

*** Visit the DSA Competition Titles page for official IMPROV competition rules and titles. ***

What is IMPROV Obedience?

DSA founder Lonnie Olson dreamed up IMPROV Obedience back in the 1970's, as an answer to the problems of traditional obedience competition, which she felt did not test the dog's ability to perform useful, daily exercises of an obedient and useful nature. As a figure skater, she also dreamed up the idea that there should be obedience routines highlighting the dog's performance, set to music, like freestyle figure skating, and judged as such. Sound familiar? That's the sport of Freestyle Obedience that everyone is now enjoying. It would be nice to see the sport of IMPROV Obedience "take off" like Freestyle did, and become a household word, as well.

IMPROV* stands for Impromptu Multifarious Performance Requiring Obedience and Versatility. In short, it is a DIFFERENT kind of obedience competition, which puts the emphasis on your dog's ability to perform to cues as asked, at any given moment. The dog and handler can not rely on pattern training or context to perform some "memorized" routine. They have to be ready to do new things under strange contexts (like real life situations). IMPROV tests how ready your dog is to be useful in real life.

**Impromptu means performed without preparation, and Multifarious means many-faceted, or containing numerous parts. The whole thing is a Performance which Requires the ability of your dog to listen and act on cues (Obedience), which may stretch the boundaries of what he is usually asked to perform in and require him to respond to all cues in any and all circumstances (Versatility).*

IMPROV does not have a standard judging format. However, it does have standard categories of exercises. Each time you go into the ring, you will be required by each different judge to do a different set of exercises, based on that judge's creativity when setting the course. This is what makes IMPROV more fun and challenging than standard obedience—you never know what you will be asked to do.

IMPROV is also different in that it requires teamwork, creativity and versatility on the part of the handler and the dog. Each team will be given a "problem" to solve, and with a little creativity and lateral thinking, each handler may have a different approach to handling the same problem put before them.

There are NO FAILURES in IMPROV. Dogs at all levels of training can compete. There are provisions for helping the dogs perform the exercises (for a point reduction), and "bending" the rules is allowed.

We've "legalized" cheating in this sport. We call it "lateral thinking," and it is encouraged. Each handler is allowed to take ONE item of his choice into the ring with him, which may be called into play on certain exercises. This item can not be food, or a clicker. It could be a prop, which you are going to use to demonstrate your useful and unique behavior (Exercise 6), or it could be your dog's leash, if he's not quite

ready for off-leash work. It could be a toy, or a target stick, or something else which would help you to gain an advantage at some point. I have seen people use their objects to help the dog make contact with obstacles in Exercise 1, direct the dog to the target area if he doesn't know a go-out, for Exercise 2, toss it, to add an extra behavior or two to Exercise 3, and use it to get the object on the target area in Exercise 5. Use your lateral thinking skills and see how you could benefit from bringing a particular article into the ring.

Exercise 1

Exercise 1 is a heeling exercise with obstacles. It demonstrates that the dog can be controlled verbally and will maintain the heel position, and also that the dog will trust his handler and overcome apprehension of new and strange objects to the point of coming in contact with these objects. The handler has the dog heel around the ring from object to object, with no instructions called out from the judge. The handler is timed, and has 2 minutes to complete the course. At each object the handler must get the dog to come in contact (touch) the obstacle. How they do this is completely up to the handler and dog.

Scoring

No rough handling or dog abuse is allowed. When the judge instructs the handler, "You may begin" and the handler walks over the starting line, the timer begins. There are five areas to be scored, involving timeliness, accuracy, and willingness to perform. When the handler and dog complete the course and cross the finish line, the timer is stopped.

Time scoring

If the handler complete the exercise in less than 30 seconds, a maximum of 10 points will be awarded. If the dog and handler take more than 30 seconds, but less than two minutes, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. Going over the 2 minute time limit results in a maximum score of 1 point.

Accuracy scoring

If the dog maintains a proper heel position throughout, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the heeling is only "so-so", or requires many corrections, the maximum points allowed is 5. If the dog is doing something that is not exactly considered heeling, a maximum of 1 point is allowed.

Willingness scoring

If the dog makes intentional, willing contact with the objects, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed for each object. If the dog requires extra encouragement, or repeated tries, the maximum of 5 points will be allowed for

each object. If the handler touches the dog or the object, or “cheats,” a maximum of 1 point is allowed for each object.

Excercise 2

Excercise 2 is a “remote control” exercise. It demonstrates that the handler can control his dog at a distance. The handler will stand behind a line and direct his dog to a designated spot, marked by an “X”, a circle, or a square on the floor or ground on the other side of the ring, at least 20 feet away. The time limit is 1 minute, and begins as soon as the judge says, “Begin.” The handler may recall the dog and try for a closer approximation to the desired target area. The handler may also move up to a second, closer line and try to direct his dog from there, at a point reduction.

Scoring

No touching, pushing or throwing of the dog is allowed. Scoring will be based on timeliness, accuracy and degree of control.

Time scoring

If the handler complete the exercise in less than 30 seconds, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the dog and handler take more than 30 seconds, but less than 1 minute, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. Going over the 1 minute time limit results in a maximum score of 1 point.

Accuracy scoring

If the dog hits the center of the target area with a “bulls eye”, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the dog is slightly off the mark, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. If the dog ended up nowhere near the desired target, or had to be helped into position, a maximum of 1 point is allowed.

Control scoring

If the handler can send the dog without crossing the first line, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the handler crosses the first line, but can remain behind the second line, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. If the handler has to take the dog to the spot, or show the dog the spot, a maximum of 1 point is allowed.

Excercise 3

Exercise 3 is the “Not-so-straight Recall.” This demonstrates that the dog is paying attention to the handlers cues, and is not just repeating a memorized (pattern trained) exercise. The handler leaves his dog on a stay and walks away to a point marked off on the floor or ground, 30 to 60 feet away. When the handler gets behind the line, the time begins. The handler must then instruct the dog to perform as many different cued behaviors as he can elicit from the dog before the dog gets past the “front” line. A maximum of 10 behaviors will be counted. Only behaviors which are performed “on cue” will be counted. Repeated behaviors are not counted, but can be used to control the dog, or to get a secondary behavior. For example, the handler gets the dog to perform a drop on recall, then asks the dog to drop so that he can roll over. The drop is not counted twice, but the handler gets credit for the roll over. The handler is only allowed to use a “go out” or “get back” twice, to prevent the dog from crossing the finish line prior to completing 10 cued behaviors. Hand signals and verbal cues are allowed, as are repeated commands.

Scoring

Scoring is based on number of cued behaviors executed by the dog before the dog gets over the “front” line, and before the 2 minute time limit has elapsed. One point for each NEW behavior is allowed. Behaviors must be cued (in other words, if your dog starts to volunteer some activity of his own, and you say, “Scratch!”, or “Run around in circles!”, it doesn’t count—but it was a nice try at lateral thinking!). The initial “stay” does not count. However the front, or return to heel or any other behavior completed past the front line DOES count, provided the cue for the behavior was given while the dog was still “in play”, and provided the dog executes the behavior correctly.

Excercise 4

Exercise 4 is to “Fetch an Unusual Object.” This demonstrates that the dog is willing to perform as asked, even though the object he is requested to fetch might be something he has never had in his mouth before, is difficult to pick up, can’t fit in his mouth, or is otherwise unusual in some way. The dog will be required to fetch three objects, selected by the judge. The objects may be larger than the dog, but there must be larger and smaller objects of similar description and composition provided for larger and smaller dogs, proportionately. The objects can be made of any material but glass or ceramic, and must not pose a danger to the dog (no plastic bottles containing harmful substances, no living or dead animals, sharp objects, or objects which could be swallowed by the dog, etc.). If the object is too large to carry, there must be some form of handle, strap or cord attached, so that the dog can take hold of the object and drag it. The objects will be placed by the judge, about 20 feet from the dog, one at a time. The handler can decide which of the objects he will elect to send the dog for, first, second and third. There is a 3 minute time limit to perform all three retrieves.

Scoring

Scoring is based on willingness and distance control.

Willingness scoring

If the object is fetched (by hook or by crook)—no problem, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed for each object. If the dog attempts to fetch, or partially retrieves the object, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed for each object. If the dog says, “you want me to put WHAT in my mouth?”, a maximum of 1 point will be allowed for each object.

Control scoring

If the handler can send the dog without crossing the 20 foot line, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the handler crosses the first line, and approaches the object with the dog, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. If the handler has to touch the object, a maximum of 1 point is allowed.

Excercise 5

Exercise 5 is a complex, interactive exercise. It demonstrates the dog’s ability to perform complex behaviors, based on previous training. This exercise usually involves interaction between the dog and object and a receptacle or target area. The dog must place something into, onto, around, another object or target area. For example, he must place a toy in a toy box. The handler is in one area, the object is in another and the target receptacle is in a third area. The handler directs the dog to go to the object and get it. Then he tries to get the dog to get the object into the target receptacle. A time limit of 1 minute is allowed.

Scoring

Scoring is based on timeliness, willingness and distance control.

Time scoring

If the handler complete the exercise in less than 30 seconds, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the dog and handler take more than 30 seconds, but less than 1 minute, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. Going over the 1 minute time limit results in a maximum score of 1 point.

Willingness scoring

If the object arrives in or on the target area, no problem, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the dog needs coaxing or “steering” to complete the exercise, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. If the dog says, “forget it!”, a maximum of 1 point will be allowed.

Control scoring

If the handler can send the dog without crossing the 20 foot line, a maximum of 10 points will be allowed. If the handler crosses the first line, and approaches the object with the dog, a maximum of 5 points will be allowed. If the handler has to touch the object, container, or dog, a maximum of 1 point is allowed.

Excercise 6

Exercise 6 requires that the handler demonstrate a really unique and useful behavior that the dog can perform. The handler has to explain how this particular behavior is useful.

Scoring

Scoring is based on whether or not the judge feels that the exercise is potentially useful. Extremely unique or useful will earn a maximum of 10 points. Moderately unique or useful will earn a maximum of 5 points. Not too useful will earn a maximum of 1 point.

Overall Scoring

This is like “extra credit.” When the dog and handler have completed all of the exercises, the judge must also indicate how well he felt that the handler and dog did as a team, working together to solve the problems presented. He must consider the degree of creativity and lateral thinking used on the part of the handler. He must also consider the versatility observed on the part of the dog. For these areas, the judge is to come up with a score, 10 being the maximum, 5 being average, and 1 being the minimum.

Important!

Because of the uniqueness of this competition and of the individual exercises, the score sheets can be made up in advance, based on what the judge will require for that particular day. Or, a “generic” score sheet could be used, with some flexibility built in for use with varying exercises. For instance the scoring section might say, “dog places object into container” when actually the exercise that day required that the dog had to roll a ball (which would not fit into his mouth) onto a chalked off square. Or, an exercise, such as “bowling with dogs” may be substituted for exercise 2, whereby timing and control marks would stay the same, but the accuracy marks would be interpreted as the number of pins knocked down.

Each score sheet must be marked with the disclaimer that: "This is not a standard score sheet. There is nothing "standard" about IMPROV obedience, except that you receive more points for distance control, quick and willing response, and ingenuity. The exercises on a future course might be completely different from the ones presented here."

Individuals and clubs are welcomed and encouraged to hold IMPROV Obedience competitions, however, I request two things. First, that it is labeled (even in the most microscopic of letters) as "Lonnie Olson's IMPROV Obedience." Twenty years from now, when this type of obedience competition has replaced the traditional, "canned" obedience competition exercises, I want everyone to remember who thought of it first! Secondly, that you put the above disclaimer on all score sheets. And, third, that you encourage training methods involving [operant conditioning](#) and positive reinforcement (the old-fashioned, fear-based training just doesn't work to get the willing responses like you need in IMPROV), and that you do not tolerate any corrections, threatening movements, or other indications of inhumane training practices in the ring.

Thanks for playing!

Lonnie Olson
Creator of IMPROV Obedience

Please reproduce, or use as a guideline the following score sheet

Lonnie Olson's IMPROV Obedience Score Sheet

Exercise 1

Heel around the ring, stopping to make contact with each of the unusual objects which are placed in the area.
(50 points) Time limit 2 minutes.

Dog makes intentional contact with the objects	10	10	10
Dog requires encouragement or repeated tries	5	5	5
Owner touches dog or object, or "cheats"	1	1	1
Dog is maintaining heel position reasonably well	10		
Heeling is "so-so" or requires many corrections	5		

That's not exactly heeling!	1
Requirement is completed in less than 30 seconds	10
Dog and handler take more than 30 seconds	5
Taking longer than 2 minutes to complete requirement	1

Exercise 2

Send dog to a spot on the other side of the ring marked by a box (or an "x"). (30 points) Time limit 1 minute.

Handler can send dog without crossing first line	10
Handler can send dog without crossing second line	5
Handler takes dog to spot	1
Dog hits the spot with a "bullseye"	10
Dog is slightly off the mark	5
Handler had to help dog into position	1
Handler & dog complete exercise in less than 30 seconds	10
Takes more than 30 seconds to complete exercise	5
Takes more than 60 seconds to complete exercise	1

Exercise 3

Not-so-straight recall. Handler leaves dog and walks to the other side of the ring. Handler gets a point for every cue the dog obeys between the stay and the front (up to 10 points). Time limit 2 minutes.

Number of commands obeyed	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
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Exercise 4

Fetch an unusual object. The object will be placed by the judge about 20 feet from the dog. (60 points) Time limit 3 minutes.

Objects are fetched--no problem	10	10	10
Dog attempts to fetch, or partially retrieves it	5	5	5
Dog says, "you want me to put what in my mouth?"	1	1	1
Handler can work dog from 20 ft.	10	10	10
Handler approaches object with dog	5	5	5
Handler touches object	1	1	1

Exercise 5

Get an object into the target area. (30 points) Time limit 1 minute.

Dog gets object into target area--no problem!	10
Dog needs coaxing to complete exercise	5
Dog says, 'forget it!'"	1
Distance control (20 feet)	10
Handler has to come closer to the container	5

Handler has to touch dog, object, or container	1
Performance completed in less than 30 seconds	10
Requiring more than 30 seconds	5
Going over 60 seconds	1

Exercise 6

Have your dog do something really unique and useful. (10 points) You can use the one object you were allowed to bring with you into the ring. Time limit 2 minutes.

Is the activity demonstrated potentially useful?	10	5	1
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Overall Score

Overall teamwork, creativity, and versatility on the part of the handler and dog 10 5 1

TOTAL SCORE _____

This is not a standard score sheet. There is nothing “standard” about IMPROV Obedience except that you receive more points for distance control, quick response and ingenuity. The exercises on a future course might be completely different from the ones above.