



have also found that when a dog is under stress they are more likely to engage in an activity that they really like with me as a way to relieve that stress than to engage in a game that is not one of their favorites. For example, I can play tug with any of my dogs. However I have only one dog who enjoys playing tug before we do agility. I have two dogs who would rather play other games before we go in the ring. Now tug is a lot easier for me to do while waiting at a crowded gate area but if it isn't of interest to my dog because of the stress level then I don't have that tool at that moment. What I need to do is engage them in their favorite game or activity while waiting our turn to run in the ring. In this case they love to do silly tricks because tricks have very positive associations for them and they have a high comfort level with tricks and they get treats for doing the tricks. I don't have rigid criteria when doing tricks and I laugh and roughhouse with them while doing the tricks so it is a lighthearted game for them. When the run is done and the stress is over then they are much more willing to play tug or any other kind of game with me.

When I am training I want my dogs excited to be out there and I want them to be jazzed up and wild for these reasons:

1. They are more likely to give me 110% if they are in a positive and fun frame of mind about the activity.
2. If they are stimulated and keyed up in training then when they get to a trial and are hyped up at the trial we both know how to handle that energy level.
3. If I have a dog that is stressed at a trial I know if I can initiate play with them and get them into that play mood it will go a long way to relieving their stress throughout the run because it will take them to a familiar place from training.
4. I ultimately want to be more exciting than all of that other stimuli out there so if that means I have to act silly to do it then that is what I will do.

I will do whatever it takes for each individual dog to bring out that excitement and enthusiasm.

My dog gets "too excited" for food or toys, what should I do?

Consider yourself very lucky to have a dog who is excited about what you have to offer for a reward! I want my dogs to be excited and bouncing off the walls when I'm training them. It is a lot easier to get speed and drive when they are excited. If you think the toys or food are too distracting then you need to teach it to be a motivator for your dog. You need to teach your dog that they have to "work" for the food or toy. Depending on how distracted the dog is, you may have to go back to some basics where the food or toys is only used in training and not given away freely at all. I don't ever give away food freely with my dogs they have to do something for a treat whether it is a simple "sit" or an agility sequence. I have toys that are set aside only for training – the toys that I know my dogs especially like. The less appealing toys and the chew toys are the ones

left out on a regular basis. Dogs can learn to work for the reward. Once I have an established behavior with my dogs then I will not only use the toy/food as a reward but I will use it as a distraction. They have learned the rule is that they have to do the required behavior FIRST and can get the toy afterward. You need to establish the groundwork of working for the reward first before asking them to handle it as a distraction. If your dog can do agility with their best motivator lying out there close to the obstacles then you will be in good shape when you have to deal with the distractions of a trial situation. Jane Simmons-Moake has an excellent videotape using toys and food as distractions for proofing weave pole performance. Susan Garrett recommends having dogs do weave poles for their dinner, with their dinner bowl at the end of the poles. She has also used a flyball box at the end of the weave poles for dogs highly motivated by the box. This works as both a motivator and a proofing aid.

What about a high drive dog who likes to do agility a lot?

I have been blessed to have dogs with varying degrees of natural drive for agility because each dog has taught me something about motivation and drive. Even with my highest drive dog I always, always, always reward efforts with interactive play. Too often I see and hear handlers saying things like “my dog likes obstacles and that is his reward” or “just doing agility is reward enough for him.” I disagree. It is a team sport and the reward should be clear and different from the actual desired behavior and the reward should be interactive with you as the handler. I want my highest drive dog to increase his drive for agility and the way to do that is to reward the behavior with a game he likes. I want him jazzed up and motivated in training because I know he will be even higher at a trial - I need to simulate that high drive in training as much as possible and the way to do it is to get him motivated with interactive play. Yes he likes the obstacles too but that is not a reward – that is part of the required behavior to get the reward. If you use obstacles for a reward you are muddying the waters for your dog and not making it clear to them what is the required behavior and what is the reward. Also you are encouraging your dog to take obstacles without your permission which can lead to other problems such as self-rewarding on an agility course and lack of teamwork. Dogs want to know “what’s in it for me?” It is your job as the human teammate to make it clear to them what the reward will be and what they need to do in order to earn that reward.

My dog doesn't always play with the same toy from week to week what should I do?

You need to pay attention to your dog's attitude on a daily basis and it may be possible that what seemed like a great reward to your dog yesterday or last week may not be the great reward today. Dogs do change over time their preferences for games and food and they do like a variety. Also dogs may have trouble playing “in public.” Sometime I will let my dogs stick their heads in the dog bag that has an assortment of toys in it and let them pull one out – they get to choose

the toy of the day. I try to have different things in my bag of tricks so I can be sure to have something that will motivate them on any given day.

Sometimes you can make a boring toy more fun just by how you interact with your dog and get them excited. One way to do it is to play “keep away” with a toy. I’ve been able to get dogs excited about a toy that at first seems boring to them by being silly and playing with the toy by myself. Then I’ll throw it on the floor and race over to it before the dog can get it. Doing this a few times can often get dogs excited about the toy because they are curious about why it is so much fun. This is often far more effective than shaking the toy in their face which we tend to do a lot. I have watched one of my dogs learn to like tennis balls because one of the other dogs would always play “keep away” with it. This would happen several times a week. Finally the dog without the ball couldn’t stand it any longer and stole the ball from the other dog and ran around with it. The chase began. Ever since then that time that dog loves tennis balls and will play with the ball with people. I have dogs who wouldn’t touch certain toys or objects if left in a room alone with them but if I or one of the other dogs takes that toy and plays “keep away” with it then it suddenly becomes the most fun thing around. It is all in the presentation. When playing “keep away” you do NOT want to shove the toy in the dog’s face, quite the opposite, play with it away from the dog and even play with it while your back is turned to your dog.

Just as you need to teach your dog to play at home you may also need to teach your dog to play in other places. Teach your dog that it is alright to play with you in class, play with you in the park, play with you at shows. One of the things I do with my young dogs is take to them along to shows as young as possible. At those shows I play with them and interact with them and I also train them. They learn at early age about playing and learning in a distracting environment that is similar to what they will be seeing when they are ready to compete. I work up to the level of distractions gradually as the dog matures.

Dogs, like humans, enjoy pay raises and bonuses (a.k.a. jackpots) for a job well done. Especially when the light bulb finally goes on for them while learning something new or when the teamwork was exceptional you want to really celebrate that breakthrough. If you’ve been playing with the same toy for several weeks and you are finding your dog’s performance is getting stale or not improving at the rate you’d like then try increasing the reward. Whether you increase it by using a different special toy or by playing more vigorously with the old toy, it doesn’t matter as long as the intensity is greater and there is a marked difference from the previous rewards.

What if my dog doesn’t like to play?

Dogs can be taught to play at any age but it is much easier to teach them as a puppy. Too often we get caught up in teaching them not to bite and chew and how to have self-control that we forget to teach them how to play. Teach your

dog at an early age that learning is fun and teaching them to play is the best way to introduce that concept. I believe any dog as a puppy can be taught to play with toys. I have had a few puppies and one older dog who were more interested in food than in toys when they came to me. Did I leave it at that? No. I taught them to play with toys – using a clicker and treats and in some cases using toys or balls filled with treats. Don't just assume your dog doesn't like toys because he wasn't running after toys the day he was born. I taught a 1 and ½ year old dog who had never played with balls or toys how to retrieve balls and play flyball. It is harder to teach an older dog to play with toys but it is not impossible, you need to be willing to take the time to teach them and to find out what kind of toy will excite them. If you can borrow toys from a friend it will be a lot cheaper but if you can't then you may have to buy and test drive a lot of toys. These days there are so many toys on the market that have pouches in them for storing treats. I would start with the stuffed toys that have the pouch for the food in it and tennis balls that are cut and filled with food. I would play "keep away" with the toy to see if that gets your dog interested in what it is you are have in your hand. You do have to really play it up like you are having the most fun in the world with that toy. Also you want to keep certain toys set aside for the play sessions – these become special toys. That adds to the fun and excitement for the dog. Susan Garrett has written articles about how to create a fun and exciting toy for you and your dog. It won't happen overnight but if you stick with it then you will be rewarded for your efforts by having a more motivated dog and having another training aid in your training toolbox.

As a last resort, if toys don't do it for you dog, try roughhousing with them to see if they like that. At first your dog may look at you like you are the weirdest thing on the planet, but if they figure out that it is alright they will become more confident about playing with you. Ultimately dogs want to have fun too and you need to find out how they like to have fun and this will probably mean that you too will have to act silly and have fun being a little crazy with your dog.

Lastly, when you initiate and encourage rough play between you and your dog (if that is a game that you think your dog would like) you do need to have boundaries and rules about it just like dogs do with each other. I use "that's enough" as a cue word to stop playing and let's go to work and I also will say "ouch" if the play gets too rough and it hurts. With that kind of feedback dogs will learn how to play with you – they have excellent control of their mouths and a well socialized dog will have very good control of their bites.

How do you reward your dog at the end of a run at a trial?

Agility (and many other dog sports) is a team sport between you and your dog. As with any team sport when the team has completed a job well done the team should celebrate TOGETHER. How often do you see at a trial that the handler is getting the hugs from friends and getting the congratulatory feedback while the dog stands patiently at their side. How was the dog rewarded and when was the

dog rewarded? Was the level of reward comparable to that which the human partner is experiencing? Usually it is not, unfortunately. We as humans tend to be more interested in talking to our friends about our runs than in playing with our canine teammate. It is easy to do and I've done it myself. Play with your dog first – they need the immediate feedback. Your own feedback from your friends can wait a few minutes, however your dog's need for feedback cannot and should not have to wait. Many of you videotape your agility runs at trials and I would challenge each of you to examine the tape at the end of the run and observe how you interact with your dog at the end of the run (this may mean asking the videographer to continue taping the run past the last obstacle). Notice if your dog seems really engaged and interested in you and your behavior. If you know how your dog plays with other dogs – do they like to roughhouse, tug or chase? You can use that information to create interactive play with your dog at the end of your agility run.

Now go out and enjoy playing with your canine teammate!

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