

About Competitive Obedience

Dave Skinner

In North America the sport of competitive obedience is governed by national kennel club rules (Canadian Kennel Club or American Kennel Club). These organizations license obedience trials and provide a uniform and consistent judging standard against a standard set of competition rules.

Competitive obedience requires a high degree of teamwork between dog and handler and emphasizes precision and accuracy in the various exercises. Training for competitive obedience can take many years. The sport attracts people from all walks of life and at many age levels. The physical demands on handlers are modest.

Many seniors find this an ideal activity, not only in building a strong bond with their dogs but also because of the social environment.

The Ottawa area is a "hotbed" of fine obedience teams. Many of the top obedience teams in Canada are from this region, which also boasts some of the best instructors in the country.

The events are generally conducted in a 40 x 40 foot ring, bounded by fencing, baby gates or ropes. There can be several adjacent rings operating simultaneous events. While competing, dogs are expected to work through distractions caused by other dogs, other rings and spectators.

Scoring

Points (or half points) are deducted for each performance fault from a starting score of 200 (perfect). Thus a final score of 195/200 would represent a loss of five points during the event. The minimum qualifying score is 170/200.

Generally points are deducted for small faults in both dog and handler position, speed, and accuracy. Every exercise at all levels requires the dog to "finish" in an accurate heel position. In many exercises the dog must also execute a consistent and accurate front position. At each level described below, there are increasing requirements for "front and finish" maneuvers and deductions can accumulate quickly. In retrieving exercises, the dog must not "mouth", chew or toss the articles they carry.

In all exercises, the dogs must await specific verbal or hand signal commands. Anticipation by the dog (e.g., retrieving before commanded) will result in disqualifications or deductions.

Finally, each exercise has a number of critical elements - for both dog and handler - that must be performed in accordance with exact criteria. A failure in any critical element results in a non-qualifying score. The fact that handler errors can cost points emphasizes the importance of teamwork in competitive obedience.

Obedience Levels

Generally there are three "levels" or classes of obedience competition. Each class has a unique set of exercises and a team must progress through each class before they are permitted to enter a higher class. To achieve a "title" in each class requires that a dog-handler team must achieve a minimum qualifying score in three separate trials, under different judges.

Here are some brief descriptions of the various classes and the exercises required.

The Novice Class

This is the first level through which all teams must pass before they can progress to higher levels. Although the number of exercises is small, the requirements are demanding. The title earned when a dog has scored 170 or better in three different trials at this level is called CD - Companion Dog. The main exercises are:

- On and off-leash precision heeling involving halts and turns in all directions.
- Heeling in a figure 8 pattern.
- Brisk recall with accurate front
- The novice class also includes two "group" exercises. In the first, the long sit, all dogs are seated together (about 18 inches apart) in a Trialing row. The handlers stand some distance away but within eye shot of the dogs for 1 minute. The dogs must stay in the sitting position until the handlers return. This is then repeated (the long down) for 3 minutes with the dogs in a down position.

The Open Class

Although not the "highest" level, many consider this to be the most difficult level for dogs to perform consistently. This is because the demands in the open class increase dramatically over the novice requirements, and the competition in this class is fierce. It can take several years for a dog to be ready for competition at this level. The title earned when a dog has scored 170 or better in three different trials at this level is called CDX - Companion Dog (Excellent). The main exercises are:

- The same precision heeling and figure 8 requirements as in novice except all heeling is done off leash.
- Brisk recall with a drop signalled by the judge at some point during the return.
- A retrieve "on the flat". Although apparently simple, this exercise is very demanding in all its phases. The dog must await commands, move briskly to a dumbbell, perform a clean pickup, return to "front" position, release the dumbbell on command and accurately return to heel position on command.
- The retrieve over a high jump is similar in demands to the previous retrieve, except that the dog must jump over a high jump (set to withers height) to the dumbbell and on the return trip. This can be especially demanding if the dumb-bell bounces widely to one side.

- The broad jump requires the dog to perform a longitudinal jump on command and return to the front position.
- The open class also includes two "group" exercises. In the first, the long sit, all dogs are seated together (about 18 inches apart) in a Trialing row. The handlers leave the ring for a three minute period. The dogs must stay in the sitting position until the handlers return. This is then repeated (the long down) for three minutes with the dogs in a down position.

The Utility Class

This class is the "PhD" of dog obedience, and requires the highest level of training, teamwork and concentration. It can take several years beyond "open" for a team to reach this level. As a result there are fewer overall competitors at this level. The title earned when a dog has scored 170 or better in three different trials at this level is called UD - Utility Dog. (In Canada, dogs having earned this title may also use the designation OTCH - Obedience Trial Champion). The main exercises are:

- More complex heeling, similar to previous classes all done off-leash.

There is no figure 8 exercise in utility.

- The "seek back" exercise requires the dog to retrieve a glove (on command) that has been quietly dropped by the handler during a heeling exercise, and return it from an accurate front position.
- Scent discrimination is amongst the most interesting and challenging exercises. From a collection of leather, metal and wooden "articles" the dog must find the one most recently scented by the handler. Scenting is done by hand rubbing for a short period.
- The "signal" exercise consists of silent heeling followed by hand signals to the dog, who is left at a distance. The hand signals require the dog to do a down, sit and recall. No verbal commands can be made during this exercise.
- The "directed jumping" exercise finishes the utility program. The dog must first perform a "go out" whereby the dog is directed to run away from the handler in straight path to the ring boundary. Once there the dog is directed to turn and sit. Then the handler directs the dog to jump one of either a solid high jump or a bar jump.

A HIGH IN TRIAL (HIT) score means that not only has the team won in their class, but in so doing have achieved the highest score for all classes in that trial.