

Rally-O: Another Option for Busy Trainers

Wendy Wallace, Dogs in Canada, October 31, 2008

Just when we'd gotten used to having agility added to a busy schedule of tracking and obedience, The Canadian Kennel Club added Rally Obedience (or Rally-O, as it's more commonly called) to the sport options available under its banner. How can we find the time, never mind the energy, to compete in them all? When I was young, I had the energy but with three kids, not a lot of time. Now I have the time but not a lot of energy, which I figure must be one of nature's jokes. Does anyone ever have both at the same time? If they do, the addition of Rally-O to the CKC's roster will come as a welcome treat. And for those just getting their toes wet in the wonderful world of dog training, Rally-O is the perfect introduction.

While the CKC adopted Rally-O in 2008, it has been offered in Canada since 2002 by the Canadian Association for Rally Obedience (CARO), which, unlike the CKC opens its trials to all dogs, including mixed breeds. Rally-O was first developed by Charles 'Bud' Kramer, the developer of the first American agility program. A long-time obedience competitor himself, he saw entries in traditional obedience declining and felt the need to develop something that would draw in newcomers by emphasizing fun, excitement and "attitude rather than precision." His ideas for Rally-O first appeared in the American magazine *Front and Finish*, in the spring of 1999. These ideas fell on fertile ground as there were many others who, like him, wanted to see a less-rigid, more-natural showcase for obedience. In a relatively short time, the sport of Rally Obedience emerged.

Rally-O is not a "dumbing down" of traditional obedience as some initial naysayers proclaimed. While it is based on many of the usual obedience exercises, the format and scoring is very different. Other than telling the handler when to start, the judge offers no further instructions to the team as they make their way through the course.

The course itself varies from competition to competition. As in a car rally (or agility), there are various 'stations' – around 15 out of a possible 31 – with signs telling the handler which exercise to perform. Some are the familiar "Left turn," "Slow pace" and "Halt, sit, down," but there are also unfamiliar ones, such as "Spiral right," "Serpentine," "Moving side step right" and my personal bugaboo, "Halt – 1, 2, 3 steps forward."

There are three levels of Rally-O. At the Novice level the dogs are on leash, while at the advanced levels they are off leash. Advanced exercises are more complex and include jumping. At all levels, the sport is designed to be mentally challenging for the handlers.

There are many neat things about Rally-O, not the least of which is freedom of communication between dog and handler. The handler is allowed to speak to and encourage the dog – what a change from the silence of the traditional obedience ring. In this way it's more like other dog sports such as agility, musical freestyle and tracking, all of which allow repeated commands and encouragement. Thus the novice dog, the dog lacking in confidence and the one still easily distracted can be encouraged through words and body language as the team wends its way around the course. This teamwork is emphasized throughout.

Another major departure from traditional obedience is that exercises done incorrectly can be repeated. However, just because the exercise can be repeated doesn't mean that dogs can never fail in Rally-O – they can and they do. Sometimes this is because they refuse to do the exercise even on the second try, but other times it's because handlers like me, who come from

many years of formal obedience and are not used to having a second chance, forget that they have this option.

I managed to fail my own dog a couple of times this way – much to her embarrassment and mine. However, she, like most dogs, is very forgiving and willing to give me another chance so we will try again.

A third advantage of Rally is that there is no group exercise to wait for or worry about. Once the handler and dog have made their way through the 15 or so stations, they are finished. For this reason alone, Rally-O will appeal to those of us who are uncomfortable leaving our little guys sitting in a ring with unknown dogs of varying sizes.