

Start Lines - A Lead Out Advantage

by Dan Roy

Most of us agree that having a dog that is motivated about agility is a top priority. When they are having fun, it is a good thing. More speed equals more fun. We work very hard to nurture that attribute in them. So, can we ever blame them, when we are at the start line, with a dog that is totally into the sport, foaming at the mouth and ready to run their hearts out, and before we can take one step, Yahoo! Zoom! They're off! Good luck catching up!

Agility has produced some other very interesting start line behaviors. The last example is the "who needs borders" type dog. Here are a couple of more:

"Grim Creeper" type dog. Those are the ones that we set up 6 feet back from the first jump. We turn and lead out, spectators begin to giggle. When we look back, our dear friend has magically moved a little closer to that first jump. With the distance still acceptable, we turn and lead out further. More giggles. Now when we look back, our poor friend is right up against the jump. So we call them over anyway. Down comes the bar.

"Looky over there" type dog. Those are the ones that want to know what is going on in 360 degrees and in 4 Dimensions - 3D in visual and 1D of scent. They aren't watching us! With this dog, we could actually get a lead out. We may even convince ourselves that our start line is fine! Problem is, when we call them, they just might go the opposite direction.

Having a start line can give your agility team an advantage. It is sometimes an essential tool in negotiating opening sequences with reliability. It can set the "tone" of the run. This is especially true if the agility team suffers from impulsive, uncontrolled, behaviors on course. When your start line is stable, the likelihood of having focus on the remainder of the course is high. When it does not, the ripple effect sends a shockwave through the run that can end up with the team in a wipeout.

Envision the dog you want at the start and so shall it be. Yes, I want an animal that can barely hold it together. He has intensity balanced with focus. Nearly pulling me out past the gate, he gathers himself just before the orange start cones. The leash comes off with a little struggle. That's the easy part. The scribe (bless them for volunteering) asks for the dog's name. Confident in my training, I sound out his identity without hesitation. A sure nod and an electronic "go" in return. Now his canine eyes simultaneously looking ahead and watching me as I lead out. I'm reminded of a top instructor's catchy phrase "start line stay and march away". He is now calculating the direction of my movement and final position. He has seen this posture before. He knows the opening sequence even before taking the first obstacle. We are connected, sometimes only by a thread, but enough to make due. Muscles cocked into angulations. A sense of restrained anticipation waiting for the release word. Even as my hand is raised, still no movement.

It usually comes at no small cost, but a solid start can be achieved in time, with repetition, while still having fun, through a regular training program. Begin with simple to achieve steps. Build upon your team's successes. Train it in a multitude of different environments and places. Know that the highest excitement levels for the dog will require your patience. Some dogs demand more patience than others.

What is your idea of a good start line? I would be interested to know.