

Thinking of Agility?

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This month I have asked Sassy Joiris to write about agility. Sassy trains animal actors for television and film and teaches agility as well. Her Norfolk Terrier, CH MACH Stamp RN JE, is the first CH/MACH in his breed. Sassy teaches private students, classes, and seminars. She can be reached at joiris@ix.netcom.com.

Although “agility Norwich” might sound like an oxymoron, (after all, they’re about as aerodynamic as flying bricks), Norwich Terriers can do very well in the sport, and the sport has a lot to recommend it to Norwich Terrier owners. Norwich Terriers are busy little dogs, who can easily get themselves into all kinds of trouble when bored. They’re also a bunch who appreciate their food and treats, leading to a relatively high incidence of obesity in the breed. What better than a sport that entertains them, keeps them fit, and is so much fun you’ll enjoy it too?

If you’re saying to yourself “that’s all good and well, but I’m no athlete and I can’t picture myself running around at top speed,” rest assured that although our dogs need to be fit to succeed in agility, we really don’t. Besides, getting exercise by training your dog is a lot more fun than just going to the gym!

Starting with a Norwich is not really all that different from starting in agility with any other breed, but there are a few special concerns that you do need to consider. Visit classes and speak to instructors before signing up. Look for someone who is enthusiastic about training terriers. There are unfortunately still people out there who consider terriers ‘difficult,’ and that working with them “will not get you far.”

Make sure too that the trainer you find has experience competing in AKC agility and has had some experience working with small dogs. There are all kinds of different training techniques, styles, and methods. Finding the right one for you is more a matter of personal preference than anything else. But as a general rule of thumb, avoid any trainer who believes there’s only one right way to do things. Norwich, like many other terriers, are inventive little dogs. You need a creative and inventive trainer to keep up. When training any kind of terrier, I also look for an instructor who is comfortable with dogs who bark when they’re happy. While you might want to discourage excessive barking, don’t squelch your dog’s



enthusiasm by asking for him to work silently. Most Norwich doing agility like to cheer themselves on with a happy voice.

To keep your Norwich excited about this new game and willing to work hard, keep sessions very short and be generous with rewards. Tugging and destroying squeaky toys are often seen as the ultimate rewards by our little rat catchers. But high value treats work wonderfully as well. It is not excessive to reward every three to five seconds with a dog who is just starting to learn the sport. But make sure your treats are very small since the calories add up quickly! Roast beef, chicken breast, and low fat cheese are all popular treats, easily cut into very small bits.

Corrections of any type are not necessary when you first start training. Until the dog really understands what the job is, there's no way he can really be wrong. If something goes wrong just re-assess what you did and do things differently the next time.

Cut yourself plenty of slack as well. You're learning a new sport too, and you'll be making plenty of mistakes. Not to worry, no matter what you do wrong, you won't ruin the dog. Every mistake is fixable and your dog will most certainly be too busy enjoying playing with you to even worry about what you're doing wrong!

Thank you Sassie.

— Leandra Little, AKC Gazette Breed Columnist

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