

What is AKC Rally?

By Diane Richardson

Photos: Katie Pictures - Virgil Sweeney Other Pictures: 2009 ARC Nationals



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The short definition of Rally is obedience with signs; but, there is more to it than that. Rally is a wonderful tool to sharpen your dog's obedience skills, to develop a positive relationship and working bond between dog and handler, and to expose both dog and handler to a trial environment.

Rally was developed from the older obedience sharpening tool called "doodling" where you constantly change up your heeling patterns and routines to keep the dog on its toes without getting bored. As of 2009, Rally is offered in Canada by both CKC and CARO, and in the United States by AKC, UKC,

and APDT. Each group has somewhat different rules, exercises, and courses. However, many of the exercises are similar or the same, and the ring is set up as an agility-like course with a start and finish plus a course of numbered stations with signs telling you which exercise to perform there. After the judge tells you "forward," you are responsible for accurately completing the course in order on your own.

If you are interested in trying out Rally, it is best if you can find a class with an instructor who knows the rules of the venue you will likely be competing in. However, for people with a background in some sort of obedience, Rally certainly lends itself to self-instruction with just a few items needed. Ideally, you should obtain the current Obedience and Rally rulebook from AKC. This is available either online at <http://www.akc.org/pdfs/rulebooks/RO2999.pdf> or by calling the AKC online order phone at 919-233-9767.



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Another helpful item would be a set of Rally flash cards, which is just a set of mini Rally signs from the above rulebook link pasted to index cards. If you will be progressing beyond the Novice level, you will need the use of some jumps (bar, solid high, broad). Self-taught competitors often are

able to go to some run-throughs or matches to expose the dog to a trial-type atmosphere before jumping into competition.

Rally exercises help teach your dog a more complete understanding of obedience positions, especially the heel position. By the time you get through the Rally Excellent level, if you are obtaining scores of 90 and above (a qualifying score is at least 70

points out of a maximum of 100), you will know that your dog has a complete understanding of what and where heel position is and how to perform prompt finishes, sits and downs. Lower scores simply mean that perhaps your dog needs a bit more work, but don't give up! Rally will improve your dog's traditional obedience performance.

The Novice level of AKC Rally is all on leash and consists of an assortment of heeling, finishes, sits and downs that will help your dog to comprehend and be able to perform these tasks from a variety of positions. This level will also teach you, the handler, how to maintain a loose lead. The most common point deductions at this level are for tight leashes. Because you can talk to your dog and use hand motions to encourage him, you are able to remind and reinforce the dog for maintaining proper position.

Once you have earned your Rally Excellent title and are preparing to move on to traditional Novice obedience, it is a simple matter to reduce, and then eliminate, the extra vocal and hand encouragements while the dog maintains the position and exercise knowledge gained by working in Rally. Additionally, AKC now has several non-titling optional Rally classes which some clubs are offering. The most helpful to those of you continuing on to a traditional obedience venue is the Rally Plus class. In this class, there is still a course with signs, but a portion of the course is "obedience ring-like" where you are not allowed to talk to your dog or use extra hand signals, and there is a recall as well.

In AKC Rally Novice, there are 29 different station signs (plus start and finish) available for use on a Rally Novice course. A course consists of just 10-15 stations, so you will not see every sign at every trial. All of the Novice signs may be used on Advanced and Excellent level courses as well.

The single most important aspect in Rally for you, the handler, is to carefully read the signs. The pictures are also self-explanatory. There are many very similar exercises in this sport. The fronts and finishes are a good example of this. In Novice, there are some where the dog goes directly from heel to a come to front/sit, then starts to finish while you start walking before the dog gets fully into heel position. There is a similar exercise where the dog goes directly from heel to a come to front/sit, then finishes and sits at heel. Know the signs and know where all those halts are. A good rule of thumb is if the sign has a large stop sign, then you halt before



performing the station. If the sign has a small stop sign, then you halt when you finish the station. Knowing when to pause is also important. The walk around your dog exercises all require a small pause when you get back to heel position and failure to pause can result in large point deductions.



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When negotiating the course, the signs are almost always on your right (you pass to the left of the sign). Exceptions are jumps, cone exercises, change of direction and turns where the sign may be attached to the jump or cone, or sit directly in your path. The station exercises are, with few exceptions, performed at the sign. It is best to approach each station sign and perform the exercise as close to the sign as you can without touching it. Exceptions to this are the side step where you perform the side step just before the sign (and thus pass with the sign on your left) and the halt, 1 step, 2 step, 3 step forward station where you begin the exercise at the sign but complete it beyond the sign. Circling or stepping over the sign is a big no-no.



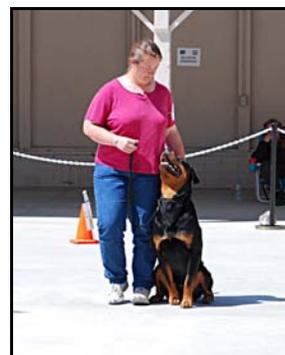
Lucy Ang & Nightshadow Skookum, BH, RN

When you walk the course, take advantage of the time allowed and walk the course as many times as you can, pretending to have your dog at your side. This will enable you to "dry run" the course and plan how close you can get to which signs, which parts of the course may be tricky and just plain familiarize yourself with the layout. Then take the course map back to your chair and read it again.

From start to finish, the dog is expected to be at heel on a loose leash. A small lag, forge or wideness is allowed as these would be ½ point errors in traditional obedience and ½ point errors are not deducted in Rally. The dog and handler are expected to proceed at a brisk, but not running, pace. A pace that is too fast or too slow will earn you deductions. While time decides ties, Rally is not a race or agility. Times are not posted, only scores. Talk to your dog, use your hands if need be but do not touch him, yell at him, intimidate him or give leash corrections. Walk at a pace that has your dog trotting, as this will keep his interest high.

Sits and downs should be straight. Sits and downs (and these include fronts and finishes) where the dog angles one end away from the handler incur deductions if more than minor.

Multiple commands and hand signals are allowed; but, deductions will be given for a lack of promptness on the dog's part. The dog should begin the exercise immediately after commanded to avoid most of these deductions.



Marlene Ferguson & Multi V3
Imo vom Riegelhaus,
VPG/SchH 3, BH, AD, RN, BST

If you feel you have incorrectly performed a station, you are able to retry as long as you have not started the next station. Walk back towards the previous station and re-approach the sign you wish to retry. Incorrectly performed stations are a 10-point deduction, but if you retry it successfully this is erased and you will receive a 3-point deduction for a retry instead, plus deductions for any errors. Retries are limited to one per station, so if after two attempts you still don't get it, just continue on.

There are many types of deductions from 1-10 points. Handler errors are the most common deductions and the points deducted vary dependent upon the severity of the error. Deductions are also taken for lack of teamwork, out of position, tight leads, knocking over cones, excessive barking and other expected areas.

When entering a Rally trial remember the following: In Rally Novice you must enter in the Novice B class if you have ever titled any dog to a Rally or traditional obedience title, or if the dog has a Rally novice or traditional obedience title, or if you do not own the dog you are handling. Dogs who complete their Rally Novice title can continue to compete in Rally Novice B classes until they earn a qualifying score in Rally Advanced. I strongly encourage newcomers to obedience and Rally to stay in Novice B until you and your dog are both fully comfortable performing off lead. There is no shame in staying in Novice until you are ready to move on to the off lead Advanced level! Practice in many different locations. Use flash cards or full size signs to create mini courses.

Practice with various distractions and try to get to as many run-throughs or matches as possible. Also try to meet with others in your area to practice and help each other. Relax at a trial, and above all, have fun with your dog! That is what Rally is all about!



Diane is a competition Rally instructor.