

Everything about SPEED

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This article focuses on a couple of topics related to speed. I think most of this is obvious, but maybe there are some ideas that can help you analyze what might be helpful with your dog. If you are hoping to bring out more speed in your dog, here are some things to look into.

Health and fitness: do your best to make sure your dog feels good, is healthy, is carrying no extra weight, gets lots of fast-twitch muscle exercise, is warmed up, and is fit. Here is an idea that will help with expectations and monitoring:

Measure out some fixed distance, say 10 yards and video tape your dog going as fast as they can under optimal conditions (for example: restrained recall to raw chicken neck). Then calculate yards per second and use that as a baseline to evaluate status. For example, you can compare with video tape of running over the dogwalk or doing a short sequence over low bars to see how YPS changes while doing agility. This could also help you evaluate whether swimming lessons or chiropractic care changes anything by checking before and after treatment. Or if it changes over time in the wrong direction, it could be an indicator that supportive care is needed.

Well being: do your best to make sure your dog is confident and comfortable on equipment and in the training/competition environment. If they are bothered, concerned or afraid of something, do your best to manage it to make sure your dog doesn't have a valid reason to be bothered, concerned or afraid and take the time and get expert advice about how you might go about training through it. For example:

Lets say your dog has a teeter fly off and becomes afraid of it – one step you might go through is to teach them how to fly off a teeter so its fun, not scary. Then you just make it more reinforcing to stop instead of flying off.

Motivation: do your best to give your dog every reason to exert themselves to play agility by reinforcing speed and effort, building the value of what you are using to reinforce them, keeping the rate of reinforcement high, and making sure they know you are having the best time ever playing with them. For example:

Lets say you normally give your dog a piece of string cheese as a reward. You could build more value for the cheese by building their anticipation of getting it by making a big deal out of unwrapping it, turning your back on them as if you are playing keep away so they have to pursue you to get it, giving them piece after piece after piece really fast, or tossing it to them so they leap to catch it, or surprising them with really stinky or strongly flavored cheese, or letting them snarf as many pieces as they can out of a baggie before you close it, or couple the cheese with an enthusiastic and authentic “holy cow, that was AWESOME!” etc.

Training: do your best to build speed into your dog’s performance asap and avoid accidentally training out speed. Here are some examples:

Be thrilled: If you get upset when your dog goes so fast that they overshoot their 2o2o contact, then they could learn that it pays better to be slow and careful into position. Instead be thrilled if they make this kind of mistake, then help them learn how to decide to stop and manage their body when they are that excited.

Be assured: If your dog is going so fast they are about to go off course, and you yell “here, here, here”, they can easily conclude that it doesn’t pay to go too fast or be too bold in driving ahead. Instead be assured that when your control of the jumps, directionals, deceleration cues, timing or whatever else applies is perfect, that you wont get those off courses anymore. There is no need to “fix it” real time, just take it as feedback on what to focus on in training.

Reinforce strategically: If you only reward your dog on course from your hand, or when they are stopped (stay, table, contacts), or when they return to you after completing a sequence, or when they are “done” with a sequence – what you are probably reinforcing is not a dog driving ahead as fast as they go. Instead, find opportunities to reinforce your dog at the moment they are going full speed, reward away from you, use toys, use friends to deliver the reinforcement etc. so that you capture the times when your dog is going fast.

Be creative: Try to build on any situation where your dog gives you more than average speed. Dashing out the back door to check out the yard first thing in the morning? Add a ready/steady and put a jump in their way. Super excited when you first come home from work? Go play weaves for a minute as part of the “I’m home” routine.

Handling: do your best to give your dog good information so they can be freed up to move at speed through the course. Here are some specific examples:

Send them: As soon as you handle your dog to put the correct obstacles in their path, release your dog to go do them. Sometimes you can set a line that presents 2,3,4 obstacles so let them rip.

Look for lines: The above statement applies more frequently if you think about the dog's path as lines connected by arcs so you can identify opportunities to let them open up and accelerate.

Move on: Pay attention to when your handling job is done and you can begin to work the next part of the sequence. For example, when you have sent your dog to a jump and you know they are going to take it, there is no need to hang around watching them actually jump, clear the bar, land and turn. Instead, once you know they are going to take the jump, move on and show them the next thing they need to know about the course.

Independent performance: One of the greatest benefits of knowing where your dog will be for a second or so (in a tunnel, on a dogwalk, in the weaves etc.) is that you can use that time to get somewhere valuable on course. As one person told me a long time ago "show your dog the entrance to the tunnel, they will find the exit on their own".

Train yourself: Do your best to, well, do your best. Take the time to train your handling so that your dog gets the clearest, most consistent cues you can give. This will probably include practicing visualization of the course, practicing memorization, practicing knowing where you are in space based on landmarks that will be in your visual field when you run, practicing moving through space while watching your dog (and obstacles are in your peripheral vision), practicing running, practicing footwork, practicing accelerating and decelerating, practicing your attention and focus etc.

Competing: do your best to make sure that speed in the competition environment is reinforced. Examples might include:

Warm up: Try to help your dog get ready to move on course both mentally and physically. Establish the framework of a routine that includes things your dog needs (might include potty, stretching, exercise, impulse control games, motivational games, attention / focus games, relationship games).

Focus: Try to stay "with" your dog from the time you get them out to run through the routine you go through after the run and help them focus on you throughout that process. Help them transition into the optimal frame of mind to be your teammate. On course, stay confident and engaged, notice when they give you exceptional effort and speed, and find

ways to let them know that you like it! Afterwards, stay with them, keep them moving and energized, be enthusiastic about what just happened, help them cool down.

Consistency: Try to avoid becoming a different handler than the one your dog is used to in class and practice. Nerves, pressures, distractions, the possibility of a double-Q etc. can all change your demeanor, tone, body language, and how you react on course and that can tend to undermine your dog's confidence, understanding, and ultimately speed.

I think that's a pretty good outline of the kinds of things to think about if you are looking to build more speed into your dog's performance. The one last thing I would mention is that you should also consider that your dog may be giving you everything he or she has to give. Be respectful of that possibility. I suspect neither you nor your dog will enjoy it if you find yourself nagging, criticizing or critiquing their best efforts.