

OBEDIENCE TRIALS
THE SPORT OF OBEDIENCE
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The sport of obedience can be confusing for observers, for there's no one at ringside to tell you what's going on. So, here's a rundown of what you'll see at ringside if you watch the obedience competition.

Novice

This is the first level of competition. Here, the dog does individual exercises to be judged on his ability to walk with the handler on and off leash, stand and stay for a cursory examination by the judge, and come to the handler when called.

The first exercise in the individual pattern is Heel on Lead. The handler starts on a spot indicated by the judge and steps out when the judge says "Forward." At the command "Halt," the handler stops and the dog sits (hopefully). The heel on lead pattern includes several halts, three changes of direction, and two changes of pace. The second part of the heel on lead exercise is the Figure 8. Here handler and dog, on the judge's commands, make two full circuits of two posts (ring stewards) in a Figure 8 pattern.

One steward takes the dog's leash after the Figure 8, and the handler stands the dog for the judge's examination. The dog must stay in position, without moving its feet, for the judge to touch his head, back, and rump with the handler standing six feet away.

The next exercise is the Heel off Lead, in which the same pattern used for the Heel on Lead is followed. The final exercise is the Recall. Again on the judge's command, the handler sits the dog, walks across the ring, and calls the dog. The dog must come the first time it is called, sit in front of the handler, and then, on command, return to heel position.

After 10-12 dogs have been judged in individual exercises, the group exercises are held. Here, handlers and dogs line up along one side of the ring. Handlers tell the dogs to sit and stay and walk to the other side of the ring. The judge times the exercise for one minute, then tells the handlers to return. The down-stay exercise is then done for three minutes.

Each dog in Novice walks into the ring with a perfect score of 200. Judges deduct points for dogs that walk out of heel position, dogs that sit too slowly or not at all, and dogs that break position on the stand, sit, or down exercises. Judges also deduct points for handler errors, such as tugging on the leash or giving two or more commands for a single exercise. A dog scores zero for an exercise if he refuse to do it or if he walks away after being told to stay in place. If the handler-dog team has 170 or more points left after the judging, they earn a "leg" towards a Companion Dog title. Three "legs" under three different judges earns the Companion Dog or CD title.

Open

All exercises in open class are done off-lead. This class includes Heel off Lead, Drop on Recall, Retrieve on the flat and over a high jump, jumping a broad jump, and group exercises with the handler out of the ring.

The heeling exercises are done first with changes in speed and direction and halts as in the Novice Heel off Lead. The Figure 8 is also done off-lead.

For the Drop on Recall, the judge gives the handler a signal to call the dog, then to drop the dog, then to call again. The dog must interrupt his recall to drop down on the handler's command, then come in, sit in front of the handler, and return to heel position on command. For the retrieve exercises, the dog must go after a dumbbell, bring it back to the handler, and give it up, then return to heel position on command. The second retrieve exercise is done over a high jump set at 1.25 times the dog's shoulder height. The broad jump is set at twice the dog's shoulder height; thus a dog that's 20 inches tall will jump a 40 inch broad jump.

The group sits and downs are done for three and five minutes respectively, with the handlers out of sight of the dogs. Again, the dog enters the ring with 200 points and the judge deducts for mistakes. Since there's so many opportunities for errors in this difficult class, dogs frequently fail to qualify or get scores lower than they earned in Novice competition.

Three qualifying scores under three different judges earns a Companion Dog Excellent (CDX) title at this level.

Utility

This class bears little resemblance to the others. Here the dog must do a complex heeling pattern off lead that includes a hand-signal exercise and a more rigorous stand for examination. He must also find two articles handled by his owner out of a pile of several placed on the floor of the ring, retrieve one of three gloves as directed by the handler, and jump a high jump and a bar jump at the handler's direction.

This class is of the utmost difficulty. Training dogs to compete at this level is time-consuming and requires an enormous amount of patience. Scoring is done in a similar fashion, with points deducted for every mistake. Relatively few dogs compete in Utility, and most of those that do are Shelties, Golden and Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, and Border Collies - breeds that are well-known for their intelligence and ability to work closely in a team with their owners.

At each level of competition, classes are divided into A and B levels. In Novice A, handlers have never earned a title on a dog before. Novice B has experienced handlers.

Open A includes handlers who have not earned a CDX. Open B includes handlers who have earned a previous CDX and handlers who have a UD (Utility) title and are competing at graduate level for an Obedience Trial Championship (OTCh). Utility A is for handlers without a UD; Utility B for handlers with a UD and handlers competing for an OTCh.