

## Start-line Stays and Other Stays

A good solid stay is a great thing for a dog to have. You can prevent the dog from running to the front door when the doorbell rings; you can keep the dog from jumping on the neighbor's child or your grandmother. What do we mean by a stay? A stay occurs when the dog remains in one place, generally in one position, until explicitly released by a release command.

Agility handlers often make a distinction between a STAY and a WAIT command. In a WAIT command, the dog is expected to wait attentively for further instructions that will come very soon. In a STAY, a dog should relax, because it's going to be a relatively long time before anything is expected. (Some trainers make a distinction between an agility WAIT at the start-line or on the table—where the dog will be released very quickly—and a long obedience STAY where the handler moves out of sight (or farther away) and the dog should relax until the handler signals that his attention is required (usually by calling his name).)

In agility, contrary to what you may have been taught in puppy class or obedience class, the dog's name is not used before every command. You simply don't have time to say "Rover, jump" at every jump as you navigate an agility course. You must assume that your dog is paying attention, both to verbal signals (like "jump" or "tunnel") and to non-verbal signals (the position of your feet, arms, and shoulders). Thus, attention-demanding commands like WAIT are quite useful.

In agility, attentive stays (WAITs) of five seconds are *required* on the table (in the down in USDAA and in a sit or down in AKC), and WAITs are also *useful* (but not required) at the start line. Your dog should already have the beginnings of a great WAIT; you can tell the dog to stay and it will stay for a few moments or longer, especially if you stand quite close. Now you need to reinforce the meaning of stay.

First, choose your release word. Lots of people use "OK," but the risk with "OK" is that it is a common word that your dog may hear in the conversation around it even when *you* want it to stay. Some other people use "free." It's your dog; you can choose whatever word you want. When you say your release word, try to say it without making it a big deal—just be calm and relaxed. Try not to use any gestures or motions at the same time; you want the dog listening carefully for that word, not trying to anticipate its release.

Now, start practicing STAYS and WAITs whenever you get a chance. Your dog must WAIT until you release it to go through doors, to get its dinner, to get a toy, to enter the agility ring, to cross the street, to find out who's at the door, to get out of the car. In short, any time you see your dog looking eager to do something, tell the dog to stay (you may want to put it in a sit or a down first), and make the dog wait until YOU release it. If the dog releases itself, put the dog back into a WAIT FARTHER AWAY from the desired result.

You should also practice a relaxed STAY. Do this when you have few distractions and want the dog to relax comfortably. You might want to put the dog in a STAY as you sit down to type an email, for example. Don't forget to reward the dog for the STAY; just because the dog fell asleep doesn't mean he wasn't listening!

To practice WAITs, take advantage of every opportunity. As an example, your dog may be eager for its dinner. Put the dog in a sit-WAIT a few feet from where you'll put the bowl. Get the bowl and put it down. Then release the dog to get its dinner. If the dog anticipates, pick up the bowl and put the dog in a WAIT even farther from the bowl. The dog doesn't get its dinner until it stays until it's released! (If you're really motivated, feed the dog small portions of its dinner and do this several times at one meal.)

To practice the WAIT at the start line, you'll want to have the dog sit or stand in one place until you release it. While it's waiting for permission to start, go back zero or one or two or three or more times to treat the dog (vary the number of times you go back, so the dog is paying attention to you, not to the routine) and then vary where you are relative to the dog when you do release it. (Don't always release the dog from exactly two jumps out, for example.) Sometimes just start running and give the dog the first instruction; you want the dog ready to go as soon as you tell it to go—but not before.

As your dog gets more experienced and the WAITs get more solid, make it harder. Start to run before you say "OK," dance, make faces, say "OH" but not the "K," shout "Are you ready?" Every time the dog resists the temptation, treat generously. If your dog likes toys, join the dog in playing with the toy sometimes instead of starting the course, or throw the toy behind the dog and release the dog to get the toy; then play with the dog!

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