

HOW TO USE VISUALIZATION IN DOG AGILITY

**by
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WHY IS VISUALIZATION SO IMPORTANT?

Several studies have shown sports-specific improvement in athletes who enhance their physical practice with mental rehearsal. In a famous study, psychologist Alan Richardson divided subjects into three groups and tested their basketball free throw shooting at the start and finish of the experiment. The first group practiced free throws every day for 20 days. The second group did nothing. The third group practiced free throws only in their minds, visualizing the weight, feel, and motion of the ball with vivid imagery. The group that practiced daily improved while the group that did nothing did not improve. Amazingly, the group that visualized practicing free throws improved as much as the group that practiced with an actual ball!



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Other studies have shown that visualization, in combination with positive self-talk and goal setting, can improve an athlete's self-confidence while decreasing anxiety, leading to better performance outcomes. This is the benefit that a strong, practiced routine of visualization can bring to your dog agility. In addition, the brain power required to use vivid imagery during your visualization leaves much less room for anxious and distracting thoughts.

WHAT DO I VISUALIZE?

You visualize yourself and your dog running the course together. Think of your visualization routine as a mental rehearsal of your upcoming run—it's a natural extension of your walk through. Your focus should always be on execution, not on past mistakes, distractions, or potential outcomes. Always focus on the mechanics of agility—the more detailed your visualization, the better.

SHOULD

- ✓ imagine the exact spot in the ring where you'll begin to perform a front cross
- ✓ picture yourself slowing down at a jump at the right moment in order to create a tight turn
- ✓ picture yourself running hard past the last jump so that your dog does not drop the last bar

SHOULD NOT

- ✗ wonder if your dog is going to miss the weave pole entry
- ✗ be hoping that your friend remembered to tape your run
- ✗ tell yourself, "oh well, whatever happens, will happen."

Key execution points include knowing when and where to show your dog changes in handler position, motion, arms, verbal cues, eye contact, and footwork. Make sure that you are reconnecting with your dog after each contact obstacle, the weave poles, and every tunnel, especially if you're using a blind cross.

WHEN SHOULD I VISUALIZE?

The best time to do your first visualization is right after you have walked the course and are comfortable with your plan of execution. This will strongly imprint the course in your mind, at a time when there is a break between clearing the course and preparing for the first dog on the line. The course will be empty and it will be easier for beginners to imagine themselves running the course with their dog.



What if you're one of the first dogs running and you're not able to visualize immediately after the walk through? If possible, I still make the effort to visualize my run at least once, and then I get my dog. At local trials (and even big events), I will finish my walk through early in order to do this. If you absolutely can't do this, you can still visualize

after getting your dog and returning to the ring. If dogs have already starting running ahead of you, then wait until they get halfway through the course before you start your visualization, so you don't end up following the dog in the ring with your eyes and brain. Visualization is a learned skill and must be practiced in order to be mastered, but it's well worth the effort—just ask the American Kennel Club National Agility Champion, Sarah Baker!

WHERE SHOULD I VISUALIZE?



I prefer to stand by the ring and I will often visualize my run while standing on different sides of the ring or even from above, in the stands. However, most of my visualizations will take place near the entry point to the ring, because that is the last orientation of the ring I will see while waiting for the dogs in front of me to take their turn.

HOW MANY TIMES SHOULD I VISUALIZE?

I visualize until I reach a point where every imaginary run is smooth and fluid, with no hesitation or confusion on my part. At that point, you can use a few refresher visualizations right before you go into the ring. If I have more than an hour between my walk through and my run, I will visit the ring for 10-12 visualizations every 60-90 minutes until I'm ready to go with my dog.



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HOW SHOULD I VISUALIZE?

I prefer to visualize my runs mostly while standing still, occasionally moving my hands or arms. Other handlers will stand by the side of the ring and visualize the entire course using as much of their body as possible, including their feet. Try both methods and see which one works better for you.

SUMMARY

There are many aspects to mental preparation for athletes, but visualization is the cornerstone of developing a focused, confident mindset that will help you reach peak performance in the agility ring.