



Conquer the Challenge: The Human Half of the Agility Team

By Angelica Steinker, M.Ed., C.D.B.C, CAP2



Agility is about a dog and a human navigating a course. We spend hours preparing the dog for competition, but little to no focus is on the human part of the team. Our dogs are massaged, fed ideal foods, given chiropractic adjustments; all while we ignore and neglect the human part of the team. This column will focus on the challenges that many of us humans face while trying to be the best agility team, and more importantly on the journeys to overcome those challenges.



Human challenges are limitless: physical challenges, financial challenges, mental challenges, and every imaginable combination. The few lucky handlers who are physically and financially fit can indulge in almost limitless agility successes, however the rest and majority of agility competitors have very different goals. We long for that feeling of connection with our dogs, that last leg to finish off a title that may be meaningless to all but a few. Facing budget constraints, many of us painstakingly pick a few trials to enter. Most of us are not competing to beat others or to gain a spot on the world team, but rather we compete against ourselves. Wanting to perfect, in our own way, our goals that may not draw attention or fame but mean the world to us.

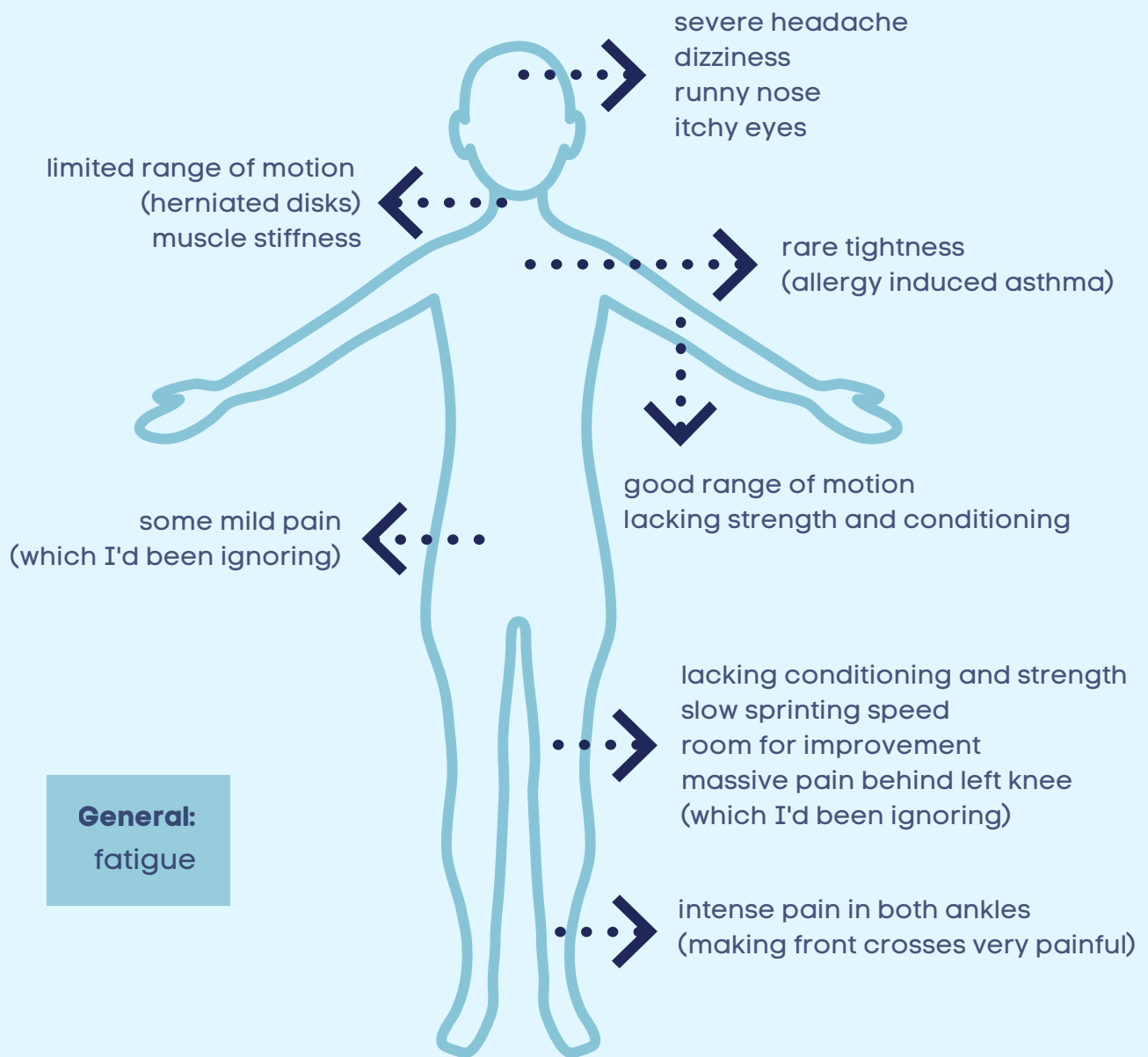
Some examples of goals may be: a trainer who has conquered extensive training issues with a dog that was deemed untrainable, dangerous, and recommended for euthanasia. Or a trainer who despite physical challenges kept competing for years, never even realizing the extent of their physical problems because they instead focused on the sheer joy of being with and communicating with their dog. This column is about these trainers: their stories, and how they conquered their challenges. This column is about us: the majority of agility trainers, the ones who pay the top handlers for seminars, books, and pay the majority of the entry fees. These trainers are the heart of agility. What is your challenge? Starting now, you can overcome it.





The Body Scan

Take a few minutes and evaluate yourself. Start with your head, what do you notice? Next move to your throat and neck. How do your muscles feel? Do you have any chronic tension? Pain? Continue this scan until you have evaluated every part of your body. Here are the results of my own scan from a few years ago.





The Pampering

The first thing on the list was a full medical work up and an exploration of why so many parts of my body were hurting or not functioning optimally. The answers I found were not at all to my liking and may have been why I was ignoring a lot of my symptoms in the first place. I was diagnosed by a rheumatologist with Fibromyalgia. This is not a fun diagnosis, since it is not clear what causes this disease or even what it is, and there is no clear treatment. I began with listening to my body. I experimented with what made me feel better and what made me feel worse. I changed one thing at a time to see if one specific change helped me or made me feel worse. I learned that I need to sleep more than most people, and interestingly current Fibro research shows that the disease may be a sleep disorder or related to sleep disorders. I began sleep therapy. Whenever I was able to, I slept. My goal was to heal my body, and so I slept as much as I could. It worked, after a few months I began to feel better.

Next, I decided that since Fibromyalgia is a disease that causes connective tissue to hurt, it would probably be a good idea to strengthen all of my muscles. I hired a professional trainer and began working out. Honestly, every rigorous workout left me feeling horrible. It would take me, on average, three days to feel human again after a hard workout. I basically went through hell, but I was determined to get into shape and to re-evaluate my symptoms at that time. This is where experience in parenting terriers and a miniature pinscher came in handy. I stubbornly persisted. One year after my body scan, I was able to report success. Most of my "trigger points" (extremely painful areas that are part of Fibro) were gone. As I type this only two points remain, and I am hopeful that as I continue to build muscles these points will dissipate. Even if they don't, I feel so much better that I find myself not caring if they bother me or not. The pain is manageable--or I should say that I am able to ignore it.



Ignoring It

This is an important part of my journey. I ignore things. This is both a curse and a blessing. If the goal is to extinguish a behavior, I will have the motivation to endlessly ignore the undesired behaviors and painstakingly reward the desired behaviors, but when you do this with your own physical pain it is truly not helpful. Since my body scan two years ago, I have learned that I had been ignoring physical pain my entire life. As a child, a fear of doctors prevented me from speaking up about my allergies and nerve pain (it seems that I already had Fibro as a child), and then as I grew up my pain and symptoms just became part of me. I also think that because of my extremely high level of energy, it was easy to ignore pain and discomfort. My fatigue was almost always overridden by my endless energy. Eventually it reached a point where it was too much: going through a divorce, losing several friendships, and nearly losing my business coincided, and I physically bottomed out.

The Result



Two years after my body scan, I am still on my journey to becoming healthier. I am still the same dress size, but I have hugely altered my diet and lifestyle. I work out three to five times a week with a goal of being able to work out every day, with the exception of recovery days which are vital to any healthy exercise strategy. I have made a commitment to completely altering my diet. No fast food ever. One side dish of something fried once a month. I choose to eat grilled fish in restaurants, and I eat fruits and vegetables every day. Most of my Fibro symptoms are manageable. My allergies are improved thanks to my allergist.

I still face a challenge regarding the dizziness. Its cause is still undetermined, but it seems that an Ear Nose and Throat specialist will be able to improve it. As soon as that is the case, I will begin trialing again. It seems to me that only sound dogs and sound handlers should run agility.

What is your challenge, and how did you conquer it?







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-  @ CourteousCanine.Inc

About the Author

Angelica Steinker, M.Ed., C.D.B.C, CAP2 | President & Founder, Courteous Canine, Inc.

For over 20 years, Angelica has owned and operated Courteous Canine, Inc. a force free dog training school in Lutz, Florida that also offers sport training, behavior consultations, board-and-train, day care, and pet sitting.

Angelica is a published author in the field of dog training and agility, with professional articles written for the Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior, the Journal of Veterinary Behavior, BARKS from the Guild, the APDT Chronicle of the Dog newsletter, Dog & Handler, Animal Trainer Magazine, Dog Sport Magazine, Dalmatian Quarterly, and Clean Run.

She is a former Advisory Board member and faculty at the Companion Animal Sciences Institute (CASI) and is also a CASI dog behavior program graduate. She is accredited as a Canine Behavior Consultant through the Pet Professional Accreditation Board, and certified through Applied Animal Behavior Professionals and International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and the only one in the state of Florida with 20 years full time experience. Angelica also holds a Master's degree in Education, which has served as the foundation for her continued certifications in dog behavior and her extensive understanding of emotional learning, operant and classical conditioning, the science of how animals and people learn.



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