Course Strategy

The Judge designs a course, and it is the job of the handler to try to run the course in the best possible way for their dog.

Before you can formulate a course strategy you need to be able to recognise the challenges that the course poses.

Once you have identified the challenges you can then formulate some strategies to successfully negotiate those parts of the course, choose your best strategy and rehearse it in your mind, then take your dog and run it!

Course strategy is a balance between accuracy and speed. There is no point taking risks and doing a part of the course fast if you then get eliminated. Alternatively there is no point in successfully negotiating the challenge if you do it too slowly and carefully.

- Look at the course from the dog's point of view.

- Remember that the dog has not walked the course and that the success of your round will be determined by the clarity of your communication with your dog.

- Choose the strategy that suits you and your dog best, that you know you can perform quickly and efficiently.

- If necessary be prepared to run the extra metre to cut down the risk and make the course run better for your dog.

- Do not attempt manoeuvres in the ring that you have never practiced.

- Agility is all about speed and accuracy – go fast, go clear!

Types of Challenges.

1. Jumping Challenges.

- **Angled jumps**. Jumps placed on angles provide a tougher jump than obstacles placed straight on to each other. Jumps placed on an angle require more effort by the dog to clear them as this makes the straight hurdle into a slight spread.

- **Differing distances between jumps.** Jumps in a row with different distances will require dogs to extend and shorten their strides to negotiate successfully.

- **Jumps off a line.** Offset jumps are also a challenge, presenting changes in angle as well as direction.

- **Unusual jump types** such as brush jumps, spreads, walls, wing jumps also provide a challenge to dogs.

- **Jumps on a corner**. Right angle turns may be a smooth curve, tight or a send away depending on the way they are set up, the distance from one to the other and the stride length of the dog. 180 degree turns can test the speed of the dog's turn and 270 degree obstacles as in a box are another challenge for the handler.

- **Jump combinations.** Serpentines and pull-throughs are a set of (usually) jumps set up in a certain pattern that handler and dog need to practice. Pinwheels are a common setup that can be negotiated in a number of different ways.

- **Send behind jump.** This requires training, good communication and good technique by the dog.

2. Distance challenges.

- **Correct obstacles close together**. Placing obstacles close together will change a smooth curve into a tight corner. This is more demanding on handler/dog. Placing the next obstacle close to the preceding one will require quick reactions on the part of the handler and the dog.

- **Incorrect obstacles close together.** If an incorrect obstacle is placed close to the path of the correct obstacle this will test the handler's ability to direct the dog in the correct direction. At the start of a course where you place your dog may negate this challenge.

- **Correct obstacle far away**. A send to an obstacle in the distance may be a challenge for some, especially when a dog likes to work close.

- **Having to move away**. Placing a tunnel beneath a contact obstacle creates a

distance challenge as the owner is required to move away from the around the tunnel. Placing the tunnel opening close to the down contact of the Dogwalk or A-frame also provides a contact challenge.

3. Angles.

- **Start line**. An angled approach at the start line may be used as a challenge for handlers.

- **Placing obstacles on an angle** requires the dog to have sufficient confidence to negotiate them correctly. The handler may need to redirect the dog so that the approach is more direct. The dog may need to demonstrate extra effort or increased confidence to negotiate them correctly.

- **An angled approach to the weave** will affect the difficulty of the entry. The dog needs to know how to decelerate to make the turn.

4. Obstacle Discrimination.

This is where obstacles are placed close together, giving the dog a choice.
A common obstacle discrimination challenge involves placing the tunnel under the A-frame or dog-walk. The challenge can be made tougher by

- **using the same obstacle placed close together** eg. Two jumps, two tunnels, so that a simple "Jump" or "through" command is insufficient.

- **angling the approach to the discrimination** such that the dog is sent towards the incorrect obstacle.

- **sending the dog towards it ahead of the handler** eg. by placing the long jump before the challenge.

- **Approaching the discrimination twice** during the same course, requiring a different choice of obstacle each time.

5. Directionals.

Agility is a sport requiring a number of turns or changes of direction where handlers will need to use a cross of some sort – front, back or blind, to negotiate. Verbal directional commands and obstacle names may also assist, but where for example both obs[ ]'s left are a jump, a bit more than "back up" needs to be done.

6. Handler restriction.

This is where the path the handler would normally take to guide the dog is restricted, necessitating the display of distance handling or other skill. The tunnel under the dog-walk scenario may provide a handler restriction. Jumps placed close together may restrict the handler's path. Handlers may need to layer the obstacle in their path, because if they run round it they will send the dog over/into an incorrect obstacle.

7. Lead-out advantage.

This is a challenge provided at the start of the course, when it is an advantage for the handler who is able to leave his dog behind the start line.

EXERCISES.

Using different courses do the following:

1. Find the dog's best path by identifying the straight lines.

2. Find the challenges on the course.

3. Pick the two toughest parts of the course and formulate at least two handling manoeuvres.

References:
See Stuart Mah "**Course analysis for agility handlers**"
Available from the NALA Library