

Are Dog Sports Good For Your Health?

My Shelties and I do Agility, Rally, Obedience and Scentwork. I am in no way linked to the medical profession, but do these keep me fit? I think they do, but how much, and is it all physical fitness or is mental health involved too?



Obviously agility is the activity that looks the best bet for health, possibly followed by obedience, rally and then scentwork. All the sports require walking from parking to rings, exercising dogs (including dogs that aren't taking part), warming dogs up, competing, helping, checking progress of classes, finding results and making trips to the caterer and other facilities. And of course there are the hours of training before the event.

I would estimate that one walks far further in agility, because the competitor numbers are high so the car or caravan is likely to be quite a distance away from the rings, plus each dog gets 4 or 5 runs so there are more courses to walk, and more classes to keep an eye on. But this will vary depending on the size and type of show (KC or not, indoors or outside), type of venue, where you are parked, how much you need to exercise your dog(s), how many dogs you run, how much you rely on any tannoy or online system for results and progress, how many times you walk the course (doubled or more if your dogs aren't in the same classes) and whether you are helping on the rings. The time actually running in the ring is less than 1 minute per class, often nearer 30 seconds for jumping classes, so it is more like sprinting, though with frequent changes of pace and direction.

Due to the speed required, many of us choose to keep our own weight down to be able to run faster. I was advised that even 8 x 1 minute runs per day sadly did not justify a significant increase in food, though bacon butties and cheesy chips remain popular for many. I have to admit to one very bad fall when I misjudged the position of my speeding dog who took my legs from under me, and of course I've witnessed many falls – so that is not a positive health benefit! Sensible shoes for the conditions are a must and each competitor needs to consider this carefully. As with all energetic activities the onus is on the competitor to check that they are sensible in what they attempt.

Many obedience shows are also large, but courses are not walked in advance. It is necessary to keep an eye on progress, and also in the possibility of a run off at the end of the class. Each dog can do 2 or 3 classes each, and then they also have to attend the stays, and the time spent warming the dogs up prior to competing is likely to be longer than in the other sports. The KC ring times range from 4 minutes for Beginners up to 7.5 minutes for class C, so any dog doing the normal 2 classes is unlikely to spend more than about 15 minutes in the ring and most of that will be at a normal walking pace.





The small amount of fast pace will have only a limited effect, and it is brisk rather than running, though fairly demanding if your dog is large and long-striding.

For rally, once you've added your name to the list, you must run in that order so you've got to keep a close eye the progress of your class. The courses need walking carefully in advance, and as dogs can enter 2 classes plus a fun class, this involves multiple class walking sessions, more if you have several dogs. Shows are currently rather smaller than for agility and obedience, and not many are over several days, so parking is normally closer. There is only a very little fast pace, so not of significance, but the courses double back and twist around the ring, so the distance walked will be greater than it might appear.

Scentwork is certainly less strenuous in terms of physical activity. Because of the time required for each dog, trial numbers are small and so parking is close. A handler can only work one dog, and that dog will work 3 or 4 times, but only over relatively small areas. Dogs, including non-working ones, will need exercising though. The stewards will cover more ground as they ensure each dog is ready in the right place at the right time.

Conventional wisdom has been that 10,000 steps/day would be a suitable target for good health. Recently this has been amended to 5,000 providing some are at a fast pace. With the current enthusiasm for fitbits I have been able to collect data from fellow competitors, though obviously these are averages, given all the varying factors mentioned above.



In agility 20,000 to 25,000 steps per day could be expected when competing one dog in 4 classes at an outdoor show, with a range of 30,000 to 35,000 or more if running several dogs or helping on the rings. For an indoor show 15,000 to 18,000 steps would be likely. If judging the number of steps could be higher still.

For an obedience show the numbers are around 16,000 steps/day for one dog in 2 classes, rising to between 20,000 to 25,000 for multiple dogs. Stewarding or judging works out at about 20,000 steps, with one class C steward recording over 5 miles on her pedometer despite removing it each time she left the ring (a mile being 2,000 to 2,500 steps, depending on stride length).

For rally the number of steps per show day tends to range between 11,000 to 16,000 steps, even with just one dog in 2 classes, with higher figures for more dogs or for those staffing the show. From these figures the difference between agility and obedience isn't all that great, apart from the faster speeds required for competing, and even this might be less if the agility competitor uses distance handling for much of the time. The rally figures are rather less.

However, if you are talking about health benefits, apart from physical fitness there are also mental benefits too, which I would consider even greater. Apart from the pleasure of working with canine best friends, all dog sports offer camaraderie and shared interest. For mental stimulation there is the learning and remembering of courses, which in agility involves not only working out the sequence of obstacles, but also the best route for the dog and also the handler to take to minimise the risk of inadvertent errors by the dog. Then in all sports there is the learning and remembering of aids or directions to be given to the dog at exactly the right moment and knowing how to stand and move in any circumstance to help the dog work accurately. Dog events give a structure to the year in terms of plans, training and events, with targets to aim for and large or small successes to celebrate.

Not everyone can be a top competitor, or reach a peak of fitness, but in all of the activities everyone can participate, even if they have to adjust their handling methods to their own situation, and hopefully gain health benefits along the way.

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