

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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On today's Shaped by Dog episode, I'm gonna share with you why I've been able to be so successful in the sport of dog agility over my decades of competing. Some of you listening to this episode are going to say, "Well, I already do agility, so I don't really need help."

But I'm gonna share the secrets of why each of the 11 dogs that I've competed with in the sport of dog agility have all made a World Team, have won World Championships, American or Canadian National Championships, all 11 of them.

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And I'm also gonna share with you how you can do the exact same things. Now, others may say, "Well, I don't do dog agility. So maybe I should pass on this episode." But if you listen to this episode, you may find out that you and your dog are perfectly suited to the sport of dog agility, and you might be missing out on so much fun. So, let's get started.

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And as I said, off the top, I've had 11 dogs that I've competed with in the sport of dog agility, and every single one of them has competed at the elite level of the sport. And it's not that I intended on that to happen, it just happened because I was focused on bringing out the best in my dog.

But I believe one of the reasons that I've been able to be so successful is because I started really, really early in the sport. I mean, the sport was only brought over to North America in the mid-1980s, and I started in the sport in 1989. So, I was an early adopter. You could say, "Well, it was easy to be successful because there were so few people doing it."

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And you'd be right to think that initially. So early in the sport there would be one trial a year within an hour drive for me. There'd be a few more, a three-hour drive for me, and the rest were 12-to-15-hour drives for me. So, there weren't many agility trials that you could attend.

So, over the course of a year, I might get to a half a dozen or so, which means your skill as a competitive handler is not going to grow very fast because there aren't enough trials. Now also, at that time, there were no exclusive dog agility facilities like the one I now own. There were not places that somebody could go to classes or even rent if they wanted to practice on their own.

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And so back then a lot of my training happened in my living room, in my bedroom, and yes, in the summer months in the backyard, but because I live in Canada, I was limited even to how much time that was.

And so that really didn't change for me. And I believe that's one of the biggest reasons my dogs continue to be successful. And that's what I'm gonna share with you on this episode, is the skills that I believe contribute to being a very successful agility dog also contribute to being an amazing family pet.



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And there are things that you can do within your own home. There are behaviors that get rehearsed as part of your daily life, and so it becomes who your dog is and who your dog and you are as a team.

And funny enough, the dogs that people think are the most naughty, the ones that are the most ill-behaved, end up being some of the best agility dogs out there because they have all this extra energy or they're very creative and have a brain that needs to be used.

And when they get a person saying, "Okay, I'll throw my hat in the ring. I'll try to do some of this agility stuff at home," the dogs really turn on, which in turn makes the proud owner of that dog say, "Hey, maybe we should look into this sport a little bit more."

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So let me share with you some of the skills that I think contribute to why my dogs are so good at dog agility. I'm sure if we just did a poll of pet owners around the world and said, "What do you think would make a dog really good at dog agility?" they might say things like, 'oh the dog loves to jump' or 'the dog loves to go in tunnels.' Those are really good dogs that make great dog agility dogs.

Or the dogs that like to run away from their owners and go fast. And except for maybe running away from their owners and going fast, that might be a good thing that would contribute to a great agility dog. But really and truly, it isn't about the obstacles. It's not about going over the jumps or the seesaw or going through the weave poles. Those are things that we can teach any dog.

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It's about the skills you do at home. It's about the way you live your life with the dog. So, for example, one of the first things that I think is super important when you want a great family pet or a great agility dog is that your dog has value for multiple reinforcers. Meaning they don't just have one food that 'I have to have my cheese or I'm not gonna do any work for you.'

That you as a dog owner have learned how to shape behaviors that you have learned how to build value for you by playing games like [ItsYerChoice](#). That you have learned to [transfer that value](#) through some of the tutorial videos that we've shared on our YouTube channel. So the dog has learned to have value for different types of food, high value food, and low value food.

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They've learned to have value for tugging on a toy or chasing a toy or maybe touching their nose to a target or maybe standing on a target with their feet. So, we start out with growing what they love. Maybe they just love food, we grow that into toys. Maybe they just love toys, we grow that into multiple types of food.

So now you have an arsenal of reinforcements that your dog finds value in. And at the top of that list, if you've been delivering the food and the toys and the things the dog loves to do, like running and chasing other dogs, if you've been very strategic about how you present that to your dogs, the top of the list of their reinforcements is you.

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That is an important reason why my agility dogs are so darn good at the sport because the value has transferred to me, so they love to chase me, they love to work with me. That's gonna come in really important in some of the other items that I have on this list. The next thing that seems a little bit out there but is super important is that your dog has learned to learn.



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And if you're in any of our programs like Home School the Dog or Recallers, your dog has learned to learn by playing games. So, your dog will learn that there are criteria that need to be met before a reinforcement has been made. They will learn that when they fail, they need to try again. They build resiliency to failure because guess what, in agility, humans are not very perfect.

They will make a lot of mistakes, so they have to have a dog that's okay, will come back, and will try again. That is all about a dog learning to learn, even playing puppy puzzles like [Nina Ottoson's puzzles](#) where the dog finds food. That's a part of learning to fail and figuring things out and being frustrated and overcoming that frustration.

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But a dog that learns how to learn is a dog who is easy to teach new skills to, and agility is filled with skills. Luckily, a lot of these skills we can teach at home. So, because that dog is learned to learn, they have confidence working with you, they understand that you will present things in a way that brings great clarity so that they can build value for the behavior that you want.

Now let's talk a little bit more about those behaviors that are important. [The recall](#). Obviously, we want a dog who will drive to us and so working on your recall in your backyard, going to resources like we have here on our YouTube channel and teaching the dog responding to his name, all of those things are gonna contribute to a dog who loves to work with you and is great at driving back to you.

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And that's important in the sport of dog agility as well. A dog whose [focus we can direct](#). That is a huge bonus when we're training agility that we can guide them towards this jump, not that jump. So how does that come about? It comes about for value for you. So, does the dog have value for what we call [Reinforcement Zone](#)?

Again, here on YouTube, we have lots of videos that will teach you how to create value for walking at your side. Yes, it makes a great family pet, but we don't want an agility dog that continually cuts us off because as a handler, we have to be the one guiding the dog. So, they have to find value for driving into Reinforcement Zone. Such a massive asset if any dog has value for Reinforcement Zone.

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Of course, the dog has to have focus for you, the handler. They have to be able to work amongst distractions, so other dogs moving, other handlers playing with their dogs. The dog has to be able to say, "Oh, that's a distraction, but I'm not interested."

And here's the ticket. The easiest way to get a dog to [ignore distractions](#) is for you to become incredibly valuable, which is what I talked about at the top. You, if you train the dog properly, meaning you aren't just pulling out bribes like if the dog goes to run away you go, "Hey, I got a meatball." Or if the dog doesn't come in when you want them to, you go, "Hey, I got your squeaky toy."

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Then the dog learns "Oh, life with you is about negotiating. You offer something, I decide if I want to accept that offer, or I'll hold out for something better." That's not the way we want our dogs to respond. That's not the relationship we want in any training scenario. So, it's super important that your training games be the dog offers a response, we reinforce the response, and of course we [set up the environment](#) so the response that we'd like to see is the one that they're going to offer.



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So now we've got a dog who has value for their name. They'll come and they're called. They have value for Reinforcement Zone. We might start to walk in a circle with our dog in Reinforcement Zone, maybe jog in a circle, maybe run in a circle.

Let me tell you, if you go from walking to running, you're probably going to get nipped because your dogs just love to play and they love to jump and they love to nip at you. So, you have to do that very slowly, walking in a circle with tons of reinforcement, jogging in a circle with tons of reinforcement, so the dog finds value in being in that circle.

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Super important, because agility is all about the dog following your body. And sometimes you turn to the left and yes, sometimes you turn back to the right. One of the other things that I've talked about that's super important that I have mentioned several times on the Shaped by Dog podcast is ['Location Specific Reinforcement Markers'](#), what we call for short 'Spotlights.'

Spotlights focus what we want the dog's attention on. If I throw a cookie on the floor, I say "search," it's the spotlight goes on the floor, look there for your reinforcement. Having your dog really understand spotlights, really knows "Am I getting a toy?" for reinforcement, makes it so easy because in the sport of dog agility we want the dog to drive away from us towards obstacles.

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We want to be able to throw reinforcement over their head. We want them to know, don't be thinking about looking back here for your reinforcement. I might say bring and throw the toy over your head and they'll keep driving straight. So those spotlights are critically important for our dogs to understand when they should keep driving, when they should turn back and look to us for the reinforcement.

And the other thing that is so important, dog agility is about a dog making choices all the time. So, should I go over the jump or should I go in this tunnel? Should I go on the seesaw, or should I blow by the seesaw and go to the weave poles? So, we start introducing games to our puppies, and you can do this at home, we call 'This or That.'

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So, we will give them one cue and then follow it up with another cue. So, I might say "sit" and then "down" and then "stand." So, they'll, of course, they need to understand what a sit means and what a down means and what a stand means. But a lot of dogs might know how to down from a stand, but do they know how to sit from a down.

So, the This or That's are you can repeat cues super-fast, and the dogs will go sit, down, stand, back, whatever you say, they're going to give you your response. They learn to think quickly. The more excited the atmosphere, the freer they are to respond to your cues. That's what we need from a very successful agility dog.

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Now, there are other [physical skills](#). Again, a lot of things that we do away from agility that I can teach you, but I just gave you a list of super easy things you could start implementing right now at home: your This or That games, put a tug toy in front of your dog and say, "ready, set, strike" means you can grab it or "get it." You might be saying whatever your word is that the dog can have the toy, or you dangle that toy in front of their face and say, "ready, set, sit."



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Or “ready, set, spin” if you want them to spin one way or the other. So, there's lots of choices that the dog can make. All of these things not only create the foundation of a great agility dog.

It creates engagement and enrichment in your dog's life while it's building a deeper, better relationship with you, so they're more likely to ignore other distractions because you are the most important distraction in their world.

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Now, if you would like me to go into more detail on some other exercises that you could be doing at home that will contribute to an amazing agility dog, jump over to my YouTube channel and leave a comment. Let me know if this is something that you might have more interest in.

And also let me know if you're brand new to the sport of dog agility, or if you've been doing it a long time. Let me know your experience level because it doesn't matter where you are. Growth is possible for all of us. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### **Free ItsYerChoice Summit**

[Learn How to Play ItsYerChoice](#)

### **Resources:**

[Podcast Episode 177: Dog Training Outside The Box: Transfer Of Value Case Study](#)

[Nina Ottosson's Puzzle Toys](#)

[Podcast Episode 302: The Recall Myth: Why Your Off Leash Dog Isn't Coming When Called And How To Fix It](#)

[Podcast Episode 242: Help! Why Won't My Dog Pay Attention? \(Secrets Of Focus\)](#)

[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[Blog Post: How to Use the Distraction Intensity Index to Help Your Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 6: The Art of Manipulation](#)

[Podcast Episode 151: How Location Specific Reinforcement Markers Will Improve Your Dog Training!](#)

[Podcast Episode 32: 20 Easy Ways to Exercise Your Dog at Home](#)





### 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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