

Motivation and Corrections

One of the primary keys to properly training a dog for agility is to cultivate and maintain the sense of fun for the dog. This is an issue of motivation. A reluctant or worried dog may be compelled to work at his handler's side. But the work will be lackluster, without the speed or motivation desirable for a top performance.

The magical hot-buttons of motivation are the trainer's responsibility. These *buttons* are often a riddle. This riddle is for the trainer alone to solve.

So what is the magic element that makes or breaks the dog's sense of fun and his motivation for the sport of agility?

In a nutshell, it is the dog's association with agility. Dogs make associations with all sorts of activities in life that influence whether they should approach these activities with joy, or with trepidation. Dogs will associate the activity surrounding the preparation of meals with food and gratification. They might associate visits to the vets office with probing and pricks of needles.

Negative associations are inspired and reinforced by the dog's trainer. That would be you. If you treat the dog harshly, inflict some sort of pain, or beat up the dog emotionally, he will not consider agility very fun at all.

When we use words and phrases like "treating the dog harshly," "inflicting pain," "beating up the dog," it seems clear cut what kind of actions we should avoid. But the dog is a sensitive creature. Sometimes negative associations can be very subtle. In this subtlety a trainer often will not realize what he or she is doing and will unwittingly do damage to the dog's association with agility that will be difficult to fix.

Start by endeavoring to never say *No* to your dog as a correction. In the first place, many performance errors are errors by the handler. It is certainly inappropriate to blame the dog for a handler's error. Also, the word *No* is only an obvious negative. There are many sounds you can make that are clearly negative.

Corrections should always be neutral. Reward should be positive and, where appropriate, enthusiastic. If you use a balanced system of correction and reward, the dog will figure out in a hurry what pleases you and will become a better agility dog.