

Chapter 10 Click! Handling

Clicker training is the language of training, handling is the language of agility. Handling communicates to your dog which obstacle to take and which to avoid. Handling language is made up of body cues. To be effective, handlers need to know those body cues. TAGTeaching is a new concept of teaching yourself and others the mechanical skills of handling.

Watching a tape of the agility world championships, you see that there are many successful handling styles. Some handlers glide around the ring, barely making a sound. Others seem frantic and scream their cues. Whatever the style, these handlers have reached the top of the game by being consistent.

There it is! That word consistent again! Your handling can only be effective if each movement is clear to your dog and your dog knows what each movement means. Handling is the most complex aspect of agility. It requires both the dog and the handler to learn the proper handling movements. The possibilities for either the dog or the handler to become confused are great. Avoid this pitfall by developing a consistent handling language that is clear to both you and your dog.

What is TAGTeaching?

Theresa McKeon, a top gymnastics coach, learned to clicker train her horse. She immediately saw its applications in coaching her team of six to thirteen year old gymnasts. The results were remarkable. The young athletes took to the clarity and immediacy of hearing the click when they performed a perfectly straight handstand or other physical feat, increasing their learning speed and motivation dramatically. The gymnasts' body awareness grew, and with it, their ability to perform precise behaviors. Working with humans, Theresa called the method TAGTeaching, or Teaching with Acoustical Guidance.

Along with scientist and clicker enthusiast Joan Orr and other partners, Theresa formed the company TAGTeach International, dedicated to bringing this information and technology to all sports training.

The TAGTeaching instructor makes use of a unique sound, a click, the word TAG or the ding of an electric bell, to mark the moment in which the desired behavior of the student occurs.

How to Get TAGs

In TAGging, one person learns while another person coaches. The coach and the student agree on a TAG point, a specific, clearly described body position, which the coach marks with a signal (TAG) as it is accomplished. Examples of TAG points are the handler:

- Staying upright like a candle while turning his dog.
- Holding his arm six inches from his hip while his dog jumps a specific jump.
- Executing a handling move at a predetermined location.

Traditional coaching focuses on what is wrong.

TAGTeaching focuses the student's mind on performing the TAG point, the correct behavior, not on avoiding a mistake.

The coach can TAG for an excellent training moment, outstanding handling move, or for catching the student doing anything in an ideal fashion. If his dog is having trouble with weave entrances and he clicks and reinforces his dog for a weave entrance, the instructor may TAG the student. If the student gets into an ideal position for a specific handling move, the instructor may TAG for that.

Group Class Downtime

Most group classes have down time, either before class or during class waiting for a turn. Group class students can use this time to pair off and TAG each other. Student pairs select a TAG point and alternate between student and coach roles. The cool thing is that both parties are learning.

Ideas for TAG Training

Anything that is in need of training is a potential TAG point. If your dog has a training issue, a TAG point can be created to address it. If the handler has a handling issue, a TAG point can be set to work on the move. The thing to remember is to set ONE TAG point at a time. Require one behavior at a time just like you would when training your dog.

Keeping Track of TAGs

As an instructor, I am generous in the TAGs I give out, so my trainer friend Suzanne Rider had the brilliant idea of giving me a “TAG-O-Meter”. The TAG-O-Meter is a simple counter that you can purchase at an office supply store.

Students can use a string with beads on it to keep track of their tags. For each TAG a bead is moved down the string. Instructors can use office supply counters to keep track of how many tags they have given.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

The TAG-O-Meter is a valuable tool to help keep track of how many TAGs have been given to a student while he is running a course. After the run, review with your student or training partner how many TAGs they received and why.

On occasion if the student does something wonderful, you can TAG jackpot — three TAGs at one time.

TAGulator

Students also need to keep track of their TAGs. You can use a string of beads to keep track of TAGs (see photo above). The string of beads is nicknamed a TAGulator.

TAG Prize Ideas

For many of my students the act of learning is self-reinforcing, but, hey, who doesn't enjoy a stuffed dog toy? What about a Frisbee or other fun dog gear? I place items that I think my students will enjoy into a box and when all students in the class reach 50 TAGs they each get to pick something out of the box.

TAGTeaching Guidelines

As in dog training, stop TAG sessions before the student becomes tired or bored. Switch to different behaviors frequently to keep the student's interest. End the session on success. TAGTeaching is intense. Most learners will suffer from focus fatigue if the sessions are too long. Use TAGTeaching for a specific skill set, such as where to put your feet during a specific handling move. During an hour-long group class there may only be one or two TAG sessions. During private instruction, it is possible to do more, but it is important to know your student's limits.

TAGTeaching by Yourself

Not all agility enthusiasts attend group classes or have access to a training partner. If you train alone, you can still use TAG teaching. Establish a TAG point, such as reaching a certain spot on the ground to do a front cross, or holding your right arm in a certain position. Find a person, any person (i.e. the neighbor's kid) to be your coach. Tell your coach what your TAG point is and to say TAG when they see you make the move, reach the spot or

whatever the TAG point is. One of the advantages to this method is that anyone can coach as long as the person knows the TAG point.

The TAG method relies on the use of systematic and logical approximations. This helps handlers gain clarity about what is required one body part at a time. I recommend starting with TAGging the student for ideal arm and shoulder position, because arm position is a key TAG point. If the arm and shoulder is correct, the rest of the handler's body (shoulders, hips and feet) usually falls into place.

Handling Moves

This section introduces the basic handling moves and their TAG points. They include start positions, pull turn, rear cross, front cross and false turn. My handling philosophy is to keep it simple!

While it is fun to be creative and to develop your own system of handling, why reinvent the wheel? If you base your handling on experienced world-class competitors, you can video those competitors and study their moves. Then use the video tape to break the moves down into TAG points.

Identifying TAG Points

To identify TAG points, videotape the entire handling move from beginning to end. Start with what the handler's arms are doing, then identify TAG points for the feet and the rest of the body. You want details. Identify which foot is placed where and how much weight each foot is bearing. If the handler is moving quickly, make note that this handling move will be executed on the balls of your feet. Once you have completed the TAG points for the arms, move around the handler's body one section at a time: shoulders, head to feet, legs, hips and torso.

Physical Challenges

If you have a physical challenge (and in my experience almost all agility handlers do), find a handler who has the same physical abilities as you to imitate. There are successful agility handlers in wheelchairs, with back problems and a wide variety of other physical challenges. Once you find a successful handler that matches your physical abilities, use the TAGTeaching methods to establish TAG Points.

Body Awareness

The key to good handling is body awareness. On the course, in order to have the mental room to tune into your body, make sure that you are absolutely clear what obstacles you will be performing and choose a handling strategy to get your dog from point A to point B. It is impossible to be aware of what your body is doing if you are trying to remember where the next obstacle is or thinking about how you are going to get your dog turned toward the next series of obstacles. TAGTeaching is an excellent way to develop body awareness.

To gain awareness of your feet, draw a straight line on the ground 20-feet long. Use sidewalk chalk if you are indoors on matting or use powdered chalk outside on grass. Place your left foot on the line, begin walking and have your coach “TAG” every time your left foot hits the line. The first time keep your head down watching your feet, but the second time do it without looking. The TAGging of the left foot will help you become aware of your left foot when you are traveling straight. Repeat this game TAGging right foot contact with the line. First walk, then jog and eventually run the line.

It is important for agility handlers to be able to travel in straight lines, or to move directly to a planned spot. If you travel crookedly, you may accidentally signal your dog to take an incorrect obstacle. Walking, jogging and eventually running straight lines helps you gain awareness

of where you are placing your feet and what direction you are traveling.

An awareness of your shoulders is also critical to agility handling. “Why did the chicken cross the road?” “Because the handler’s shoulders were pointing that way!” is an old agility joke. Your dog will travel in the direction your shoulders are facing. The motion of your arm is also important but shoulders determine where the arm will be.

To help gain shoulder awareness, have your coach TAG you for rotating your upper body and shoulders 90-degrees.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

Angelica before she has begun rotating. In TAGTeaching, this is called a start position. It is the position before you have attempted the behavior you are learning.

Begin in the position shown in the picture above, your start position. Your TAG point is to rotate your arms and shoulders 90-degrees to the left, without moving your feet.



Angelica after she has rotated her shoulders 90-degrees to her left. TAG!

Photo by Suzanne Rider

Now do this exercise in the other direction, rotating 90-degrees to the right. Once you are consistently successful, merge the straight line game with this shoulder rotating. Again, practice in both directions and then jog and eventually run.

Your arm is pivotal in agility handling. To help create an awareness of arms, assume a relaxed start position, arms at the sides, natural stance, weight evenly distributed on both feet. From this start position, try to “feel” the various arm position TAG points. Your coach may say, “The TAG point is to lift your arm six inches from your hip.”



Here Angelica holds her hand six inches from her hip.

Photo by Suzanne Rider

The coach can then use this method to help the handler “feel” six, 12 and 18-inches. Once the handler is successful with either arm while standing still, progress to arm movement while walking, then while jogging and finally while running. This exercise is a great way to help handlers who swing their arms, accidentally signaling their dogs to take off courses. The instructor calls out where the arm should be (six inches, 12-inches, etc.) to prompt the ideal arm position and then TAGs when it gets there. The moment the instructor TAGs, the student can feel what that arm position feels like.

In addition to an awareness of what arms are doing, it is helpful to create a default of possible arm behaviors.



In the photo at left, Angelica demonstrates the bowl arm, which signals your dog to move ahead of you. The photo to the right shows an arm that is horizontal with the ground, signaling for the dog to move laterally away from the handler. In both cases, elbows and wrists are straight.

Photos by Suzanne Rider

It is ideal for a handler to keep his elbow and wrist straight most of the time and to handle with the arm closest to his dog. Which arm to use is a source of great debate among agility handlers. In my mind using the arm closest to your dog makes sense, because that arm is most easily seen by her.

The Magic Flashlight

A great way of thinking about your arm signaling is to pretend that you are holding a “magic flashlight.”

Wherever you shine the beam of the “magic flashlight” your dog will go. Shine the magic flash light beam six-inches ahead of your dog's nose. When using your “magic flashlight,” keep your elbow straight and move your arm using your shoulder muscles. Keeping your elbow straight most of the time will help avoid knocked bars and off courses, which occur more easily when your arm is bent.

A bent arm can allow lower-arm movement and cause wrong courses. Jerky handler movements, arm or otherwise, can cause your dog to drop a bar. In general, avoid jerky movements, especially when your dog is in the air over a jump. This probably sounds challenging to do and it is, but we love this sport because of its challenges.

Connection

Connection is an agility term used to describe the line of communication between you and your dog. Connection enables you to signal to your dog and your dog to respond. Either you or your dog can break connection. Taking your eyes off your dog, even for a moment, can cause you to break connection. To avoid this, make watching your dog a TAG point. For a new handler watching their dog with their peripheral vision for one obstacle is an excellent TAG point. As the skill of the handler improves, raise criteria to watching for two, three or more obstacles. A handler could be TAGged for watching their dog while completing a very fast handling move. The coach can infer if the dog is being watched, because of the timing of the handling moves, rather than actually being able to see the handler making direct eye contact. If a handler stops watching their dog, the connection between dog and handler will be lost and this “disconnect” will be visible to an experienced coach.

Another way to lose connection is to handle too far ahead of or behind your dog. Your arm signal consistently tells your dog where she is going, but there is a rubber band effect: if you handle too far ahead of your dog, the rubber band breaks and connection is lost. If someone gives you

directions and he is two streets ahead of your note taking, mental connection will be lost. Signaling behind the location of your dog is also going to break connection and frustrate or slow the dog down. A dog barking on course can be a sign of frustration because her handler isn't clearly telling her where to go. If the person navigating a car trip keeps forgetting to tell you where to turn, you are going to get frustrated (I suggest biting his ankle).

Consistent Handling Cues

Consistency in handling is the only way your dog can know what a handling move means. If one move looks just like another, your dog can't make sense of what you are signaling. Just as verbal cues need to be different from each other in order to be clear to your dog, physical cues must be unique. Each body cue you give your dog can only have one meaning. Inconsistencies in body cues will cause your dog to become confused.

Many times handlers get exactly what they handle rather than what they meant. The handler may have meant for his dog to go to the weaves, but because he never rotated his upper body and shoulders to show his dog the weave poles, the entrance is missed. Because it is extremely challenging to achieve body awareness (what you actually did, not what you thought you did) it can be easy to blame your dog. The truth is that it is always a training or handling issue. Since we are the trainers and the handlers the dogs get off blame-free.

Assessing Your Handling

If you are already running agility, take a moment to find out how effective and consistent your handling is. Get a sheet of paper and list your handling moves on the left side. Then evaluate the effectiveness of each move. Is the move consistently successful in practice? What about competition? If the list shows that a certain move is not successful in competition but is during practice, you may want to have a friend video tape you in both training and

competition to see what is causing the move to be unsuccessful in competition. Compare the move to other moves that you use. Does it look similar to another move? If so, pick one move and eliminate the other.

Some competitors hold their breath when they get nervous. This can completely change the appearance of the handler's body, causing a limited range of motion and stiffness. Tension can make a normally fluid well-rehearsed move look choppy. Once your body tenses, your dog may not recognize your restricted handling cues or your timing may be off. The change in appearance may cause your dog to slow down or misinterpret the move.

Another common problem is for a nervous competitor to lose confidence. This manifests as tentative rather than confident signaling. Increase your confidence in your handling by clearly defining each move and rehearsing it well. Evaluation of your moves standardization and rehearsal will get you on track to make your competitive handling match your practice handling.

If you find a certain move isn't successful in training or competition, consider modifying it so it is clear to your dog. Perhaps the move was never properly trained and your dog can't read it when you are stopped or are in a different position relative to your dog and the move is not generalized to that position. You are the truth detective: investigate until your questions are answered.

If you find a move is successful at home, but not as successful in competition, here are some more ideas that may be helpful.

If your dog is faster in competition than at home and you're not used to this speed, your timing may be off. Increase your dog's speed at home to duplicate the speed she is running at the trial. Do this by playing motivational games and using DRE. Run a friend's dog that is faster than your

dog in practice, to help you learn faster timing. Alternatively, lower your dog's jump height by one or two increments so she will spend less time in the air and more time running, which will require you to speed up your handling.

Instead of responding, your dog stares at you when you make the handling move. Establish specifically which move your dog is not responding to and in which context. Train this move while standing in one place, only moving the upper body, click and reinforce the response. Be aware of the power of your eyes. If your dog stalls when you are sending her, ask yourself what you are watching. If you are looking at your dog rather than at the obstacle you are sending your dog to, this may be the problem. When sending your dog ahead of you, look where you want her to go, using your peripheral vision to track her.

Fast Feet

In order to be the best handler you can be, you need to be quick on your feet. This does not mean you have to be an Olympic sprinter — it means you must speed up and slow down according to what your dog needs. If the best speed you have is a light jog, then that is your fast speed and walking is your decelerated speed. If you can run, you will be alternating between running and jogging. No matter what your physical ability, you will need two gears to communicate effectively with your dog.

Speeding Up and Slowing Down

Speeding up tells your dog to run hard and keep taking what is in front of her. Slowing down tells your dog a change in direction is coming.

To learn to speed up while running, have another person TAG you for reaching forward with your leading leg, before your foot strikes the ground. Most people drop their feet straight to the ground as they run. This shortens stride and wastes energy. Reaching forward as far as you can

increases the length of your stride and therefore your speed. Reaching your foot forward before it hits the ground becomes a TAG point.



Photos by Suzanne Rider

By focusing on reaching forward with your leading foot, you will cover more ground and increase your speed.



A second TAG point for increasing your sprinting speed is to focus on kicking your heel up high to your bottom after you push off from the ground. This TAG point increases the force with which you push off the ground, therefore increasing your speed. The increase in speed here isn't going to do much good because the lead leg reach is poor. Just like our dogs, the previous behavior of reaching forward was lost when the focus changed to the new behavior of heel up.

A second TAG point that will help increase your speed is kicking your foot up to your buttocks as your rear foot leaves the ground. Again, this does not take a whole lot of energy, but will help increase your speed by driving your body forward.

If you have a physical handicap, you can use a wheelchair to handle your dog and work with a physical therapist to establish TAG points that will help you improve your speed. Agility handlers come from all walks of life and many have physical limitations. Don't allow a physical challenge to keep you from pursuing a dream of running agility. You can do it!

Slow Down!

Slowing down tells your dog that a change in direction is coming. Whatever your initial speed, a sudden slowing down or stop, will cause most dogs to curl in toward you looking for their next cue.

Suddenly slowing down and speeding up requires some strength training. Again, regardless of your physical condition, you can prepare your body for this and improve your speed with a little bit of training. My students range from young kids to elderly people with various physical abilities. All of them have learned to speed up and slow down to the best of their ability and are enjoying the game of agility with their dogs.

To get a feel for how your dog is affected by changes in your speed, run at full pace with your dog for a series of obstacles, then slow down. Observe how slowing down affects your dog's behavior. Observe what your dog does when you speed up. World-class agility competitor Guy Blancke calls this "feeling the dog" and it is a very powerful exercise. It allows you to "feel" how your movements affect your dog. Use this information to plan your course strategy.

How to Teach Speeding Up and Slowing Down

Some dogs will take an obstacle without being directed to rather than check in with their handler if the handler stops or slows. If your dog does this, it is easy to teach her that slowing down or stopping means, "check in with me." Run your dog over a sequence and at a predetermined location

begin slowing down. As you slow down, call your dog to you, click the response and reinforce when your dog is right next to you. Your dog will learn that slowing down is followed by a recall and she will soon check in with you automatically. You can then fade the recall and just click and reinforce her curling into you.

Warming Up For Handling

Whether you are a beginner or have been handling agility for years, proper warm up and stretching is important. Every person is different, so check with a physical therapist for specific exercises.

When getting ready to work on your handling, begin with light stretches and jogging. Once you are warmed up, do a few sprints at your top speed. Frequently we handle at the speed that is comfortable to us rather than what is truly our top speed. Develop the muscle memory of what your top speed feels like by making fast sprints part of your warm up routine. Even if you have a physical disability, move as fast as you can so you have a feel for what your top speed is. Establishing this baseline will help you decide what parts of the course you may want to speed up and slow down.

Two Ways to Start

There are two ways to get your dog started on your agility run. You can lead-out ahead of your dog, while she waits, or you can do a running start together. A running start is a fun way to start and it does not require your dog to hold any position prior to starting the run.



Photo by Angelica Steinker

Suzanne has lead-out ahead of Rev. Her hand is pointing back at her dog for connection as she prepares to release him.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

Rev is ready to go and I am restraining him by placing my hand on his chest.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

The running start is complete.

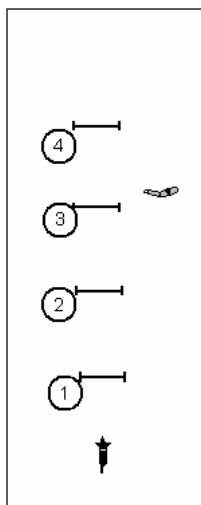
To perform a running start, hold your dog back from doing the first obstacle by pushing on her chest. When ready, give your dog a gentle push backward away from the first obstacle and take off running. The slight push away from the first obstacle is intended to trigger your dog's opposition reflex, which will cause her to assertively drive forward toward the first jump.

The running start is popular among some handlers of small dogs. Dogs that are less motivated to do agility can also benefit from a running start. If you have a fast dog, a running start can present an entirely different set of handling challenges. This makes it a fun exercise for training. The challenge is that the handler will rapidly fall behind his dog. Many sequences are very different to handle when you are behind your dog, compared to if you are even with or ahead of her.

Lead-outs

A lead-out is when the handler leaves his dog in a sit or down at the start. He walks onto the course, strategically positioning himself to let his dog know the entire opening sequence rather than just the first jump. A lead-out is an advantage because it enables the handler to be ahead of his dog, which makes it easier for her to see handling signals. This is why it is important to train and proof your duration behaviors such as sit. You must be able to lead-out with confidence and know your dog will release only when you are ready.

The handler pictured has led out to the third jump. Since both the dog and the handler's path are straight ahead this is a straight lead-out. Note that the handler's left arm magic flashlight beam should be reaching back pointing six inches in front of the dog's nose indicating the path the handler wants the dog to take (the software design program doesn't allow handler arm adjustment).



When leading out, use your shoulders and arms to show your dog where she is going. Using your hand to shine the magic flashlight beam at the path you want your dog to take.

Begin practicing lead-outs on the flat without obstacles. Once your dog has a 90% success rate, begin practicing with one jump. Gradually build on success, until finally you can practice a long lead-out over a sequence of four or more obstacles.

TAG Points for Straight Lead-out

Feet and Legs: Handler on the balls of his feet. Knees bent and soft (unlocked) facing in the direction the dog will be traveling.

Upper body: Leaning forward slightly.

Shoulders and arms: Shoulders facing in the direction you want your dog to go off the start line, arm closest to your dog pointing at her. The moment you release begin to shine the magic flashlight beam six inches ahead of your dog, arm furthest from your dog naturally at your side.

Head and eyes: Toggling between dog and first obstacle.

TAG Points for Running Start

Feet and Legs: Parallel to dog's.

Upper body: leaning forward slightly.

Shoulders and arms: shoulders facing in the direction you want your dog to go, arm closest to your dog on your dog's chest ready to give her a gentle push backwards, arm furthest from your dog at side in a natural position.

Head and eyes: toggling between dog and first obstacle.

Less Can Be More

Being ahead of your dog is a good thing, but being too far ahead can add challenges. The greater the distance of the lead-out, the more risk that you may lose connection with your dog. Long lead-outs can also encourage more speed, which flattens the stride of most dogs. This may cause knocked bars. It can also be difficult on your timing. Your dog may misread which obstacle you are indicating when she is far behind you. It is your call if a long lead-out is worth the risk. However, in the agility ring, we are all gamblers and taking chances is part of the fun.

Handling Moves That Turn the Dog

The pull turn, rear cross, front cross and false turn are the most common handling moves used today. (They have different names in different countries and even in different regions.) These handling moves will help you complete upper-level agility courses.

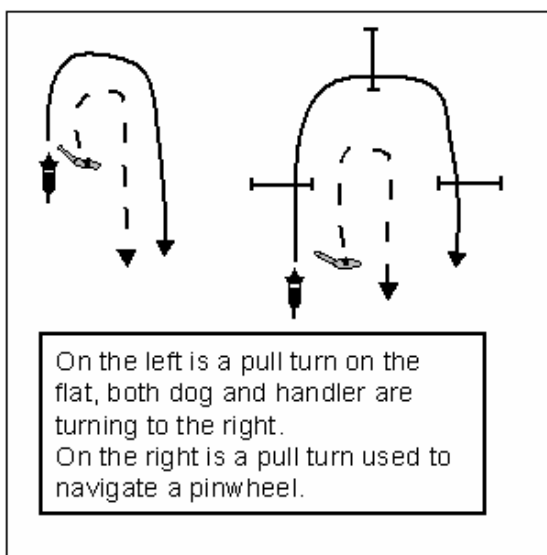
Blind Crosses

I don't recommend blind crosses. It seems to me that it is hard for a dog to distinguish between the handling move of a blind cross, and a pull turn, described below. Dogs can also get confused as to which side of your body they should race to if you use both front crosses, described below, and blind crosses. Rather than risk confusing a dog by adding the blind cross move, it seems more ideal to be able to continue using pull turns and front crosses. Having said this there are many handlers phenomenally successful using blind crosses. I coach what I believe to

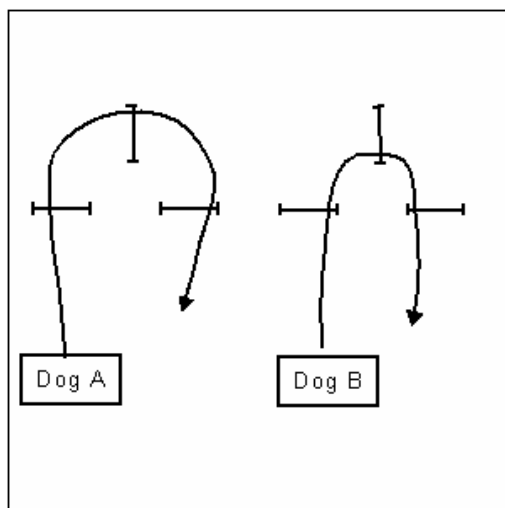
be consistent and know to be successful based on my own experiences.

Pull Turn

Also called the pole turn (not to be confused with pole dancing), is among the simplest of handling moves. The pull turn asks your dog to wrap around your body as you both turn in the same direction. While this turn is physically the least demanding for the handler it does hold some challenges.



The diagram above pictures the path of the handler and the tightest possible path for his dog over the jumps. Your dog's actual path will depend on her speed, size and training. When practicing pull turns, tweak your handling style until you can consistently get your dog to perform the three jumps as tightly as possible. The tightest path brings your dog close to the inside standard of all three jumps of a pinwheel.



In the diagram above, Dog A and Dog B are completing a pull turn with their handler. If these dogs are traveling at the same ground speed, Dog B's time will be faster going through the three jumps because her path is tighter (shorter) than Dog A. When training turns, help your dog choose the tightest path.

Pull turns don't require a lot of movement: rotating and pushing off the outside leg or inside leg the handler turns. This turn is similar to an obedience "about turn". During a pull turn, the dog remains on the same side of the handler.

TAG Points for the Pull Turn

The TAG points below assume that the dog is on the handler's left side. Dog and handler are both traveling to the right.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

Brenna has decelerated as she moves towards the second jump of the pinwheel to begin the pull turn.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

She has rotated off her outside leg and is now running out of the pull turn.

The dog may be turning right just a little or a lot (270- to 360-degrees). The pull turn can be used if the handler is slightly ahead of the dog, with the dog, or behind the dog. If you are significantly ahead of your dog, another handling move, front cross or false turn, is usually a better option.

Begin with the TAG points for the lower body, starting with the positioning of the feet, then legs and hips, until the entire behavior is completed.

Lower Body

TAG POINT: Handler softens knees and slows down using balls of feet, signaling to the dog that a turn is coming.

TAG POINT: Handler rotates off the left (outside) foot shifting weight over to the ball of the right foot – turning his

upper and lower body as much as needed; you will not know which foot you will be caught on when it is necessary to complete the move. Practice pushing and rotating off both your outside foot and inside foot.

TAG POINT: Handler speeds up out of the turn to reach next strategic handling position.

Upper Body

TAG POINT: While slowing down, handler uses left arm to continue to signal his dog's path six inches ahead of the dog's nose.

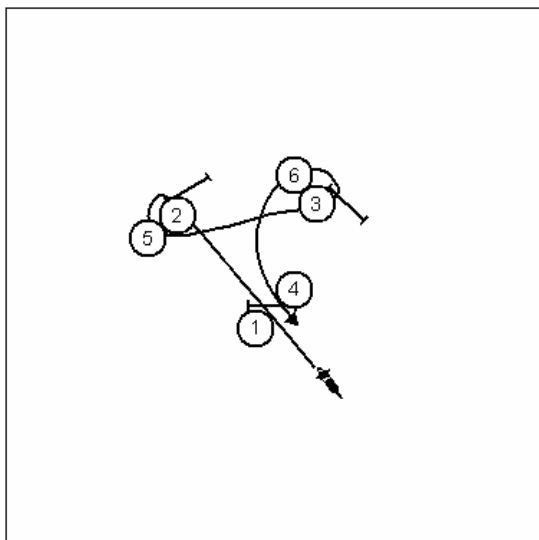
TAG POINT: Shoulders and hips are centered above each other. If the handler bumps his hip outwards, it can cause wide turns or even send his dog off course.

TAG POINT: While left foot is pushing off the ground during the actual turn, the handler uses his left arm to bring his dog around turn by placing the beam of the "magic flash light" six inches in front of his dog's nose.

TAG POINT: Handler uses peripheral vision to watch dog.

TAG POINT: While speeding up, handler uses his left arm to continue to signal the "magic flash light" beam six inches in front of the dog.

The game below is a great way to help your dog learn how to successfully execute pull turns. When clicking your dog for turning with you, reinforce with either tug or food to help keep your dog close and focused on you. If your dog swings wide or is not focused on you, pull turn execution is usually compromised.

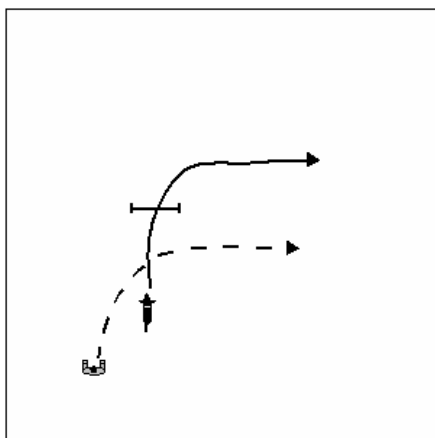


The diagram above shows the pattern of this exercise, start by only doing four obstacles and build up to #5 and #6. Play this game at your own risk because it can make you dizzy!

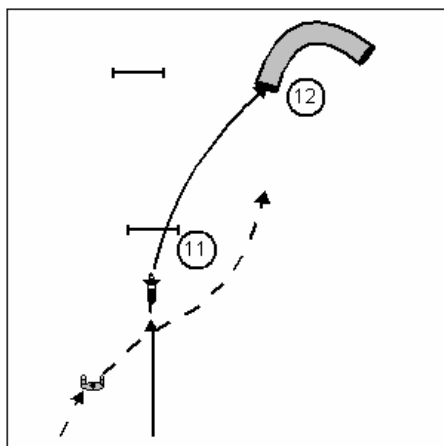
The pull turn game helped me tighten Nicki's wide floating pull turns. When I started playing this game with her, the jumps were 20-feet apart giving her plenty of room to turn. As she improved, I decreased the spacing until her path was only nine-feet from one jump to another.

Rear Cross

Also called cross behind or back cross, this move involves crossing behind your dog, so she is now on the opposite handling side.



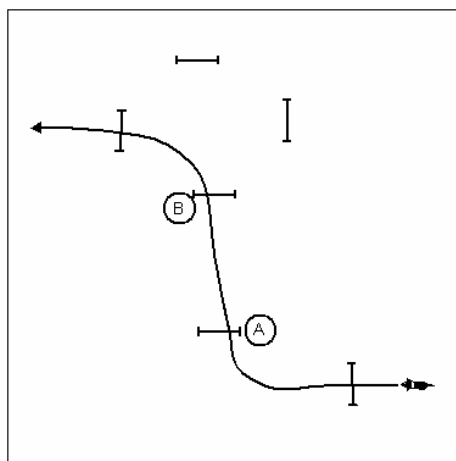
Above, the dog is traveling ahead of the handler on the handler's right, but ends up on the handler's left side. The purpose of a rear cross is to turn your dog. The dog turns when the handler performs the cross. Rear crosses are a fun way to communicate to your dog which obstacle you want her to take if she is facing options, as shown below.



The diagram above shows the effective use of a rear cross. Without the rear cross, the dog would probably continue to the off course jump straight ahead, because the handler was heading that way. By using a rear cross,

the handler clearly communicated that the next obstacle was the tunnel.

When rear crossing, keep your eyes on your dog. Moving into the path your dog just traveled on will signal to her that a rear cross is coming.

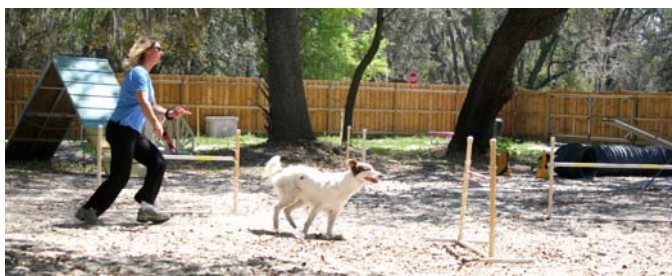


Assuming the dog is one obstacle ahead, as the handler reaches the upright marked A, he begins his rear cross moving toward the upright marked B. The moment the handler begins to step into his dog's path after A, an experienced dog understands that a rear cross is coming, allowing her to adjust her stride, change leads and perform the next obstacle.



Photos by Suzanne Rider

The beginning of the rear cross, Zoomie is on my left, my magic flash light signals his path and I am moving into his space, letting him know that I am going to rear cross.



Zoomie has landed on his left lead and turned, I am preparing to cross behind him as my magic flashlight continues to signal his path.



Zoomie has committed to the last jump. I am following through and continuing to move toward the jump he is ready to take.



The rear cross is complete and I am preparing to reinforce Zoomie with his toy.

TAG Points for Rear Cross

The TAG points below assume the dog is on the handler's left, at the beginning of the move, but ends with the dog on the handler's right. In order to perform a rear cross, the handler needs to be behind the dog. If the handler is even with or ahead of the dog, the handler will be unable to perform a rear cross unless he slows down or stops. In those cases, the dog will continue to move because the handler will signal the dog's path with the magic flashlight.

Lower Body

TAG POINT: Handler slows down — signaling to the dog that a change in direction is about to occur, knees are slightly bent, weight is on the balls of the feet.

TAG POINT: Handler steps into the path the dog has just traveled on.

TAG POINT: After the cross handler speeds up.

Upper Body

TAG POINT: Handler's left hand is low magic flashlight beam signaling six inches ahead of the dog's nose.

TAG POINT: As the handler crosses behind the dog, the handler's right hand follows through and continues to signal the magic flashlight beam in the direction of the next obstacle, shoulders support the arm movements and consistently indicate the path the dog is about to take.

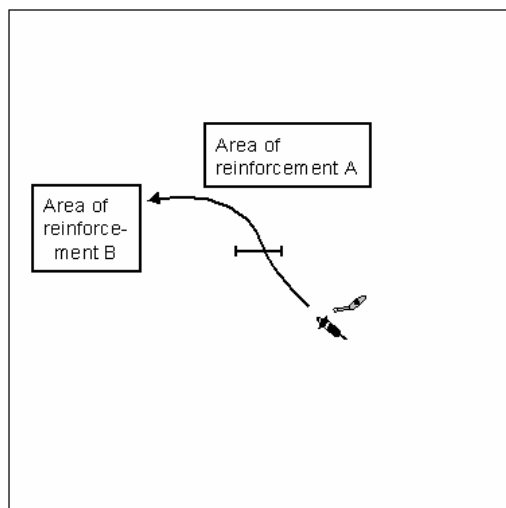
TAG POINT: Eyes on dog, peripheral vision on obstacles and dog's path.

Rear Cross Game

There are several games that teach dogs the rear cross. Before playing the rear cross game your dog must fluently perform the "go" cue, introduced in the Ground Games Chapter. Generally, in order for you to rear cross you will need your dog to be ahead of you, "go" helps you achieve that.

Performing lefts and rights on the flat as described in the Ground Games Chapter also prepares your dog for rear crosses. Finally, you can play two more games. The first introduces your dog to the hand signal that precedes you stepping into the path she has just traveled on and the second helps your dog learn your follow through on the landing side of the jump.

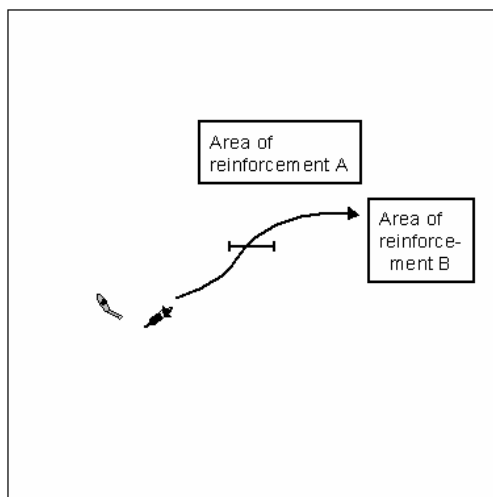
Pictured below are the two rear cross games.



The game begins with the dog on the handler's left, the handler signals the jump with his left hand aiming the

magic flashlight beam ahead of his dog at the jump, while saying “go”. The handler clicks as his dog commits to the jump and then tosses a toy or food tube forward to the area of reinforcement labeled A. Three repetitions help ensure that your dog will travel ahead of the handler to the jump, eventually allowing the handler to cross behind. This game should also help prompt your dog to accelerate and perform an obstacle that you are signaling as you are pairing the hand signal for the jump with the toy toss.

Providing you have had success with the first game, now you can raise criteria by adding the rear cross. As before signal the jump and cue your dog to go, but this time tuck in behind your dog indicating the rear cross. As your dog commits to the jump, change hands beginning to signal the magic flashlight beam with the right hand. The left hand holds the reinforcer which is seamlessly tossed to the area labeled B. If your dog spins, don't toss your reinforcement, go back to playing the rear cross on the flat game. Be sure that your dog is set at an angle asking her to slice the jump as this sets your dog up to land on the left lead. Again, you are pairing your hand signal, now with the right hand, with the toy toss.

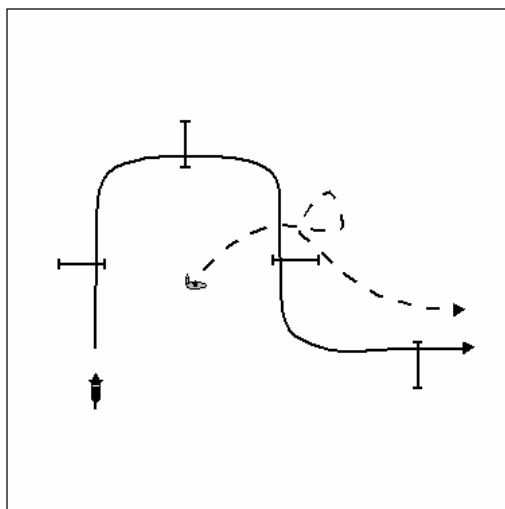


Above is the mirror image of the rear cross game. As always play all games off both sides of your body.

Front Cross

The front cross is also used to turn a dog. An advantage of a front cross is that it enables the handler to be ahead of his dog, or to get ahead of his dog, making it easy for his dog to understand where she is going because both the next obstacle and the handler are ahead of her. For less motivated dogs, trying to catch the handler can be a fun game. If you are less physically fit, or have a physical challenge, don't worry, you can still do front crosses. By teaching your dog to send ahead of you and work away from you at lateral distance, you will be able to front cross even if you can't run.

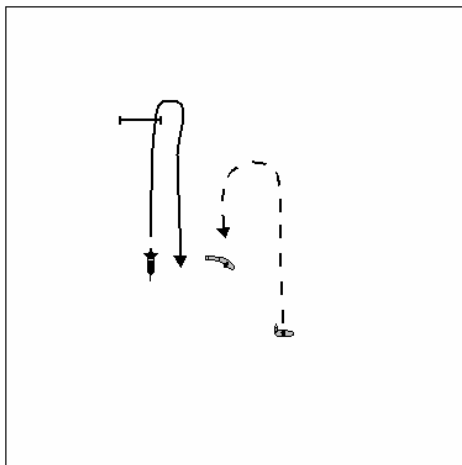
When ahead of the dog's path, the handler steps into and across the dog's path, rotating in front of the dog.



The path above is not exactly drawn as the handler will execute it: the loop is actually a tiny pivot. The cross point of the loop indicates the *location* of the front cross. The

footwork of the front cross creates a line that points in the direction the dog is to travel.

It is possible to front cross when you are even with or behind your dog if the course requires your dog to turn 180-degrees, as shown in the diagram below.



The above type of front cross is easy for beginners to practice on the flat. Even though it looks very different it is a front cross. The handler started with the dog on his left and ends with the dog on his right. The handler caused the turn by moving into and in front of the dog's path.

The pictures below show Zoomie and I performing a front cross. The front cross starts with Zoomie on my left and ends with him on my right.



Photos by Suzanne Rider

Zoomie is on my left taking the first jump, I am signaling for him to move laterally away from me to the second jump so I can get into position and front cross after the third jump.



As Zoomie commits to the second jump, I move to get into position to front cross.



As Zoomie commits to the third jump, I step into his path to start my rotation. My left arm continues to signal his path.



As Zoomie jumps the third jump, I am shifting weight from my left leg to my right, preparing to move my left leg out of Zoomie's path, otherwise you may lose a knee cap.



I have rotated 180-degrees while reaching back with my left leg to move off of Zoomie's path. I am following through with my right hand signaling Zoomie's path.



The front cross is complete, I am getting ready to reinforce Zoomie with his toy.

The actual footwork of the front cross, pictured above, is as follows: slow down on the left leg with knees bent and weight on the balls of the feet. Next, rotate on the left foot, stepping into the dog's path with the right foot. Finally, rotate on the right foot, stepping with the left foot in the direction the dog will be traveling. The right foot then follows through and also steps in the direction the dog will be traveling. Be sure to practice front crosses in both directions. Most people have better timing in one direction. Practice your "weaker" side twice as much as your "stronger" side.

Handler TAG Points for Front Cross

The TAG points below assume the dog is on the handler's left, at the beginning of the move, but after the handler completes his front cross rotation, the dog will be on his right.

Lower Body

TAG POINT: Handler decelerates to let the dog know a change in direction is coming, knees are soft and handler is on the balls of his feet.

TAG POINT: Handler's right foot steps into what will be the dog's path.

TAG POINT: Handler's left foot rotates counter clockwise moving in the direction the dog will be traveling.

TAG POINT: Handler's right foot follows through, signaling the next obstacle and direction the dog will be traveling.

Upper Body

TAG POINT: While handler is decelerating, left hand is "magic flashlight" signaling the dog's path.

TAG POINT: While handler is stepping into the dog with right foot, handler prepares to change "magic flashlight" from left to right hand.

TAG POINT: While handler is executing a reverse pivot counter clockwise, handler changes hands and starts signaling the "magic flashlight" with his right hand.

TAG POINT: As the handler's right foot follows through signaling the next obstacle, the handler's right hand "magic flashlight" also signals the next obstacle.

TAG POINT: Eyes on dog at all times, using peripheral vision to scan obstacles and dog's path.

The footwork of the front cross, if executed properly, should create a straight line. You can determine the line the front cross will be on by using a simple formula developed by Elicia Calhoun. While you perform the front cross, you will usually be moving between two obstacles. The upright of the first obstacle that is closest to you before you front cross, is point A. The upright of the obstacle that is closest to you when you end the front cross, is point B. The trick of a good front cross is to stay as close as you can to the B point and to perform your front cross on the line formed between point A and B.



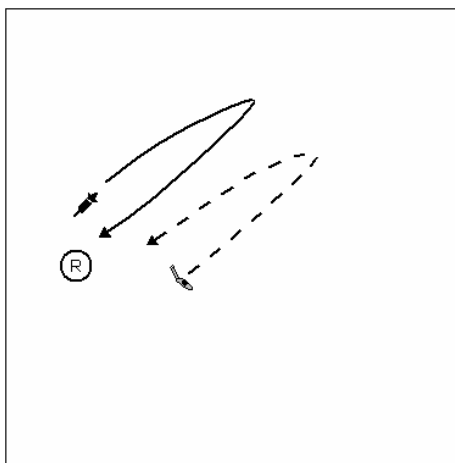
Photo by Suzanne Rider

Rubber spot markers indicate the A and B points, marker chalk, available at hardware supply stores can indicate the line the handler will be making the front cross on. The photo assumes the same path for the dog as the diagram and pictures above.

Point A is the first upright the handler will get to before he makes his front cross and point B is the first upright he will get to after he makes his front cross. The line is drawn from point A to B. Use this line to play a fun TAG point game. Have your coach give you a TAG for each front cross footfall that hits the line.

The Front Cross Game

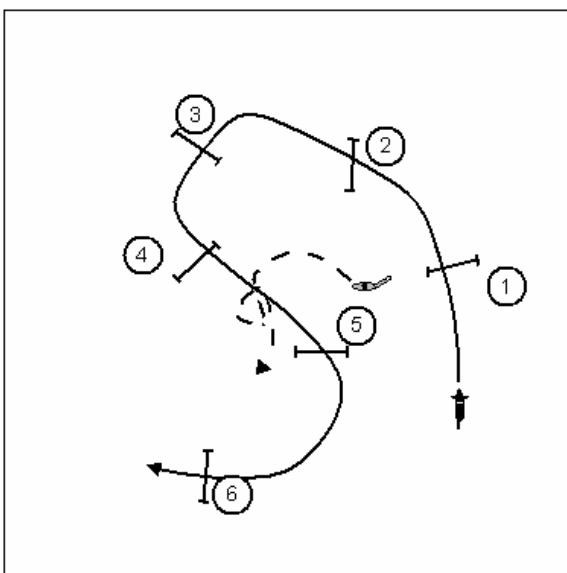
To teach your dog the front cross, begin by playing the running side by side game on the flat with no obstacles. While connected to your dog, do the front cross motion and call your dog's name, asking your dog to turn 180-degrees while rotating into you. Click your dog for turning into you. Then toss your toy as hard as you can to the area of reinforcement.



In the diagram above, the R in the circle represents the area of reinforcement.

This game teaches your dog that the step into her path signals a change in direction. Your dog will learn to dig in and cut in ahead of your path so that she can hurry up and get to her area of reinforcement. Click the turn and then toss your toy to the area of reinforcement so that your dog learns to accelerate out of the turn!

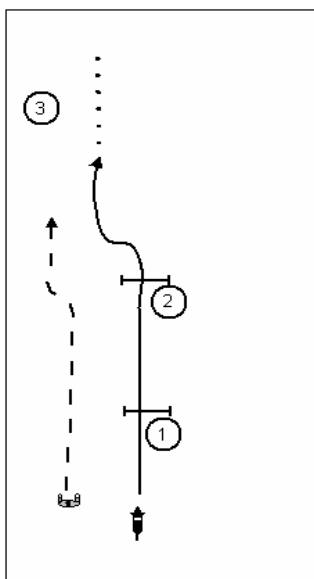
As you and your dog improve at front crosses, adding lateral distance will become extremely important. It is possible to send your dog over several obstacles laterally away from you while you cut the corner and perform a front cross. So, the “out” game will be of high importance in mastering front crosses.



Above the handler, without covering a lot of ground, has used lateral distance to send his dog out to #2 and #3, enabling a front cross between #4 and #5.

False Turn

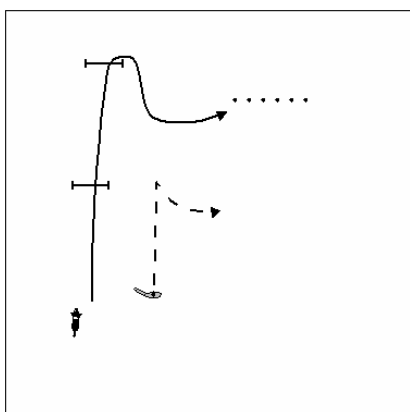
This move is one-half of a front cross; it is as if the handler were going to do a front cross, but then changed his mind. It enables the handler to place a kink in the dog's path. If a dog has to hit a tricky weave pole entrance, the handler can use a false turn to adjust the dog's path, helping the dog find the entrance to the poles.



By performing a false turn after #2 and before #3, the handler avoids a missed entry into the poles and a refusal fault. The dog now has a straight entry into the poles. The dog's path is kinked after #2 by the handler briefly rotating into the dog, when the dog has turned sufficiently to be aligned with the weave poles the handler rotates back, signaling the poles.

TAG Points for False Turn

The TAG points below assume the dog is on the handler's left. There is no change of side during this move.



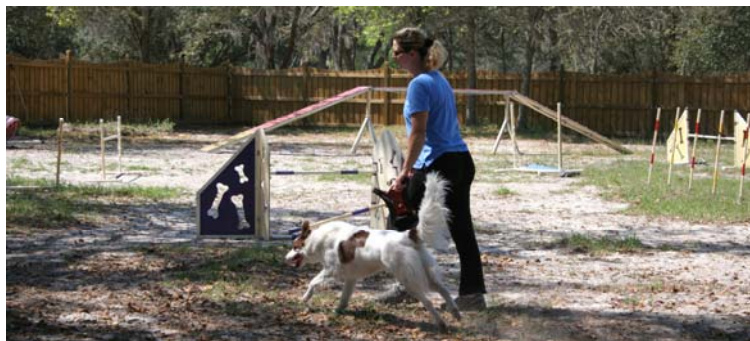
The handler appears to be engaging in a front cross but after pulling the dog and adjusting her path the dog is turned back to the original direction.

The handler can be parallel, slightly behind, or ahead of his dog to execute this move.



I have rotated into Zoomie to pull his head and body toward me. This helps me line him up for the weave poles.

Photos by Suzanne Rider



Having sufficiently kinked Zoomie's path I rotate back to the original direction and send him to the poles.

When using a false turn, decelerate and then hold your rotation depending on how tight a turn you need. For a tighter turn hold the position longer, for a tiny kink rotate for just a split second.

Lower Body

TAG POINT: The handler decelerates to let the dog know a change in direction is coming, knees are soft and he is on the balls of his feet.

TAG POINT: The handler's right foot steps into dog's path.

TAG POINT: The handler holds the previous TAG point for a split second waiting for the dog to respond.

TAG POINT: The handler's left foot steps forward pointing at next obstacle and handler begins to accelerate.

Upper Body

TAG POINT: As the handler slows down, his left arm continues to signal the dog's path with the "magic flashlight beam."

TAG POINT: The handler's left arm is lowered and held tight to the body (using triceps muscle) to avoid accidentally pushing the dog away from the handler.

TAG POINT: As the handler's right foot steps toward the dog, he switches the magic flash light from left hand to right hand and continues to use its beam to indicate the new path.

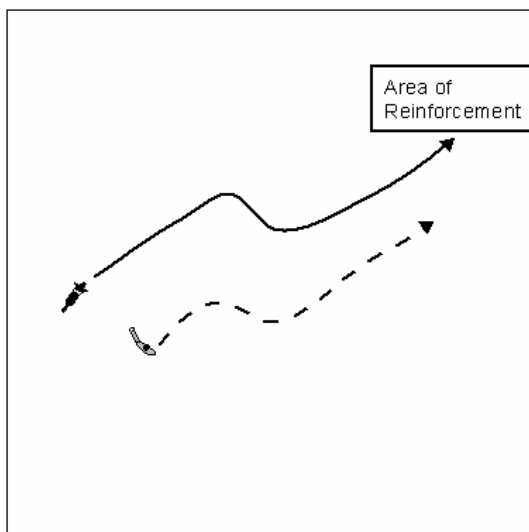
TAG POINT: As the handler's left foot is signaling the next obstacle, the left arm's magic flash light also points at this obstacle.

TAG POINT: Eyes on dog at all times, using peripheral vision to keep track of obstacles and dog's path.

False Turn Game

To maintain false turns, play plenty of front cross games. For dogs that enjoy performing the obstacles, playing the front cross game is critical in maintaining a good false turn. Dogs that like doing the obstacles will learn you are "crying wolf," if you do too many false turns without enough front crosses. The result is a handler who performs a false turn and a dog who ignores the move and continues driving to the next obstacle. Consistently playing the front cross game will get the dog thinking, "turn" and the redirect of the false turn will be easy. Be sure to always click the turn and reinforce in the area of reinforcement.

For clingy dogs that don't want to come off the handler, play the false turn game on the flat without any obstacles running side by side, begin rotating into your dog as if performing a front cross, then change your mind and after kinking your dog's path, turn back to the original direction. Click your dog for kinking and turning with you, then toss your toy to the area of reinforcement pictured below.



The opposite of clingy dogs that don't want to turn away from the handler are dogs like my Nicki. These dogs figure it is even faster if you avoid kinking your path in the first place, so when you false turn they tend to ignore the handlers attempt to kink the path and keep running full speed. These dogs are more reinforced by running fast and doing obstacles, then by turning or focusing on the handler.

Nicki is a very obstacle-focused dog and rather than playing the false turn game, I play lots of front cross games with her. When training, I frequently perform a front cross where I will be performing a false turn just to help keep her focused on me. I click and reinforce for turning with me, so I can build up a larger handler-focus bank account to

balance the obstacle focus she naturally brings to agility. After front crossing, reinforce these dogs with tug or by tossing the toy behind you from in between your legs to encourage handler-focus.

The Dog's Path

A great way to practice handler-focus is to play the 'alphabet soup handling' game. This game teaches you to focus on handling your dog's *path* rather than the obstacles. This is easy because the game does not include obstacles. When handling a dog around a course, your focus *ought* to be on the path you intend your dog to take, rather than on the obstacles. Use powdered chalk to spell letters on the field, such as O, L, V, M, U, N, W, Z, C, L and M.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

Using marker chalk you can spell giant letters in the grass.

The goal is for the handler to indicate to his dog the path determined by the powdered chalk letter marked in the grass. Experiment to learn which handling moves direct your dog to travel on the chalk line path.

Alternately, you can play this game without marking the grass. The handler picks a letter, handles it path with the dog and the other students guess what the letter is.

Each completed stride of your dog while traveling on the chalk line can be a TAG. This game will teach you how to visualize and handle your dog's path. If you click and reinforce your dog for turning with you, you are using the game to create wonderful handler-focus.

Proofing the Handling Moves

Proof your handling moves with the proofing games you've already read about and others you developed. The only difference is that you are asking your training partner to create distractions while you are performing the handling moves and your dog is responding to your handling. As with all other training, your handling moves are not fully trained until your dog can respond to them, even while you are playing proofing games.

Potential TAG Point Challenges

While TAGTeaching is a great way to help students learn, you can encounter challenges.

What happens if the handler never does the movement the coach is waiting to TAG? A TAG point should be easily attainable in two to three tries. If the handler can't perform the TAG point, lower criteria by taking one step back in the process of shaping the behavior.

What if you want to TAG for more than one handling behavior at a time? Build a behavior chain with one TAG point at a time. If you are working on a rear cross, start with setting TAG points for the handler's feet. Once the lower body behavior is established, focus on the behaviors of the upper body, one at a time. When you have the entire rear cross behavior the coach can set a new TAG point that addresses the timing of the rear cross. The key TAG point in handling moves will always be the positioning of the handler's arm, as that will enable ideal connection and help the handler with the timing of the move.

What if your training partner or student doesn't like the idea of being coached via TAGTeaching? You have several options. Experiment with different types of reinforcement. Have a bystander drop chocolates in a box for every TAG, or use something else that the learner wants. Have your partner observe TAGging in action and see the results. The results are generally impressive. Even if the learner

doesn't like the process, he will like the result. Ask the learner to become the coach and TAG you. If you experiment with all this and your partner still does not like TAGging, accept your training partner's choice. Clicker training and TAG teaching are about reinforcing voluntary behaviors. No force, just fun!

Peripheral Vision

Peripheral vision is key to handling. Improve your peripheral vision skills while driving a car. Too often, when we are behind the wheel, we watch the road paying little attention to what we see in our peripheral vision. We can drive more defensively and improve our agility handling by engaging our peripheral vision, using it to gather information about the other cars and the environment around us. Using this skill will help you handle more effectively and maintain connection with your dog.

Other ideas to improve your peripheral vision:

- Maintaining a soft focus — the more you hone in on an agility obstacle or any other detail, the less you will see your dog in your peripheral vision.
- Scanning — or keeping your line of sight moving across the area in front of you. If you allow your eyes to settle on one spot, you are likely to lose your peripheral vision. Practice scanning while watching sports on TV. Keep your eye on the ball without moving your head.
- Looking straight ahead and using your left and right hand to determine the boundaries of your side vision — is a great way to establish a baseline for your peripheral vision. You can then use this exercise to stretch that boundary by moving your hands back in small increments.



Standing in this position, raising and lowering the arms while wiggling your fingers, you can improve your peripheral vision. Use this training to help you keep track of your dog in the agility ring.

Photo by Angelica Steinker

Does Your Dog Know This Move?

If your dog is already agility trained, consider the following. Many handling moves can be intuitive to your dog. If you raise your arm, most dogs will move away from you and if you lower your arm, most dogs will move toward you. If you use a new handling move and your dog responds to it as you intended, you might assume your dog has learned the new move. For example a handler may rear cross and the dog may guess that this move means to change leads and turn the other way. If the handler does not repeatedly click and reinforce the turn and change of leads, however, the dog may not actually *learn* that she should turn because of the rear cross. Soon this dog is spinning on every rear cross and the handler is frustrated, because he thought the dog “knew” this move.

If you accidentally skipped the steps of teaching your dog your handling moves, it is likely that your dog may not be able to respond to them in a trial situation. To prevent the problem of your dog “guessing” what a handling move may mean, play the handling games, click and reinforce your dog for responding.

Another potential problem is that your dog may know the move but the information has not been generalized to other contexts — other agility equipment, other places and

so on. Playing proofing games while performing handling moves should help resolve this issue.

A great way to find out whether your dog understands a handling move is to use obstacle discriminations, situations when your dog has a choice of taking one of two or more obstacles. Faced with the option of two obstacles, your dog must rely on your body movements to communicate which of the two to take. Experiment and find out what responses your handling moves get from your dog, then adjust your training accordingly.

Try running silently. Release your dog with “okay” and run a sequence without any verbal cues. This will show you if your dog is “listening” to your handling moves. If you are turned one way and your dog went another you know you need to work on handler-focus.

Another way to proof handling moves is to leave toys lying all over the training area. These toys, people standing around, noises and so on will help you verify that your dog understands your body and verbal handling cues and will pay attention in many different circumstances.

Now strip out your body cues. Stand still and experiment to see if your dog understands her verbal cues of left and right. Ideally, she will be able to perform the left and right cues without any body cues from you. When proofing my Border Collie Nicki on left and right I noticed that she was turning according to my head tilts. After I faded that, she was cueing off my eyes. If I looked left she turned left, if I looked right she turned right. I decided not to fade that and so make sure I look in the direction that I want her to go!

New Handling Move Game

Whether you are learning your first handling move or adding a new one, train yourself and your dog. First, create a plan. Then, practice it without your dog. Once

you are comfortable doing the move dog-less, to both the left and the right, invite your dog to join in the fun.

Suggested training plan for a new handling move:

1. Create a list of TAG points for the move.
2. Have your coach TAGTeach you the move without a dog; do it at a walk, then a jog and then a run.
3. Do the new move with agility equipment around you.
4. Perform the move with your dog on the flat with no agility equipment.
5. Do the move with your dog using only one jump.
6. Put it all together; the new move, your dog and an agility sequence with equipment.

The goal is to help you commit the move to your muscle memory, performing the move without thinking, before ever adding the equipment or your dog into the equation. By training new handling moves using approximations, you can be sure that both of you understand the handling move.

Verbal Cues

Verbal cues are used for the start line sit or down, release, directionals and obstacle performance. The cue “sit” places your dog in the duration sit position; the cue “okay” releases her. The cues “left” and “right” cue your dog to turn to her left and right, enabling her to see the next obstacle. The “look” cue is a directional indicating your dog should look behind her and “go” to run straight and take what she sees. The remaining verbal cues are for obstacle performance.

Body Overshadows Verbal

As descendants of predators, dogs are genetically wired to smell and see. This means that for most dogs your body cue will overshadow your verbal cue. I suggest not spending a whole lot of time on training body independent

verbal cues, other than left, right, go and look. This way if you accidentally run to an incorrect position on course, you can use a well-timed verbal cue to repair your mistake.

Ideally, verbal cues are given as your dog commits to the previous obstacle. If your dog is performing a sequence of jump, tire, jump, tunnel, the verbal cues would be “jump”, then as your dog commits to that jump, “tire”, then as your dog commits to the tire, “jump” and when your dog commits to the third jump the cue “tunnel”. Depending on the complexity of the course, it may be necessary to give cues even earlier and to stack them.

TAG training can help handlers with the timing of cues. Rather than using the TAG for a TAG point, the coach can say “now” to prompt the handler to give the verbal cue. Only an experienced agility handler will be able to accurately time this prompt. Unlike dogs, handlers don’t become prompt dependent, because the achievement of ideal timing is self-reinforcing. Timely cues will cause the dog to run smoothly without slowing, spinning, or having to check in with you because she does not know where to go. Most handlers are reinforced by this.

Your dog’s name can also be a handling cue, for both an emergency recall, or to create a head check. A head check is when your dog maintains her path of travel but turns her head toward you. Head checks are a great way of handling obstacle discriminations. If you cue your dog to momentarily turn her head toward you while she continues to move, she never sees the obstacle that you don’t want her to take. Use part of your dog’s name to get a head check and your dog’s entire name to get a recall. For my dog Turbo, my head check signal is “Tur” and my recall is “Turbo.”

To train a head check, give the cue while running side by side with your dog. Having played the name game, this will prompt your dog to look at you. Click the head check

and reinforce with food or tug. This method first prompts and then captures the head check.

Head Check Addiction

Warning! Once you have trained the head check, it can become addictive. When running a fast dog, it can be tempting to give the head check cue frequently, to slow your dog down and allow you time to think. Abandon this strategy, because running as fast as possible is part of your dog's fun. Train both yourself and your dog to compete well at speed. Only use the head check to prevent off courses or to let your dog know a change in direction is coming.

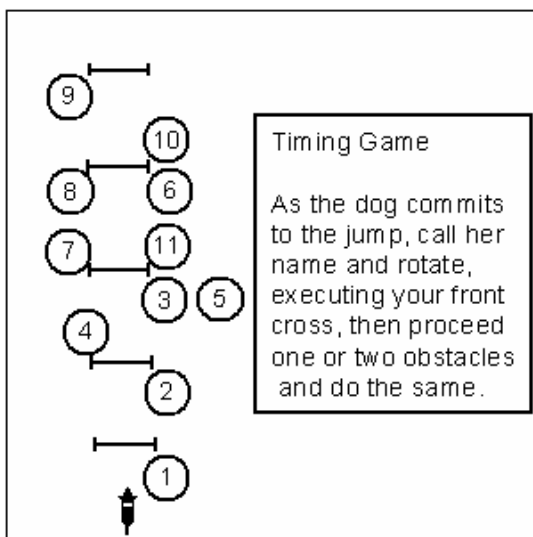
Name Recall

A fun way to reinforce recalls is to cue your dog to "back" and, once your dog is 15 to 20-feet away, call her name and click for running towards you and then reinforce with food or tug when she gets to you. You can even reinforce behind you to create speed for moving toward you.

You can also use your dog's name as an emergency recall. If a dog gets loose and runs onto the field while you are running, or if you have accidentally sent your dog to the incorrect obstacle, you can use your dog's name to recall your dog to you.

Timing Game

Chris Parker recommends handlers play this game to improve their timing. Build a jump chute with eight-foot spacing between jumps. If you are less experienced at this game or at timing your cues ideally, you may want to start with 12-foot spacing. The larger the spacing the more "time" you have and the easier it is to succeed. With tighter spacing, your cues need to be much faster. Perform the sequence, (shown below), using front crosses. The goal is to keep your dog turning tight and to prevent wrong courses.



As dog commits to jump, slow down, call name and execute front cross. Travel one or two obstacles in the opposite direction before again calling, front crossing and turning your dog back again. Because of the design of this exercise all front crosses will be pulling the dog around the respective uprights and then sending her in the opposite direction.

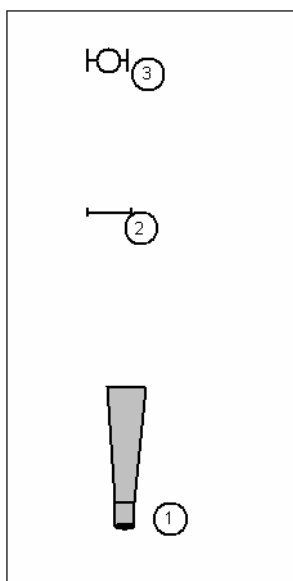
In order to ideally time your front crosses, slow down and then call your dog's name the moment your dog commits to the obstacle, (two front feet in the air), before the turn. Your coach can prompt you by saying "now". Timing is a physical skill so you can practice your timing by playing video games.

As well as practicing your timing to improve your handling, start noticing the common obstacle patterns in the competition ring. Use these patterns to train and prepare your handling for competition.

Common Agility Course Patterns

Rhonda Carter explains that a simple way to look at course design is to chunk sections of the course into familiar sequences. All courses are made using a combination of lines, pinwheels, serpentines, boxes and zig zag patterns. Some courses include all of the patterns, others only a few.

Lines

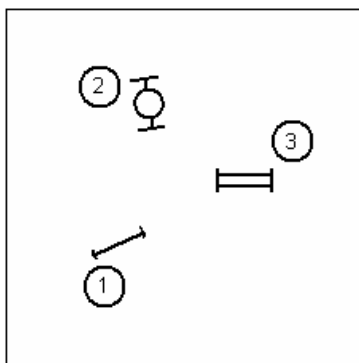


The diagram at left shows a line of obstacles. Lines can be very slightly offset and still be taken as a straight line by the dog. Obstacles offset more than slightly will require handling moves to ensure that the dog will take the obstacle. This is especially true if the dog is young and inexperienced.

Evaluate how many obstacles you can take in a straight line if you start alongside your dog. At what point will your dog get too far ahead and start curling back toward you? Use this data to establish handling strategies. If I know that my dog will curl after three obstacles and we are facing a line of five, I know I will need to use a handling move, such as a rear cross, to tell my dog to keep traveling straight for the last two obstacles. Without that handling move, I can predict that your dog will curl away from an obstacle back toward you and incur a refusal fault.

Pinwheels

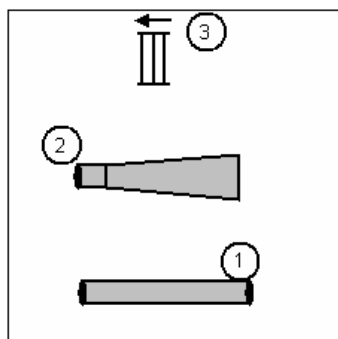
The diagram at right shows a pinwheel. Even if the obstacles, angles or spacing vary, the pinwheel concept is the same. Use different obstacles, angles and spacing in training to create pinwheels, so your dog learns to recognize this pattern.



Establish where your feet need to be and what pinwheel handling strategy works best for you and your dog. Know the spot you need to run to and turn if you are using a pull turn. Which handling move gets you the best results? Practice pin wheels with pull turns, rear crosses, front crosses and false turns so you know how each option works for you and your dog.

Serpentines

In the diagram at right, the three obstacles create a serpentine. Even though both dog and handler may be used to seeing the traditional three jump serpentines, it is important to recognize this type of sequence and to implement a handling plan accordingly.



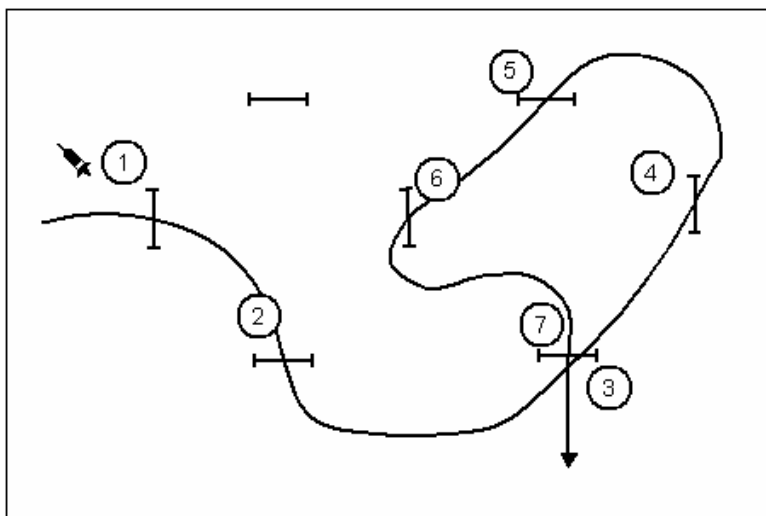
Which serpentine handling strategy works best for you and your dog? Experiment, evaluate and choose. Be sure to gather data on how you handle serpentines when you are

ahead of, alongside, or behind your dog and off either side of your body.

Box Games

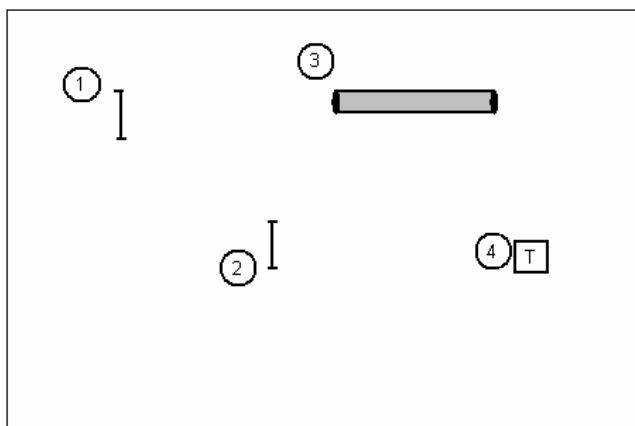
Setting up a box of obstacles creates an array of challenges. Not only does it present options, but also 90-degree turns, 180-degree turns, 270-degree turns and threadles.

A threadle, also called a pull through, refers to two obstacles next to each other that are performed in the same direction. In the diagram below, jump #6 and #7 are a threadle. The dog will jump #6 and then be pulled back through the gap between the two jumps to jump #7.



Pictured above is Greg Derrett's training exercise called the double box. This set up allows you to practice, 90-degree turns, 180-degree turns, 270-degree turns and threadles. #1-2 is a 90-degree turn. #2-3 is a 180-degree turn. #4-5 is a 270-degree turn and #6-7 is a threadle.

Zig Zags



The diagram above depicts a zig zag pattern. This pattern is easily completed with rear crosses or, if the handler is fast, front crosses.

These five sequence patterns are predictable in the sense they will be part of the courses you run in competition. If you develop a handling plan off each side of your body, for each of the patterns and for when you are ahead, even with, or behind your dog then you will have designed your own successful method of handling. Congrats! Your dog will be able to anticipate what is to come because your handling system clearly tells her.

Handle at Your Dog's Speed

When learning how to handle, the main problem is that it all happens so fast! Just as it can be tempting to use your head checking cue more than you need to, you may also unconsciously delay your cues in an attempt to slow your dog down. Resist the temptation! Instead, over-prepare by pretending that you are running a dog that is even faster than your dog. When you can call your cues and signal your handling moves at the speed of the pretend dog, you know you are ready to go into the ring.

Course Analysis

At an agility competition, competitors are given a copy of the courses they will be running that day. Analyzing this course map to plan your handling strategy is a key to success. Begin with penciling in the path you want your dog to take. Then, using your dog's path as your reference, begin penciling in your own path. You can collect course copies by requesting them from your instructor or agility friends. Most competitors collect course maps.

AKC

The AKC (American Kennel Club) offers two titling classes for agility dogs. Titling means your dog is able to achieve titles (certificates entitling your dog to have initials added before or after her registered name). The Standard class includes the contact obstacles and a table, while the Jumpers with Weaves class includes only jumps, tunnels and weave poles. AKC offers three levels of agility Novice (for beginners), Open and Excellent. For more information visit the AKC website at www.AKC.org.

NADAC

NADAC stands for the North American Dog Agility Council. NADAC emphasizes safety and flow in their courses. There are no tables in NADAC classes. NADAC offers three levels of agility: Novice, Open and Elite. Trials usually offer a Standard and Gamblers combined course. Jumpers, Tunnelers, Weavers and Touch and Go may also be offered. Jumpers is a course of all jumps with an occasional tunnel. Tunnelers is a course of tunnels and Weavers is mostly weave poles, and some tunnels. Touch and Go is tunnels and contact obstacles. For some of the NADAC games all competitors run the same course, but the time allowed to run the course is shortened with each progressive level.

NADAC is tremendously popular in some parts of the country and not available in other parts. For additional information on NADAC, go to www.NADAC.com.

USDAA

The United States Dog Agility Association (USDAA) is one of the oldest American agility organizations. USDAA also offers three levels of agility: Starters/Novice, Advanced and Masters. USDAA classes are Standard, Jumpers, Gamblers, Snooker and Pairs relay. Jumpers is a course of mostly or all jumps. The Gamblers class contains an element of handling your dog at a distance. Snooker is a strategy game that emphasizes the handler's control of his dog. Pairs relay is a fun class that involves two dogs and two handlers, one running the first part of the course and the second dog and handler team running the second half. The website for USDAA is www.usdaa.com.

Other Agility Organizations

In addition to these three major organizations, other organizations offer agility competitions. Canine Performance Events (CPE) is a new agility organization that seems to be gaining rapid popularity. The United Kennel Club (UKC) offers agility with some different obstacles and a strong emphasis on control. Just for Fun is an agility organization started by Bud Houston that emphasizes fun. Bud is also involved in Tea Cup Agility, which is for small dogs only. For more information on any of these organizations, check the Appendix.

Course Walk Through

At competitions the judge allows time for handlers to walk the course and plan their strategy. You will need to memorize the course, focusing on segments by lumping obstacles into the constellations discussed in this book helps. Determine the ideal path for your dog to take. Get down to her level of sight. Evaluate what your dog will see and use that information to plan your dog's path.

Your dog's path will determine where she needs to turn. For each turn in your dog's path, ask yourself which handling move (pull turn, rear cross, front cross, or false turn) you will use. The game is on: do your best to execute your handling plan while smiling!

Handling Seminars

Handling is about consistent communication with your dog. There are many handling styles out there. Serious damage can be done to your dog's ability to understand your handling language if you train with people that teach different styles. Find a handling style that makes sense to you and is compatible with what your dog knows and stick with it.

Flow

The concept of flow, or zoning, in sport psychology is used to describe a mental state of intense focus. Activities done when in the "zone" are self-reinforcing. Flow is fun! Dogs also experience a similar state when engaged in an activity that they are accomplishing with great fluency. This flow is self-reinforcing to a dog as it is to a handler. For dogs that are highly reinforced by doing agility, well-timed cues by the handler can maintain behavior chains with high fluency. The release and the first obstacle cue becomes the reinforcement for the duration sit at the start line, the release off the contact becomes the reinforcement for going into the 2020NT position and so on.

Even if your dog is not crazed by doing agility, but was clicker trained, properly timed cues will be reinforcing. Because of classical conditioning, your cues have become associated with good stuff — they have become positively reinforcing.

In *Don't Shoot the Dog*, Karen Pryor uses the example of how kids love to hear a recess bell ring because it signals that fun is about to begin. With proper training, any cue you give your dog will have the same effect, providing you

don't poison your cue by using negative reinforcement or punishment. If you give your dog a cue, and then yell at your dog or give your dog leash corrections to comply, you have poisoned that cue. Research in behavior analysis shows that cues taught to dogs using positive reinforcement prompt a happy attitude. Cues taught with negative reinforcement prompt stress. Interestingly when a cue that was taught using negative reinforcement is repeatedly given after a positively trained cue the stress responses begin to occur after the positively trained cue is given. The previously happy cue predicts the "poisoned" cue.

Precise, accurate handling is both a science and an art, and there are many things that you can do to improve your handling. Timing is a physical skill, so if it isn't as fast as you want it to be, keep practicing. With practice your timing will improve.

Just in case I have not said it enough, the most important thing to focus on is giving clear and consistent body cues. Only then, can your dog run both clean and fast. Agility is a blast — enjoy the journey of learning to handle!

