident he has rehearsed a skill you want duplicated on course.

### *Warming Up Your Dog's Frame of Mind*

Have you ever stopped to consider your dog's mindset before his run? You need to be aware of and strive to create the proper mindset since there is no reason to think that the mental state you have been allowing your dog to develop all day should change for the better simply because you have walked beyond the ring gating. Preparing your dog to have the proper mindset is something you will work on all day at the show (I'll discuss that more in a bit), but you also need to make it part of your warm-up.

I think that a dog's mindset is different from his level of arousal. I recommend that you read Susan Garrett's series of articles, "Starting as a Team," in the *CR* April, May, June, and August 2008 issues. In April 2008, she does an excellent job of explaining the dog's state of arousal and its impact on the dog's ability to execute learned behaviors.

I think there are two aspects of a dog's mindset: focus and attitude. Proper focus is what you want to nurture in the last 5, 10, or 20 minutes before you enter the ring, and you can lay the groundwork during your warm-up. Attitude takes into consideration the dog's overall frame of mind, which is affected by everything that has taken place, or that has failed to take place, throughout the day. Preparing your dog to have the proper attitude is something that you need to plan for before arriving at the competition and that you will work on all day long at the trial.

Focus, the first part of mindset, is sometimes referred to as being either "handler" or "obstacle" centric. What is the dog most concerned with: focusing on you or focusing on where the next obstacle is? We want a handler-focused dog when we encounter tricky or tight portions of a course, and we prefer an obstacle-focused dog when we have a wide-open

area or would gain an advantage by sending the dog ahead.

Has your warm-up included precision heeling, attention drills, hand signals, and the like? This type of warm-up causes the dog to focus intently on the handler, and the dog's focus is not likely to shift immediately to the obstacles. Does this type of focus complement the style of course you are about to run? It does if the course is tricky, flows poorly, or has tight turns, threadles, and requires technical maneuvers. If your upcoming run involves distance work, however, you probably want the dog focused less on you and more on obstacles. Why not send the dog off to nose-touch a target a few times? Or do sends over the practice jump? Walking casually to ringside will benefit you more than strict head-up style heeling.



*Needing handler focus for their upcoming run, this warm-up routine starts with hand targeting.*

### **ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING**

Attitude, the second part of mindset, is the dog's overall frame of mind and is influenced by everything that has taken place, or that has failed to take place, both inside and outside the agility ring. Have you evaluated your dog's overall attitude? What type of personality does your dog have? How does that personality mesh with your day-of-show behaviors?

Has your dog been sitting in your lap all day or perhaps in his favorite chair? Has your dog been permitted to wander or visit other people and dogs at will? If so, your dog has been indulging in self-reinforcement all day. If you have a dog with less motivation and drive, why should the dog now work for you? He has been in control of access to reinforcement all day, and you were absent from the reinforcement picture. If you have a dog with drive and motivation to spare that has been self-rewarding all day, why should that dog now follow your rules on course? In fact, why not make up his own course and help himself to a favorite obstacle repeatedly? Has your dog been stressing (perhaps barking or yawning) in his crate or in your motor home while

you ran your other dogs or were off visiting friends? Your dog might be worn out and unable to perform or he might behave in a crazed fashion, exploding from anxiety.

I watch too many handlers standing just outside the ring gate allowing the dog to eat food or tug on a toy while the handler is not mentally engaged with the dog. The handlers look out at the course wondering if they remember the proper order of obstacles, or if it is time for them to enter the ring. Then there is the on-deck handler, nervously getting hand touches, high-fives, spins, and so on from the dog.

This interaction is freshest in the dog's memory when the team enters the ring. Is it one the handler wants? Will it enhance the team's performance?

### **TESTING IDEAS IN TRAINING**

You have an opportunity to test warm-up ideas and routines whenever you train your dog, not just in competition. Your dog should be warmed up every time before he runs in practice. Think outside the ring when you attend your next training class. Does your dog perform differently when he is permitted to drag you from your car to the practice field? Now see what happens if you ask for a controlled walk from the car to the field. What if your dog is required to sit at the entrance to the practice field and has to wait while you enter the field and then turn to invite him? What if your dog is not required to wait to be invited? These behaviors and the reinforcement they provide matter to your dog and they should matter to you.

For maximum benefit, go one step further. Take time to consider how the other sports you enjoy with your dog affect (for better or for worse) your dog's performance in agility. For instance, dogs that learn how to pivot and move their rear end toward their handlers while heeling around the inside post of a figure-eight pattern have better rear-end awareness in agility. Yet because they are so tuned in to their handler, these same dogs sometimes struggle to learn obstacle focus and distance skills for agility.

The next time you seek to improve your performance, remember to think outside the box and outside the ring. 🐾

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