

Dog Agility Training: 3 Big Mistakes All Dog Owners Should Avoid

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG If you've been following this podcast or potentially you've googled who Susan Garrett is, you may know that I got my reputation as a professional dog trainer primarily from excelling in the sport of dog agility where I won multiple world championships, many, many US national and Canadian national championships, and have been loving teaching and competing in the sport of dog agility for more than 30 years.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And today, I'm going to share with you the three biggest mistakes people make when they're training their dogs in the sport of agility. And here's the kicker, these three things are exactly the same three things that make it difficult or easy to train a dog in any sport or to have the most amazing family pet possible. The exact three things.

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I'm also going to share with you the 15 ways how in the dog training sport of agility, dogs communicate with their handler. And guess what, it's the same 15 ways your very own dog may be trying to communicate with you. I'll share that at the end of today's podcast. Now, my hallucination is the reason people make these same three mistakes because they focus on the wrong thing.

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When you think of dog agility, what do you think of? Possibly you think of a dog darting in a weave pole or jumping up and over an A-frame or speeding over a jump or through a tunnel or turning tight; it's exciting. It's amazing. I mean, it's just mind-blowing to me to see the athleticism of these dogs, but when you focus on those things, these other three things go by the wayside.

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So, the number one thing is people do not focus on having a joyful, engaged relationship with their dogs. One where the dog has an amazing recall, has a brilliant retrieve, and understands very clearly how to be in [Reinforcement Zone](#), the area that is by your side that your dog's naturally want to gravitate to that area because, let's face it when we're running agility we don't want our dogs tripping us up or running backwards barking at us saying, "What are you going to do next?"

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Those three layers are three of the 25 layers that I make sure are in place before I ever let my dog see any piece of agility obstacle. But yet, what happens when you sign up for a local agility class? A lot of times, they tell you, "Okay, put your dog on leash, put a meatball in front of their head, and let's get them up and overall this equipment." Or worse yet, they'll put them on two leashes and kind of drag them across and say, "Hey, they'll learn to like it." Oh, nay nay. Mistake number one.

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Now, imagine if you took that wild Mustang horse who had never had a rider on its back and you try to do some stadium jumping or some dressage. Would it be smooth? No. There's a saying that my sprinting coach used to say to me and it's this; "Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast".



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We need to get things understood between us in a way that creates a smoothness to the movement, to the relationship, to the dog, understanding what you want and what you are seeing in your dog. You get that by focusing first on the foundation of your relationship.

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So mistake number one people make is they say, "My dog could do this. My dog likes to jump, so I'm going to start doing agility." Will your dog come when he's called? Will your dog happily come to your side? Will your dog, you know, when they're running, "sit" when you ask and "down" and "do all these things," are they verbally responsive to you? That's what we want as your foundation for agility.

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Mistake number two. People focus on the sexy. And the sexy of agility are the items I mentioned right off the top. The obstacles, the weave poles, the dog walk, the A-frame, the tunnels, the jumps. "Ooh la la, I can't wait to get my dogs doing those things."

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You signed your kid up. "I think my kid would love BMX racing." So, you go to the local BMX school, and you go, "Hey, can you teach my kid BMX racing?" And they go, "Okay, bring him over." so you bring your five-year-old over, and they say, "Okay, first thing we're going to do is we're going to put you on this bike and shoot you down this ramp. And when you get airborne, you're going to kick your legs out behind you, and you're going to do what's called the Superman."

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"And then if that goes well enough, then you're going to come back here, and we're going to show you how to throw the bike in the air and do a tail whip, like getting the back end of the bike all underneath you." And then little kid goes, "Whoa, I don't know how to ride a bike." Well, the same thing's true in agility.

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We got to get [the fundamentals](#), guys. The sexy things don't matter. So, after we get the relationship, then we focus on the other 22 items long before we get to any obstacles. You can look at the best agility competitors in the world, the world champions. And funny enough, you're going to see a ratio that's very similar to the very novice agility competitors.

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And that is, the time a dog spends on an obstacle compared to the time the dog spends between the obstacle is very similar. So, for somebody who's pretty new to agility, let's say they get around the course clean. They don't have a dog going off and visiting somebody; they get around clean. They will spend approximately 50% of the time on an obstacle and 50% of the time between the obstacle. And at the world championship level, that might be like 45, 55, but it's really close to 55%.

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We've looked at all kinds of dogs in all kinds of levels and the height. It doesn't matter. It's all-around 50-50, yet people obsess with the obstacles. They want the sexy. And they don't even bother teaching how do we get the dog to move between one and the other without looking at you and barking. We teach these things, and then we just tell them the names and start running, don't we?



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Oh, a nay nay. To quote John Pinette. Oh, nay nay. So don't get wrapped up in the sexy; get wrapped up in the understanding of what we call the flatwork. And if you go to somebody who says they're going to teach you agility and within the first 8 to 10 to 12 weeks, like, three months they say, "We're going to get on this equipment. We're going to—." No. No. You're going to the wrong school.

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And if you're teaching a school and you think, "Well, people aren't going to come to me if I don't tell them they can get on all the obstacles, or maybe it's just baby obstacles." Or "Susan, my students don't want to win world championships." Well, it's not about winning. It's about keeping the dogs safe. It's about maximizing the fun that the dog and the handler has. And yes, it's about maximizing the success.

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Because if somebody is investing their time with you and they get 10% success. And if they had invested their time say with me and would've gotten 90% success, then you're letting them down. Safety first. Then we want them to have fun, and then we want them to maximize success. And all of that can happen if you don't focus on the sexy. You've got to get the relationship first, and then you get the flatwork.

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The number three mistake that people make, and this is true in every walk of life no matter what people are doing to train their dog. They do not receive the feedback the dog is giving them. They say, "Training is about me spewing all this information to you." And it's, you know, it's not just true of dogs. It's true of educators, of anybody who is coaching you. They should be learning from you while they're teaching you.

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You should be learning from your dog. Your dog is going to communicate so clearly how well you're doing with your training. Or you can just say, "Well, I'm just doing what I've been taught to do." So, your dog is going to give you such clear cues, feedback as to how well your instructor has been teaching you. Maybe what you're learning is not what you're going to be needing.

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Fifteen ways your dog is going to give you feedback. Number one, a dog that sniffs in between obstacles is giving you feedback. They may be saying, 'I'm stressed. They may be saying, 'I'm confused.' They may be saying, 'I'm overwhelmed. Or they may be saying, 'you have skipped a couple of those 25 steps on the way to teaching this, and I'm just not having fun. Feedback number two, the dog just leaves work. "Checking out, tapping out. Uh, yeah, I'm done. You can do the rest of this yourself. I'm leaving."

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Same thing overwhelmed. I don't see value in what you're doing. You haven't built it in a way that gives me clear signals. Why this is fun for me. Maybe you've been doing it with a lure, and now you're trying to do it without the lure. "Nope. Tapping out." "Let's see over here. That's where I'll be. That's where I'll be when you're done."



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Number three, the dog's jumping on the person. As they're trying to go from obstacle to obstacle, the dog is jumping on you, going, "Oh, hey, hey! Don't have a fricking clue what we're doing here, pal. You might want to take a few steps back. Come listen to this podcast Susan Garrett did because we got a problem here, Houston." So, if the dog is jumping at you when you're trying to train them in the sport of agility, it's feedback. Take the feedback. It's the best thing you can do for your dog. Take their feedback.

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Number four thing, nipping. If a dog jumps up at you and nips as you try to point them to go somewhere feedback. You know, there's only so many things our dogs can do. They can't write us a letter. They can't get on their computer and send us a text, but they can give us feedback with their body and their voice, and their actions. And this is what they're doing. This is their communication tool. We need to absorb it, take it in, and take action on their coaching us about how good a job we did coaching them.

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Number five, a lot of dogs they'll get up near obstacles, and they'll start spinning. The spinning, same thing, "I don't know what's going on here. I'm too over-excited. I don't really know what my job is. I don't know what you're trying to say to me. I'm crazy. This is crazy." Number six, dogs that just start grabbing off course of obstacles.

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"Your communication is not very clear, so I'm just going to go off and do this tunnel. I'm going to go off and do the A-frame. I hope this makes you happy. Cause I know, I'm trying to make you happy. How about this? How about that? How about this?" Or they might just get the zoomies, and they just tuck their tail, and they start doing laps around the training ring, or if you've got the meta trial, the trial environment, they are doing the zoomies. They're just like, "Poof! Check it out! Check it out! Don't know what you want. Go on!"

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And you can say, "Oh Susan, no, you don't understand. My dog knows." No. Your dog's giving the feedback. I know if it was my dog, I'd be listening to that feedback. You need to listen to your dog's feedback. Some dogs might give you the feedback of just, "Hmm, yeah, there's a judge. I think I'm going to go visit the judge. Oh, look, there's somebody over at the table. They might have treats." or "Look at this lady setting bars in this chair. I'm going to go visit her." Visiting other people, feedback. That's how they can communicate, feedback.

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Some dogs might just be doing agility, and then they just stop. "Yeah, we're done." Just stopping. Some might, every once in a while, stop and have a scratch. Now, if you've listened to [podcast number 112](#), you know that signs of stress or trigger stacking, you might see some scratching. Some dogs might do things that they shouldn't be out doing on obstacles. Like they might run-up to the top of an A-frame and sight-see, or other dogs might go into a tunnel and start rolling or just not come out. They'll stop and go. "Yeah. You better come back in here. Cause I, I think it's better in here. Come on, you come in here." It's just feedback. Just don't take it personally. It's just feedback.



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Some dogs may eat grass, or if you're training in an area where there's cow poop or horse poop, or sheep poop, oh, sheep poop. Dog training in agility, they're saying, "Yeah, you know what your training is not so good, but the sheep poop yeah, it's pretty darn good." Right? It's feedback. Don't take it personally. Don't get mad at the dog because you don't like what they're communicating to you. Don't get mad at them. They're giving you feedback on your training. Now, some dogs may give you really overt feedback, and they might go around obstacles.

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"Yeah. Hmm, don't like doing weave poles, nope, no." And that feedback might be 'I'm a little bit sore. Don't feel like doing that.' or they go around the seesaw or they jump off part way, that's the feedback. Not comfortable, not happy. I'm either in pain, or I'm stressed, or I'm worried, or I'm a little bit worried about doing this. And the final way a dog will give you feedback is they just stop and have a big old poop. Right, yeah. That's clear. That's pretty clear.

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Now you can say, "Oh, it's clear that I didn't exercise." but there's a lot of dogs that the stress of agility will cause him to defecate in the ring. And you may think, "Oh, didn't I walk you?" You know, sometimes it happens when dogs are new, and they're a little bit excited, but the truth is all of this could be avoided. If you, number one, focus on that great relationship. I've given you so many relationship tips here in Shaped by Dog. If you still need more, I'll put a link in the show notes here on how you can [join our community in Home School the Dog](#). Build that relationship.

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Number two, if you've got this great relationship, now you need to put in the layers of the work that happens between the obstacles, the flatwork, those things that make you guys work and act and move as a team. And the third thing is, listen to the feedback your dog is giving you and believe the dog. Don't try to correct them when they leave. Don't say, "I know you're wrong." Say, "Poof, that's not what I expected. So how can I be better? What can I do differently?"

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Now, if you do have an interest in agility, I'm going to put a link here in the show notes to our new masterclass called *Breakthrough Agility Masterclass*. It's all about handling, anybody on any level of agility is going to benefit by it. It doesn't matter if you're brand new or thinking about doing agility with your dog, or you've been doing it for years, but you really haven't had the success you want. Or you've had success, but you want to breakthrough to the next level. *Breakthrough Agility Masterclass* will be for you. I'll put a link right here in the show notes. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Join our Free Online Dog Agility Masterclass](#)

[Learn About Home School the Dog](#)

[Blog with Video: RZ For Dog Sports \(Don't Leave Home Without It\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 112: Stressed Dog? How Trigger Stacking Might Be Putting Your Dog Over Threshold](#)

[Podcast Episode 35: Pro Dog Training Tip To Improve Your Dog's Focus](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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