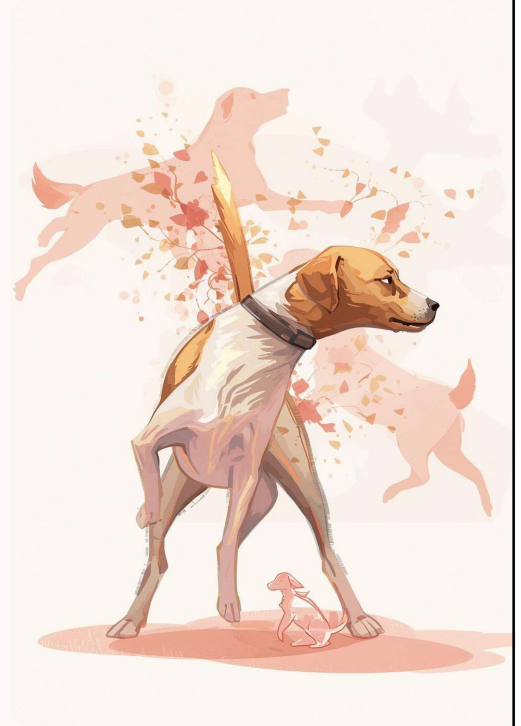


Health and Safety in Dog Dancing

February 1, 2026



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Before we start...

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Animal welfare is paramount in dog dancing; prioritising this ensures a positive experience for every dog involved.

3

The Judge's Role

Judges are responsible for ensuring **animal welfare** and must act as guardians during competitions.

4

Partnership and **Well-Being!!??**



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**This is a difficult
responsibility!**

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What is Welfare Really?

And what does this mean for the judge?

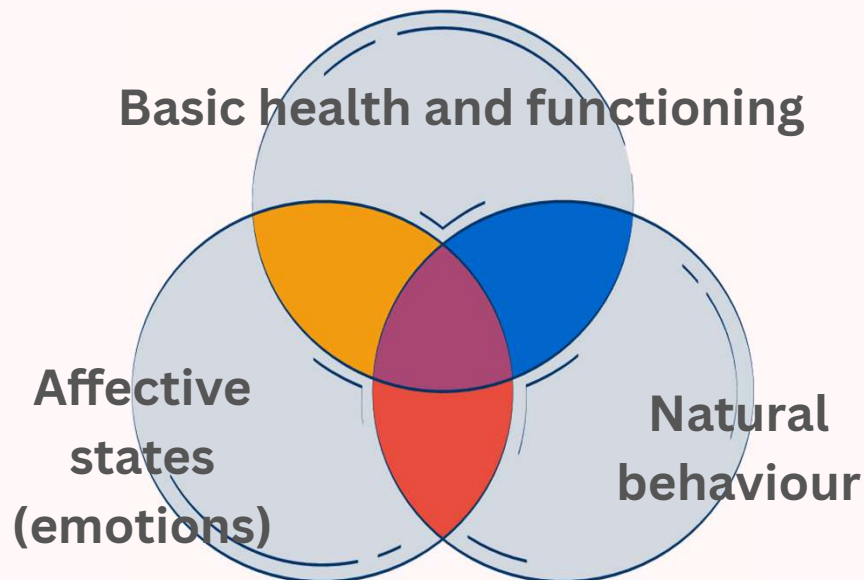
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The 5 Freedoms

- Freedom from hunger or thirst
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury, or disease
- Freedom from fear and distress
- Freedom to express normal behavior

8

Core Framework: Three Pillars of Animal Welfare



9

In dog sports, this means that a dog can be:

- Physically comfortable, *but*
- Emotionally stressed, *or*
- **Behaviourally** stressed

10

Welfare Is Both

Science-Based and Values-Based

Different judges may interpret the same dog differently because they prioritise different welfare elements.

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Basic health and functioning

- No overt lameness
- No repeated favouring/avoidance
- No excessive fatigue

Usually the easiest to observe, **BUT...**

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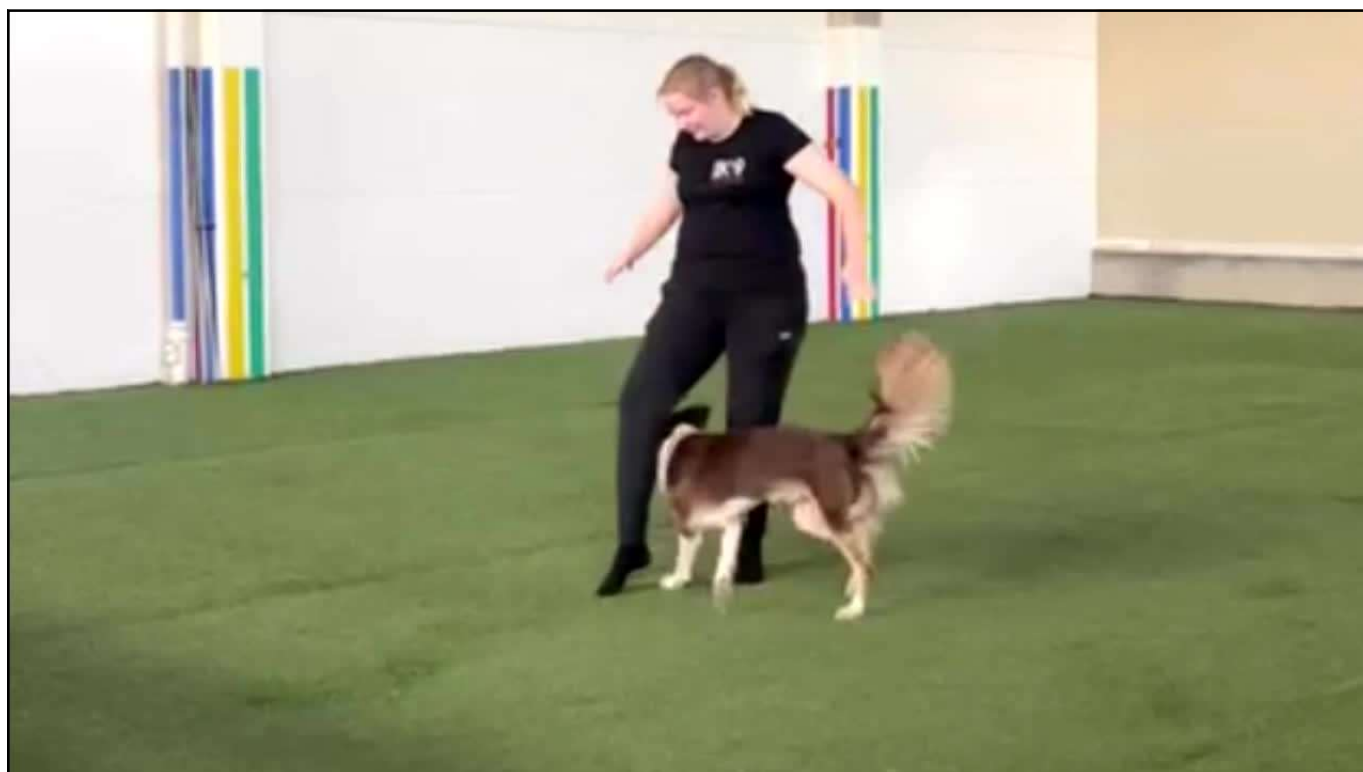
What is in your scope of expertise??

- Unnatural postures and movements
- The variety!!!
- You are not a veterinarian
- A routine is not a lameness assessment

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Natural behaviour

- Ability to move freely
- Use normal gait patterns - *which are....?*
- **Avoid unnatural postures??**
- Avoid extreme repetitive behaviours

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Why Body Type Matters

- Limb length, muscle mass, spine shape, and joint angles affect movement
- The same movement places different strain on different dogs

18

Understanding body type helps

- Recognise normal variation
- Identify excessive physical demands
- Protect long-term health
- Welfare judging asks:
“Is this safe and sustainable for this dog?”

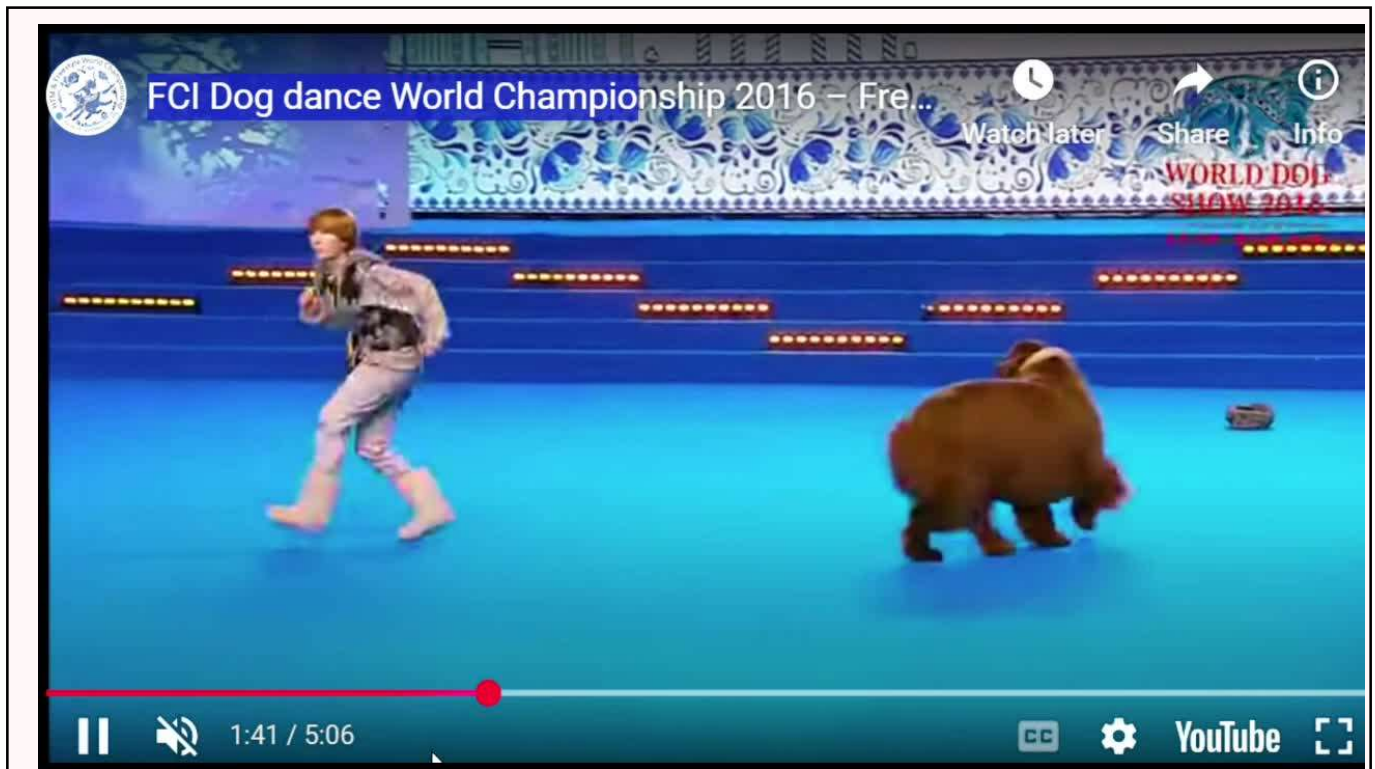
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Quick Ringside Checklist

- 1 Is this typical for this body type?
- 2 Is the dog still moving confidently?
- 3 Is weight-bearing comfortable?
- 4 Is behaviour still positive?
- 5 Is it consistent or worsening?

20



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Extreme Postures & Repetition

- Dogs are built for balanced, forward movement
- Prolonged or exaggerated postures place strain on joints and spine
- Repeated unnatural positions increase injury risk over time

That which is **Rewarded will be **Repeated**
(and Trained)**

22



23

That which is
Rewarded
will be
Repeated
(and **Trained**)

24

Affective states

A technically “perfect” routine performed by a stressed dog represents poor welfare under this framework.

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Key Principle for Judges

- Look for clusters and patterns, not single behaviours.
- One yawn or lick may mean nothing.
- Repeated signals across posture, movement, and behaviour indicate genuine stress.

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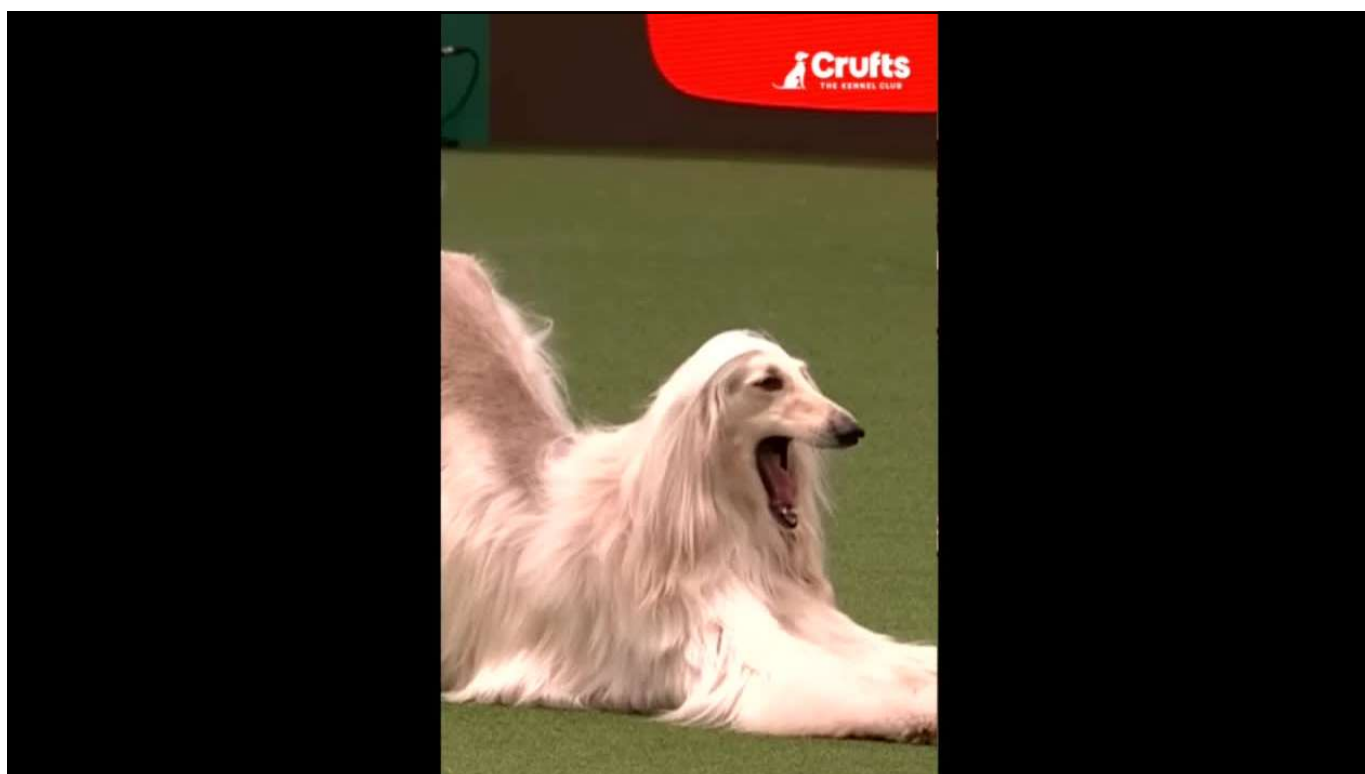
Why is recognition of stress NB?

- Stress has a physiological/physical consequence

27

“Does this dog look
confident and comfortable
— or merely compliant?”

28



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The Pitfalls



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Pitfall 1: Fear of Being “Wrong” or Controversial

- Welfare decisions can feel uncomfortable
- High-stakes events increase pressure
- Fear of complaints or appeals
- Concern about reputation
- Hesitation even when action is justified

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Practical Strategy

- Ask Yourself:
 - ☐ Is there visible deterioration in movement?
 - ☐ Is coordination compromised?
 - ☐ Is performance becoming unsafe?

**“If movement quality is declining,
intervention is justified.”**

33

Is the first step to speak to
the handler afterwards?

34

Pitfall 2: Training, Pain or Distress?

- Over-arousal can alter movement
- Anxiety may cause reluctance
- Training gaps can mimic discomfort

35



Practical Strategy

- Evaluate movement first, behaviour second, then interpret together.
- Principle:
“Pain changes mechanics.
Stress changes expression.”

36

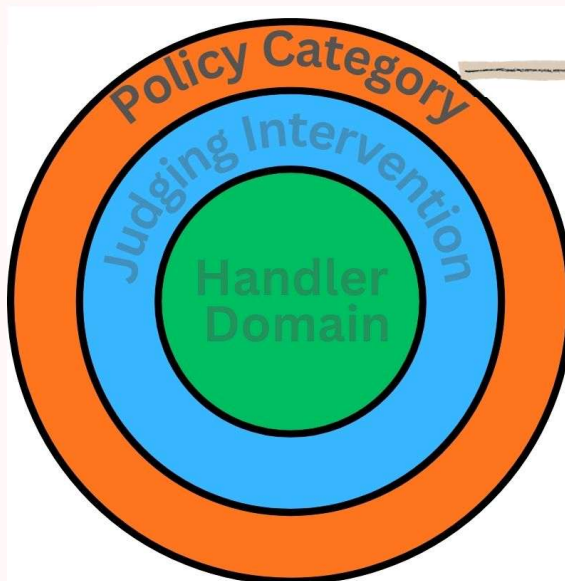
Pitfall 3: Inconsistent Intervention Thresholds

- Different judges set different standards
- Similar cases treated differently
- Lack of shared benchmarks
- Reduced fairness across competitions
- Confusion for handlers

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Practical Strategy



- Clear Welfare Standards & Protocols
- Mandatory Education & Certification
- Regulation of High-Risk Practices
- Health, Fitness & Monitoring Systems + Records
- Independent Oversight & Fair Review

38

“Published injury epidemiology is strong in agility, but dog dancing-specific injury prevalence data are limited.”

39

Pitfall 4: Handler Reputation Bias

- Well-known handlers get more leeway
- “Benefit of the doubt” effect
- New handlers scrutinised more closely
- Unconscious judgement bias
- Distorted welfare decisions

40



Practical Strategy

- Reset Focus:
 - ☐ Ignore handler identity
 - ☐ Assess baseline movement
 - ☐ Track changes only
- Strategy:
Mentally “blind” yourself to handler status and rely on movement patterns

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Unified Welfare Decision Flow

When unsure, run this sequence:

- 1 Observe baseline movement
- 2 Track changes/patterns during routine
- 3 Check for mechanical disruption
- 4 Assess safety risk
- 5 Act proportionately

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Thank you!