

Your First Fun Match

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Congratulations! You've entered your first (or second or third) Fun Match. Here are some tips to help you have a good experience, regardless of the type of match (agility, rally, competition obedience, conformation, etc.).

Fun matches are also called Ten Minute Tickers, Show 'N Go's and Run-Throughs. Different organizations who offer these events use different systems for getting participants into the ring. The best (in my opinion) schedule everyone in advance and then post the run order/time schedule to a website or email it directly to exhibitors. Some groups simply publish a run order, but no time schedule. Some groups don't make a run order until you check in at the event.

More formal events are called Sanctioned Matches. They are designed more for training prospective judges and they typically do not allow training aids, food, pinch collars, toys, etc. in the ring. They do not allow corrections. For these reasons I usually do not recommend new students attend these events. When in doubt, check with me or check with the organization sponsoring the event to find out what is, and is not, allowed.

Plan to arrive at least an hour or more before you think you'll be in the ring so you can get settled. Take a folding chair, soft crate (with sheet to cover it in case your dog barks), dog water & bowl, dog treats (different kinds so you'll be prepared if your dog is distracted), dog toys (to play with in the ring and reward your dog with), food & beverage for you and all your regular training equipment.)

Before you unload all your stuff, walk into the venue and check it out. See where your ring(s) are located, find crating space, etc. Leave your dog in the car and haul your stuff inside (having a crate dolly is wonderful; some folks use folding wagons) and get it set up. Check in with your rings to see if they're on schedule. Be sure to hide any valuables such as video cameras, cell phones, etc. (Matches are typically pretty safe, but take precautions.)

Go get your dog. Let him potty outside. Bring him inside and let him "be a dog" (not at the end of the leash, but keep him close to you and let him check out the facility (but not other dogs). Walking around outside the rings helps spread his, and your, scent around. This will make the new facility seem more like "home" to your dog. Some dogs may take 15 to 30 minutes to acclimate. Dogs used to going lots of new places for training will typically acclimate faster.

When your dog has calmed down, relaxed and is starting to check in with you, it's time to see if you "have a dog" outside the rings. Use food and practice the exercise like we do in class. You cannot proceed until you "have a dog." Again, this may take longer with some dogs and/or dogs who are new to this.

Once you "have a dog" see if you can do some heeling or other attention work outside the ring. Get your dog to play tug with you outside the ring. When your dog is engaged, stop and put him in a crate. (Don't wait until you lose him, stop when you're ahead.)

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Depending on how much time you have before your first turn, and how much natural energy your dog has, let your dog get used to relaxing in his crate for a while. It's way too over-stimulating and exhausting for most dogs to just hang out with you for several hours before going into the ring to perform. Your dog needs to get used to this routine. High energy dogs might benefit from getting out again for another walk-around and attention work, while more laid back dogs might be better off resting. These are things you need to track and tweak as you do more matches.

Organize your training equipment so you can have everything ready to go when it's your turn in the ring. Having everything in a training bag helps. Most fun matches will allow pinch collars; however, they will not allow strong corrections. Food and toys are allowed in the ring at most fun matches. Some agility, obedience and rally matches may not allow food inside the ring if they are using those rings and equipment for an actual Trial later that day or on the weekend. Food inside of target tubes, containers, empty target plates, go-out targets, etc. are typically allowed. The key is – don't take messy food into the ring. No one wants to use a ring or equipment if there are dried food crumbs all over the place, or squeeze cheese smeared on ring gates.

Outside the ring, waiting your turn, make sure you have a dog. Keep an eye on your dog. Not every dog at these events is "nice" and not every handler has been trained to pay attention to their dogs. (The same can be said of real trials.)

For the first few minutes (or even entire runs) your job is to make sure you "have a dog" and your dog will play with you and engage with you in the ring. You don't need a "judge" for this. It's okay to let the judge know that you need a few minutes. Note: You're being "charged" time-wise for this; the timer starts when you walk in the ring. However, there's no point in trying to work a dog if you don't "have a dog." That's why it's important to sign up for several runs at each event.

Depending on the type of event, if you have a classmate who can help you, that is great. Your helper (without a dog) can go in the agility ring with you and put out your target plates, pick up your toys, etc. Using the buddy system is wonderful. If you know someone else attending, ask them to video tape for you. Then when it's your friend's turn in the ring, be sure to help them.

Have a plan for the ring. It really helps to write it down and take it with you to the ring. Your first priority is always having a dog. Your next priority should always be staying focused on your dog and your plan. From there your priorities will depend on your dog and experience level.

Take feedback from so-called judges and other exhibitors with a grain of salt. Typically the more "free advice" people offer, the less value it truly has. Better to ask advice from a classmate or instructor, even if you have to wait. You can always nicely say "Thanks for the suggestion; I'll discuss it with my instructor." Everyone has a different training style and philosophy. People who don't know your dog and don't know your background should not be offering free advice!

If you're doing Rally or Agility, be sure to arrive in time to do your walk-through. Walk-throughs are typically offered at the beginning of judging (and perhaps before different class levels or jump heights). This is your time to go in the ring WITHOUT A DOG and walk the course. In the case of Rally, take your cheat sheets with you so you can look at the sign description if you're not sure what's expected.

In Agility, put your hands on all the contact equipment. Make sure everything is solid. Check to see how the teeter falls and how much noise it makes. You do not need to do the course as it's marked. In fact, it's typically better to come up with your own plan for your dog. If your dog is new, keep him on leash and practice your contact performance. If your dog is not comfortable with the teeter, don't do it – or have him "ride the wave." Have him go through the weave poles on leash and get his reward. It may be best to skip the jumps the first time in the ring. If your dog doesn't really have off-leash control, ask yourself if she should drag a line. However, there are downsides to dragging a line. You don't want your dog to get tangled on equipment.

If you "have a dog" in the Agility ring, then try doing a few sequences to a reward or target. This is where the partner comes in handy. Plan all this in advance to make the best use of your short time in the ring. Three and five minutes goes by really fast. Be aware that if you take your dog totally off leash, and he decides to do a ditz run around the ring, your clock is ticking. You don't want to spend all your time trying to catch your dog!

In the Rally and Obedience rings, if you “have a dog” then proceed with exercises – AT YOUR DOG’S LEVEL. In a new location, you may need to simplify things for your dog. It may take more food and praise to maintain attention while heeling. Use your props (such as front chutes, food clips, long lines, etc.) as appropriate. In the obedience ring, remember the “judge” is there to help you, so if you know what your plan is things will go more smoothly. If you don’t have off-leash heeling, then keep your leash for that segment. If your dog tends to break stays, then go back and reward your dog. Be proactive and do what’s appropriate for your dog.

Instead of trying to do multiple exercises with little attention and/or poor quality work, it is better to do less and do it well. If you run into problems in a certain section of the ring (such as loss of attention), go back and repeat that area. Good, smart trainers fix things when they happen. If your dog has a really hard time with distractions part way through your turn, you may need to break it off and go back to “having a dog” and getting your dog to play with you.

Try to spend the last 30 seconds or so of your time in the ring PLAYING WITH YOUR DOG so the ring is a fun place for your dog.

After your turn is over, take your dog back to your set-up and play with your dog, give him a jackpot, etc. You might have to do this outside if it’s really crowded. Stay attentive to your dog. Then put him in his crate and take a few minutes to decompress. Write down notes as soon as possible. Ask a trusted classmate or instructor for feedback. Give some thought to how you might want to change your next run. Should you make it easier? Did your dog do well and you now believe he’s ready for a little more challenge? Add this info to your notes so you have a plan of action for your next run.

Remember, fun matches are training opportunities. Be proactive. Have a Plan A, Plan B and Plan C. Think of the best and worst case scenarios and be prepared for whatever happens.

The dogs and handlers who seem to do really well are usually folks with lots of experience. You and your dog won’t be perfect in your first few matches. There are so many distractions, unusual experiences and new routines that you’ll be surprised to encounter. But it’s all good. We’ve all been there.

Write detailed notes after the day is over. Reflect on how things went. Write a list of at least three things that went well. Come up with at least three things that need improvement. The more specific you can be, the better. Sometimes the “things that went well” might be as simple as: 1) I didn’t fall down; 2) My dog didn’t pee in the ring; 3) I didn’t pass out!

Your notes will help guide your upcoming training sessions, as well as help formulate your plan for your next fun match.

Feel free to share your experiences in class and ask questions. Even if your instructor is present, he or she is probably trying to work his or her own dogs. As much as your instructor would like to watch every student and every run, it’s just not possible. However, if you post videos with unlisted links, and share them with your instructor, you can get feedback that way. You may also want to take photos of the venue, for future reference and/or to share with your classmates.

Remember – Success is a journey, not a destination!