

# History of dog agility

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The **history of [dog agility](#)** can be traced to a demonstration in the late 1970s in the [United Kingdom](#). It has since spread rapidly around the world, with major competitions held worldwide.

## History in the United Kingdom

The first widely-documented appearance of dog agility was as entertainment at the [Crufts](#) dog show in 1978. John Varley, a committee member from the 1977 show, was tasked with coming up with entertainment for the audience between the [obedience](#) and [conformation](#) competitions in the main ring. Varley asked dog trainer Peter Meanwell for assistance, and they presented a largely jumping-style course resembling something from the equestrian world to demonstrate dogs' natural speed and agility.<sup>[1]</sup> Many obstacles recognizable to modern handlers were already present at that demonstration, including the 'Over & Under' (A-frame/tunnel combination), 'Tyre Hoop' (tire), 'Weaving Flags' (weave poles), 'Canvas Tunnel' (collapsed tunnel) and 'Cat Walk' (dogwalk).

It was reported in Our Dogs newspaper that in 1974 Meanwell had either been a witness to or participated in such a competition at an agricultural fair, thus predating more widely published accounts for the start of dog agility. By some oral accounts, there was an earlier demo with similar intent using playground articles such as a [seesaw](#) (or [teeter-totter](#)) and a [tunnel](#), although this has not been documented. Another account attributes the other obstacles to exhibitions by the Royal Air Force K-9 Corps exhibitions of the time, which is more plausible, given the nature of the first regulations for dog agility in the UK.

At the 1978 Crufts, the demonstration immediately intrigued dog owners because of its speed and challenge and the dexterity displayed by the dogs. People wanted to see more, and indeed wanted their own dogs to be able to participate. The demonstration was so popular that it went on to grow into local, then national, and eventually international, competitions with standardized equipment.<sup>[1]</sup> By 1979, several British dog training clubs were offering training in the new sport of dog agility, and that December the first Agility Stakes competition was held at the International Horse Show at Olympia in London.

In 1980, [The Kennel Club](#) became the first organization to recognize agility as an official sport with a sanctioned set of rules, and the first agility test to be held under the new regulations was the team event at Crufts that year. The event was judged by Peter Meanwell, with Peter Lewis as his scribe. Peter Lewis and John Gilbert (one of the few original 1978 competitors who continues to participate in agility competition, training, and judging) went on to play a major part in spreading the sport of dog agility across Europe and around the world. 1983 saw the founding of the Agility Club, the first national agility club in the UK publishing the *Agility Voice*, the first agility magazine.

During the early years, smaller dogs were not well catered for in the UK, with all having to compete over the same 30" jump height with the large dogs. This started to change during the early eighties with classes being introduced for Mini dogs (up to 15" at the shoulder, jumping 15"). The first Mini Agility Dog of the Year competition took place at Olympia in December 1987. Classes for Midi dogs (15-17" at the shoulder, jumping 20") were introduced in the Nineties, though it was not until 2005 that they too had their own competition at Olympia.

In 1992, the first weeklong agility show (Dogs in Need, in aid of dog charities) was held at Malvern in England, with a total of 885 dogs entered and 5,879 class entries. Dogs in Need is now one of several weeklong Kennel Club agility shows to take place each year, part of a busy calendar of day and weekend shows. Dog agility has grown in the UK to the point where the most popular Kennel Club

shows regularly run ten or more rings a day, with up to 450 runs in each ring (or more if two judges are used in each ring).

Throughout the Nineties, dog agility in the United Kingdom was dominated by the Kennel Club, with KC shows the only ones that were widely publicised. This situation finally started to change in 2003 with the appearance of shows run by East Midlands Dog Agility Club (EMDAC). The Kennel Club initially attempted to defend its monopoly, before finally accepting that clubs and organisations outside its jurisdiction should also have the right to put on agility shows without any fear of disciplinary action against members or competitors from the Kennel Club.

This decision led to an explosion in the number of non-KC agility shows from late 2003 onwards. Many of these were (and still are) held by independent clubs as one-off events, but a small number of distinct agility organisations have also started to emerge. These include UK Agility, Agility Addicts and It Barks, all of which were founded in 2004. In 2006, EMDAC launched the British Agility Association (BAA). In addition to providing agility competitors with a wider range of choices in the type of show they wish to attend, these shows have acted as a catalyst in encouraging the Kennel Club to review its own agility rules and attitude towards the sport.

## History in the United States

In the [United States](#), several people experimented with dog agility based generally on the British rules. The first exhibitions took place in the early 1980s. The pivotal founding groups were the NDCA and the USDAA. Today, the NDCA has merged with the United Kennel Club leaving the USDAA as the dominant force in the U.S. world of agility.

### NDCA and UKC agility - The Merge

In 1984, using information from articles describing English agility, Charles (Bud) Kramer began developing the idea that became the National Committee for Dog Agility (NCDA). He built and experimented with equipment through the winter of 1984/1985. He published a series of articles describing his ideas for *Front and Finish* magazine, which eventually were published as a book, *Agility Dog Training for All Breeds*, in 1987. In 1987, Kramer founded the NCDA in [Manhattan, Kansas](#) with the goal of convincing the AKC to recognize agility as a sport. Kramer's agility was briefly affiliated with AKC agility in the early 1990s, but became separate under a new name, National Club for Dog Agility, in 1991. In August 1994, NDCA merged with the [United Kennel Club](#), and agility under Kramer's rules has been performed under UKC auspices since then.<sup>[2]</sup>

UKC agility has evolved into a different kind of sport than that provided by AKC, USDAA, and international agility organizations, involving more control of the dog over complicated obstacles rather than speed and accuracy over basic obstacles.

### USDAA's Influence

In 1985, [Kenneth Tatsch](#) collaborated with his local obedience club and others, and began putting on all-breed exhibitions in Garland, Texas. A year later, he founded the United States Dog Agility Association ([USDAA](#)) and incorporated in January 1987 in Texas. To promote the sport, USDAA secured [Pedigree Dog Food](#) (formerly Kal Kan Dog Food, a sister company to Chum Dog Food, the guiding sponsor in the UK) as a sponsor, and the first national championship tournament series in North America — the Grand Prix of Dog Agility — was introduced in 1988 at the Astro World Series of Dog Shows in [Houston, Texas](#).

Until 1990, USDAA agility competitions were only for placement ribbons, but at that time the USDAA began offering agility titles, for which the dog had to perform to certain standards in several

competitions to earn scores towards the various titles. At first, the only titles offered were the Agility Dog (AD), or starters-level title; the AAD Advanced Agility Dog (AAD), or intermediate-level title, and the Master Agility Dog (MAD), or expert-level title. This increased the appeal for all dog owners; one's dog did not have to be a [superstar](#) to succeed at agility, but could simply be good enough and fast enough to meet the requirements to earn title points. USDAA's vision was far broader than a single class, and in 1994, USDAA introduced an expansive titling program to incorporate title recognition in each of four nonstandard classes (those other than the basic form) — gamblers choice, jumping, snooker agility, and relay.

In 1988, almost no one had heard of dog agility in the United States, while meanwhile in England it had become an extremely popular sport, drawing hundreds of spectators. By 1989, however, when the USDAA Grand Prix of Dog Agility was first filmed for TV, nearly 2000 spectators attended the final round. Just a year later, attendance neared 4000. The event's popularity sparked interest around the country, and in 1989, Tatsch expanded the tournament to include local qualifying events, hosted by groups formed by competitors in attendance at the *Grand Prix* the prior year in Texas. The tournament grew rapidly, jumping from 8 events in 1989 to more than 150 local and regional championship events in 2004, in five countries, leading to a World Championship event. Tatsch also named his first Advisory Board composed of experienced trainers and agility enthusiasts from different parts of the country, who began working on a set of regulations for titling programs that were adopted in May 1990.

Meanwhile, the agility equipment used by the USDAA mirrored its British counterparts, as did the basic rules for the standard agility course. USDAA also introduced Jumpers Classes and other nonstandard classes from Great Britain, such as Gamblers and Snooker, which encourage handlers to design their own courses under strict sets of rules established by the judge on the day of competition, and the Relay, which pairs up two dogs and two handlers to take on a course resembling the standard agility course.

## **ASCA and NADAC**

Meanwhile, in the early 1990s, the [Australian Shepherd Club of America](#) (ASCA) decided to provide its own sanctioning rules for agility. In July 1991, Sandra Katzen became the agility chairperson to pursue this project. Initially, ASCA considered mirroring USDAA's rules; however, because each individual ASCA club would have had to become a member of USDAA, ASCA decided against this proposal. In 1992, ASCA began working with Sharon Nelson of Idaho, who had been a member of the first US team in international agility competition, to develop a program based on the international programs. Jacqueline Taylor and Sally Sheridan, among others, contributed heavily to the program. In 1993, ASCA began considering the proposal for ratification, but the process stalled. <sup>[3]</sup>

As a result, Katzen and Nelson formed their own agility organization in 1993, the North American Dog Agility Council ([NADAC](#)) using the rules developed for ASCA. In 1994, ASCA approved using the same set of rules in lockstep with NADAC, so that competitors could earn either ASCA or NADAC titles, or both, at dual-sanctioned events, starting in January, 1995. <sup>[3]</sup>

At that time, NADAC and USDAA used the same equipment and had similar rules for the standard numbered and jumpers courses; NADAC also included the Gamblers event in its rulebook. However, over time, NADAC moved away from the International standards, focusing on its own vision of a faster but less physically stressful environment. It has gradually eliminated or changed many of the obstacles so that its equipment specifications and many of its rules no longer match those of the USDAA, AKC, or FCI. As of May 31st, 2006, ASCA and NADAC no longer dual sanction trials, and the ASCA agility program has returned to an earlier set of rules that more closely match those of the rest of the agility community.

## AKC

Bud Kramer's NCDA provided an early influence on, and was briefly affiliated with, AKC before AKC developed its own rules. The [AKC](#), which for decades had sanctioned [conformation shows](#), [obedience trials](#), and other [dog sports](#), showed a growing interest in agility over a period of several years.<sup>[4]</sup>

The AKC's first agility advisory committee met in August 1993 and started the process of creating its own agility rules and standards. When the AKC entered the field, each competition had only one standard course. The first AKC sanctioned agility match was held in 1994<sup>[5]</sup>, at the Houston Kennel Club show held at the [Astroarena](#) in [Houston, Texas](#). Sanctioning by the AKC made the rapidly growing sport nearly explode in the United States, as AKC handlers began exploring USDAA and NADAC competitions as ways to expand their agility experience. A few years later, AKC introduced its own version of the Jumpers course, which included weave poles as did the International rules but which NADAC and USDAA did not include.

### Additional organizations

Bob and Marliu Basin created the American Agility Associates in Colorado. This organization didn't last much beyond the early 1990s.

When the [FCI](#) introduced its international agility championships, it continued its affiliation with purebred [kennel clubs](#) around the world, including the AKC, allowing the AKC to choose a team from among its registered competitors. As a result, many top-level American dogs without AKC registration were shut out of international competition. To compensate, two additional organizations — the International Agility Link (organized through email) and the World Dog Show — sponsored international competitions starting around 1996 that allowed any competing dogs to be part of their country's teams; the World Dog Show affiliated with the USDAA, while the IAL remained independent. The World Dog Show hosted a couple of international championships but financially could not continue, so the USDAA began pursuing its own affiliations with other organizations and clubs worldwide to start its own International Championships. In 2001, the Grand Prix of Dog Agility, previously national in scope reached beyond North American boundaries and became a truly international event, hosting teams from several countries on other continents.

In 1998, **Canine Performance Events (CPE)** was founded by Linda Eickholdt, who took suggestions from other exhibitors, judges and host clubs, and created an organization with more common and new unique games classes as well as the standard agility course. Jump heights do not exceed a dog's measured height, although an owner may enter a higher height if they wish to. CPE agility continues to grow in the United States.

Bud Houston founded the **Teacup Dog Agility Association (TDAA)** for small dogs. The purpose of the TDAA is to provide challenges similar to that experienced by larger dogs in other venues. Obstacles are placed closer together and obstacle sizes are miniaturized to accommodate smaller dogs.

### Continuing changes

The sport of agility continues to grow and change in the United States. Every year brings the addition of new clubs and new classes. The rules for each organization go through periodic review as well, requiring that competitors in each organization keep up with the current rules, regulations, and class offerings.

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