

Fully Engaged

Are you FULLY ENGAGED every time you train or compete with your dog? A few weeks ago at an AKC trial I had the opportunity to watch many of the runs in both the novice and the masters' rings. I watched students and I watched strangers and I left shaking my head at how many handlers had no engagement with their dogs at all as they walked into the ring and to the start line. That lack of engagement was immediately obvious with dogs showing displacement behaviors like sniffing, sight-seeing, scratching, getting up from start line positions, not releasing from stays and generally showing a total lack of enthusiasm or desire to get out there and compete with their handlers.

This lack of engagement was followed by a lot of non-qualifying and lack luster runs with a distracted dog and a distracted handler. I know handlers are nervous at times before a run, it happened to me that weekend running my young border collie Pie in AKC for the first time. But I knew I had to override my novice dog ring nerves and take care of my dog. The start line is the last place handlers should be looking around the ring to see where the course goes, but that is what they seemed to be doing. The dog follows them on leash into the ring obediently, the handler never makes eye contact as they are distractedly looking around to find the first few jumps and remind themselves of the course flow. Then they rip off the leash and leave the dog with a look on its face as if they have never met this stranger who took them into the ring.

I started looking at my own start line with Pie. I tugged her to the start line, and had lots of connection there, but a couple times I led out like I was running Scoop or Ace, I just turned my back and walked to my lead-out spot. I deserved the distracted look she gave me one time as well as the start line sit that turned to a stand while my back was turned. The rest of the weekend I made sure I kept eye contact and praised her when I led out.

I decided after that weekend that I had to really help my students learn how to stay engaged with their dogs at the line. Tomorrow is day one of Power Paws Camp, our 14th year of teaching summer and winter camps. I wrote an article for the Camp Workbook on staying "Fully Engaged" and wanted to share it with all of you and all of my students who don't get to attend camp this weekend. It is written to our Campers, but of course applies to any kind of training or competition scenario. I hope it will help you remember to stay fully engaged with your dog if you want your dog to stay engaged with you!

Fully and extremely engaged!

Nancy Gyes, October 2013

My goal as your instructor is not just to help you learn how to train and handle your agility dog more effectively; I want to help both you and your dog have more fun and stay more connected to each other. Success in our sport requires focus/connection and what I call engagement. You need to be fully engaged with the training and what you plan on doing with your dog on the course and you want your dog fully engaged in the process.

I have a great goal for you at Camps, Seminars, Classes or at home training for you this year. A goal of staying connected to your dog and him to you. From the moment you get your dog out of its crate to begin an exercise you need to have 100% of your dogs' attention and you want to bring your dog to the correct state of arousal for the job.

- A dog that is distracted needs to be focused back to the handler with tugging/tricks/or focus games. Try hand targeting, high five, figure-8 between your legs or other handler focus games before you run.
- When tugging with your dog, YOU get to disengage/end the tugging, not the dog. The goal for tugging is that YOU have to ask your dog to stop tugging and get the toy back from them not vice-versa. Try not to let your dog disengage from the tug game until YOU are finished and they were solidly tugging with you before you ended the game.
- EYE contact. Give it and ask for it and don't start a run without it.
- A dog that is half asleep needs to be woken up and mentally and physically prepared to go play/work. AFTER you wake up and arouse your dog, you need tugging or silly tricks or some animated ground running work to engage them. Try scratch/rubbing your dog excitedly through their rib cage area to get their blood flowing and hope the brain follows!
- A dog that is over the top excited needs to be helped to have calm focus before the handler attempts a drill. Soft eye contact and quiet talk may help to calm them. If you are tugging keep it low key, the toy down at your knee or ground level, and don't encourage growling.
- A dog that is stressed by the surroundings needs some fun/happy/silly talk from the handler so they forget to be worried. Look them in the eyes, give 'em a kiss and ask them to trust that you will do the right thing to help them play through their fear.
- A suspicious dog that comes out of its crate and is immediately looking for a dog to warn away or chase needs some very special focus work on the handler and they need to be in motion WITH the handler and prevented from staring at other dogs through focus games and possibly control head halters on their way from crating to start line. If your dog will stay focused on you while tugging that is likely your best offense.

In order to do any of the above things to get your dog engaged, YOU need to be fully engaged.

Don't turn your back on your dog or mentally "drop" them. This goes for the start line and in between obstacles if you have to get a restart. When you walk to the start line keep your dogs' attention by making eye contact, tugging, praising or saying silly stuff so that your dog knows that you are being attentive to them.

If you have a momentary mental lapse on course, or you or your dog have a screw up and you need to get restarted on the course or talk to the instructor about your handling:

- Call your dog to you immediately, don't let them wander.
- Don't talk to the instructor until you get control of your dog!
- Tug if possible, or give them a treat if appropriate to the situation and if they responded to the recall immediately.
- You could also ask them to lie down or sit and praise them for doing so.
- If you have called your dog to you, gently hold them by the collar, or kneel down next to them. Put your arms around them to gently confine them so they can't nick off or get distracted by dogs, people or surroundings.
- Small dogs could be picked up, but don't grab at them, and try often to keep your small dogs feet on the ground where they play and work.
- Always take a few moments to re-engage or play with your dog before you start the drill again.
- ALWAYS re-engage and reward your dog at the end of every run. Throw your toy, or have a game of tug. If you can't tug or play retrieve then stay engaged with extremely lavish praise and some kind of physical play or a bit of rough housing one-on-one connection and of course eye contact. Don't dis-engage from your dog until he is off the course and back at the crate area.
- If you need to talk to the instructor or repeat some part of the drill, reward and play momentarily, **THEN** go get the info from your instructor.

**Stay fully engaged with your dog and it is likely
he/she will stay fully engaged with you!**