



Goal Setting With Your Performance Dog

by Kathy Butkovic

Goal setting is essential to training and working with a performance dog. Because there are so many available disciplines for our family pets and canine athletes to participate in; you first must make some choices.

Would you like to finish an AKC title? Become a top-ranked PWD in a specific canine sport? Compete competitively in the PWDCA National Specialty Super Dog Competition. Introduce your dog to Water Work and work towards a title?

For instance, if you'd like to finish your dog's American Kennel Club Champion title, you will want to make sure your dog is in proper condition, in good coat & groomed well. Add to that, being well trained to participate in the show ring. In the show ring, your dog must stand for examination and move around on a leash. It sounds quite easy, but there are pieces of that simple idea that are a little more complicated.

Allison Alexander of Leading Edge Dog Show Academy has a great YouTube channel with valuable FREE information. One of those videos is called "The Best Dog In 2 Minutes" and explains why the above is important. PWDs are a hands-on breed, and it's important to give the judge the best opportunity to evaluate your dog by having them well trained and well prepared.

HERE ARE SOME STEPS TO HELP YOU SET EFFECTIVE GOALS FOR YOUR PERFORMANCE DOG IN A VARIETY OF VENUES.

1. Define a clear objective: Determine what specific skill, behavior, or accomplishment you want to achieve with your performance dog. It could be winning a particular competition, mastering a new trick, improving obedience, or excelling in a specific sport. With this, consider the timeline of competitions such as Water Trials or the National Specialty. Are you looking for a Top Dog status? Check out the last three years to see how many points it took for the #1 or Top 5 dogs in the sport you're interested in.
2. Break it down: Once you have the overall objective, break it down into smaller, achievable steps. Identify the individual skills or behaviors that need to be developed to reach the ultimate goal. (i.e., The retrieve for Water Work, weave poles for agility, duration in standing for examination in conformation showing). This allows you to focus on specific areas during training.
3. Make your goals SMART: Ensure your goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART). This means clearly defining what you want to accomplish, making it quantifiable (e.g., improving agility time by 2 seconds), setting realistic expectations, aligning it with your overall training objectives, and assigning a deadline for intended completion.



4. **Prioritize and sequence:** Determine how you'll address the goals. Prioritizing foundational skills before moving on to more advanced or complex tasks is often beneficial. This way, your dog builds a strong foundation and progresses systematically. Maybe you'd like to earn your CD obedience title in 2023. Getting positive ring time for both dog and handler and training classes may be beneficial. You may want to seek out a fun obedience match or start with your BN obedience title before making the leap to CD.
5. **Be realistic and flexible:** Set goals that are challenging but attainable. It's important to be realistic about your dog's abilities; consider factors such as breed characteristics, age, and individual strengths and weaknesses. Adjust your goals if necessary, based on your dog's progress and any unforeseen circumstances that may arise.
6. **Plan your training sessions or training class schedules:** Regularly assess your dog's progress towards each goal. Keep track of achievements, milestones, and areas that require further improvement. Writing notes about each training session is ideal, but even a recap can help you assess progress and plan future training sessions.
7. **Monitor progress:** Regularly assess your dog's progress towards each goal. Keep track of achievements, milestones, and areas that require further improvement. Writing notes about each training session is ideal, but even a recap can help you assess progress and future training sessions. Monitoring progress helps you identify what's working and what adjustments might be needed in your training approach or planning.
8. **Celebrate milestones:** Recognize and celebrate your dog's achievements along the way! We tend to forget this very important point. Training towards any goal takes dedication to learning and time away from other areas of our everyday lives.

Celebrating along the way can boost motivation and strengthen the bond between you and your dog. Rewards, praise, and high-value treats can reinforce positive behavior and acknowledge progress.

9. **Seek guidance if needed.** If you need clarification on setting goals or encountering challenges, consider seeking advice from experienced trainers or joining dog training clubs or communities. They can provide valuable insights and support and help you refine your goals. Look for people who have been where you want to go! There are many online training options and communities if you don't have people in your dog sport and/or area.

Remember, each dog is unique, so tailor your goals and training approach to suit your dog's needs and abilities. Most importantly, it's not just about our dogs but also about being honest with ourselves as handlers. I don't know about you, but I'm often my dog's weakest link. Look for opportunities to improve your goal, or ask a trusted trainer or dog friends for helpful feedback.

Patience, consistency, and positive reinforcement are key components in reaching your performance dog's goals. Lastly, remember to dream big! My friend Lee Ann always says to seek out BHAGS ... Big Hairy Audacious Goals. Your dog is so capable, and so are you.

