

Agility training and competition is a great activity to do with your Leonberger. For them, it is a game they can play with you that involves a great deal of physical activity and a sense of bonding and accomplishment. For you, it is an opportunity to improve your training and communication skills and to strengthen your bond with your Leo. It is a team sport, with the handler leading the way and the dog doing the difficult physical work.

Classes, training and competition are all fun. All agility training is done in a positive manner. The dog is praised for success and errors are ignored. In competition, the dog can do no wrong. All errors are considered to be the fault of the handler. Either the dog was not trained correctly or the signal given by the handler was not clear. The handler will be dismissed from the ring for speaking harshly to the dog.

People at agility trials are generally very supportive and helpful of other competitors. They are trying to for the best run they and their dog can accomplish, not trying to outdo the other dogs and handlers. New handlers get help and advice from everyone around them.

Agility trials are fun to watch. A wide number of breeds of all sizes and types will be at an agility competition. Some dogs and handlers will be expert at agility. Others will be just starting out or just simply not good at it.

I have done agility with two of our Leos, Gunther and Gretel, both of whom earned titles shortly after starting competition. Gretel, who was small, had amazing control of her body, and was high-strung and driven, performed incredibly well in agility. She earned several Elite level titles and a Championship in agility. She frequently ran the fastest time through a course of any dog of any breed or any size. Gunther's ability and accomplishments were more typical of what one can expect of

a Leonberger doing agility. He earned a wide variety of novice level titles but was never fast enough to qualify at the Open level. He loved doing agility and was quite good at it but he was not driven to dash through the course. He did the course, but at his own pace. Gunther did agility because it was fun, because he wanted to please me, and because he loved to show off for the audience. Gretel was driven to go through the course as rapidly and accurately as she possibly could.

Gunther was a good sized male, 30 ½” at the shoulders and 135 pounds, and started training at five years old and competing at six. Gretel was a small female, 27” and 92 pounds. She started training at 18 months and competing at two years. Both really enjoyed classes, practice sessions and competition. For Gretel, agility work was the most fun of anything she did, except for eating and (sometimes) retrieving a tennis ball. She got really excited when we go out into our practice area, she got to class, or we got in line to enter the ring at trials. Her eyes got really big, she became really focused, and she could hardly wait to begin. For Gunther, everything was great fun and exciting but he did really enjoy agility. He would go out of his way to go over jumps in our yard without being asked to do so. Unfortunately, he would also sometimes do the same thing in the ring.

The sport was originally set up for herding dogs. A 39 pound Border Collie is considered a large dog in agility. A Leonberger is at a significant disadvantage because of its size and weight. The tunnels and chutes are nominally 24” in diameter but actually considerably smaller inside. Any dog less than 20” tall at the shoulder can run through the tunnels at full speed, while the Leo has to crawl through. This is physically difficult and costs the Leo time. Gunther, being tall and advanced in age, never was very fond of the tunnels. He would do them at a surprisingly good speed, but he would often refuse to enter a tunnel that was not upright at the entrance and, after the age of 8 he would often refuse to do more

than two or three tunnels in a run. Gretel at 27" still had to crawl somewhat but she was slowed only slightly by tunnels. In fact, she had her Elite title in NADAC Tunnellers, which involves running through a maze of tunnels as fast as possible. The weave poles, a series of vertical posts that the dog weaves through, are too close together for a large dog. They are 20" apart and a Leo is typically in contact with three poles at once.

Before competing the dog needs to be able to properly master several types of obstacles. The basics are jumps, tires to jump through, tunnels and chutes to run through, the dog walk and A-frame to climb and descend, the see-saw, and weave poles. Dogs easily catch on to jumps and tunnels. The chute, which is a hard tunnel with a cloth tube at the exit end, can be difficult for some dogs to become comfortable with. The dog walk, the A-frame, the see-saw, and the weave poles are the most difficult to teach a dog to perform correctly.

The dog walk and A-frame help the dog develop confidence in its physical abilities. The A-frame is steep and high (6 feet) and the dog walk is high (4 feet) and narrow. In addition to successfully traversing these obstacles, the dog must touch a "contact area" at the end of each obstacle. This contact area, usually painted yellow, must be touched by at one of the dog's feet. This is for safety, to prevent dogs from jumping off the obstacles from too far off the ground. The see-saw is scary because it moves and makes a "bang" when it hits the floor. Your Leo should be exposed to a lowered and quiet see-saw at first. Otherwise they may become afraid of the obstacle and it will take a really long time for them to become comfortable with it. The see-saw has contact areas at both ends.

Gunther was not able to learn the weaves until I set up poles 30" apart in our yard, taught him how to weave, then gradually moved the poles closer together. He became good at doing the poles accurately and was able to earn novice level

titles but he basically walked through them, going to slowly to earn Open or Elite level titles. Gretel learned on regular poles. I only had to lead her through them a couple of times. She immediately caught on and started doing them faster and faster. Gretel was extremely fast though the weaves for a big dog, driving through and pushing them aside with her shoulders. She was famous in New England agility circles for pulling up spikes or ripping up tape holding down the pole frames as she zoomed through.

The dog needs to be healthy and in good physical condition. He or she will need to be able to jump over a bar, typically 20" to 26" high for a Leo, to be able to climb and descend fairly steep ramps, to crawl through tunnels, and to run and make tight turns. Your Leo should be at least 18 months old before doing a great deal of jump work or training with weave poles and should be at least 2 years old before starting to compete. Their hips and elbows should have been x-rayed and have no serious defects. You should never attempt to do agility with an overweight Leo. You should be able to easily feel their ribs at the side and the tips of their vertebrae along their back. The Leo should be fit, having had regular exercise involving both play and hiking or swimming. Your Leo should like to jump. If your Leo has to be coaxed to jump or tends to go around rather than over jumps, you should consider the possibility that there is a physical problem

The handler needs to be mobile; generally it is best if the handler can sprint for the minute or so each run takes. As the team gets better the dog moves more and more rapidly through the course but the dog also gains ability to work away from the handler, reducing the distance and speed the handler has to run. It is possible to do agility with a handler who is not very mobile (there are handlers in wheel chairs who compete successfully), but you would need a very attentive and well trained dog. It is hard to imagine anyone being able to compete successfully in agility with a Leo without the handler being able run at least a little bit.

The handler and dog need to learn to work together. The handler needs to give appropriate and timely signals to the dog and the dog needs ignore distractions and to respond immediately to those signals. This is the area on which most training and practice concentrates.

The handler has to be able to plan for each run. Before the run begins be clear the handler must have clear in his or her mind the course the dog will run, the course the handler will run, when and how their paths will intersect, and what signals the handler will give and when. There is no time during the run to think about what needs to be done next. I have gotten lost several times in the middle of a run, standing there trying to remember which obstacle comes next with Gunther or Gretel waiting impatiently.

Getting started is easy. Find beginner agility classes in your area and give it a try. If you and your Leo enjoy the classes you will want to go on to the next level of classes. You can build most of the equipment so you can practice at home once you have been properly taught the basics. Agility can be addictive. You may find yourself spending weekends at trials located hours away from home.

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