

Steeplechase Tips and Tricks

Steeplechasing is a race of approximately 100 feet over 3-4 low hurdles with the first dog into the catch pen through a hole being the winner. Modeled loosely after the equine sport of the same name, canine steeplechasing is traditionally for certain breeds such as terriers and some sight hounds. However, true to the Dog Scout creed, we see no reason why all dogs cannot be successful at this sport and enjoy the thrill of the chase.



The main object of a canine steeplechase is that the dogs will do anything to catch the prey (lure). So the first step would be to make sure that your dog wants to catch that pesky, elusive lure and nothing is going to stop them. If your dog has not seen a lure before you can introduce it on a short line or even hooked to a leash. A lure can be either a plastic bag or some animal pelt or tail. Move the lure forward in short jerks (or whatever motion excites your dog) until you have your dog's attention and then see if they will follow it. They may be cautious or slow at first but be patient and they will improve. Letting them catch it briefly may also add spice to the game for them. Remember to stop the game when they are really getting into it and not after they have gotten tired or bored.

Safety should always be a major concern and it is very important that you prepare your dog properly for any sport and that you know the possible dangers of it. Since a lure is used in steeplechases the dogs will be operating in very high prey drive and may very easily slip into "lizard brain" mode. If that happens, your dog will be operating on instinct (auto pilot) and will be reacting rather than thinking. In this state it is quite possible that your mild mannered, sweet dog could snap/bite at dogs or people that "interfere" with their prey. For that reason dogs are required to wear muzzles during the actual races and this is to protect all the dogs racing and also the people that catch the dogs at the end of the race and hold them for the handlers to pick up. Make sure that you have a properly fitting muzzle for your dog so that it does not rub along the nose or eyes and the dog should be able to open its mouth to pant. Softie or basket muzzles are often used and other types may be acceptable as long as they can be well secured and do not hold the dog's mouth closed. They will need to open their mouths to pant as they will be running at top speed and need oxygen. Although the dogs often notice nothing after they see the lure it is still advisable

to get your dog accustomed to wearing the muzzle before you try to race them. This will reduce their stress and make it more enjoyable for both of you.

Dogs will be jumping over hurdles at high speeds and even though the hurdles are very low for most dogs there is always the chance that in their excitement they will misjudge a jump and hit it. Making sure that your dog knows how to jump well can minimize the possibility that they will forget while they are in prey drive. Also, the other dogs may be a distraction or even cause physical interference thus making it even more important for all the dogs to have sound jumping skills. Taking the time to train your dog to jump well may prevent injury or stress later on. For the same reason it is a good idea to introduce going through the finish hole into the catch pen without the lure or other dogs around. Get your dog comfortable with the idea of diving through that dark hole and getting a treat on the other side. Practice having someone else give them the treat and restrain them since they will need to allow themselves to be "picked up" or caught by a stranger until you can get to the catch pen to reclaim them.

Once your dog has all the components down you can start to practice with other dogs. I would suggest just one more dog at first and then increase the number if you have other people to practice with. Each race will consist of 2-6 dogs and even if they avoid each other during race there will usually be a scrum at the finish as all the dogs try to get through the hole after the lure. This can be very intimidating to a green or timid dog so giving them good practice time at this can really make a difference in their confidence and safety.

Okay, your dog loves the lure, wears a muzzle comfortably, jumps well and can't wait to dive into the hole and get treats from a friendly stranger. Now you are ready to put it all together and send your dog hurdling down the course after that lure. And don't forget to yell and cheer because that is all part of the fun of any competition (and it might make your dog run faster) as the crowd urges on their favorites. Good luck and safe running.