

Teaching Movement

– by Bud Houston
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We rely on the simple proposition that most dogs already understand how we move. When you bring a young dog into your house within only a few weeks that dog has you completely figured out. He knows which direction you are going, and how fast you're moving to get there. He can tell when you've changed directions.

Given that the dog has been a student of your movement, really without any collaboration or intended teaching on your part, a case can be made that our natural movement is intuitive to the dog. This is an important realization. We already have natural movement to give, intuitive to the dog. Why would our movement change because we are doing agility?

The lexicon used to describe agility movement is unsettled. Around the United States, and around the world, agility enthusiasts use different terms to describe handler movements. I'm dedicated to settling everyone down to one rational system... mine.

A Word or Two Aside

Movement is a separate issue from training the dog to perform the obstacles. Sometimes training the handler to move is a more difficult task than training the dog to do the obstacles. But both are tasks upon which the dog's trainer must embark. We seek perfect movement in the handler. At the same time we strive to train the dog to perfect performance. One without the other will have the team out of balance and not ready for competition.

The most elegant movement is wasted if unattended by the dog. You should be keen to remind your students that at the heart of every movement the handler has a "job" to do. The handler's first obligation is to do his job. The movement takes shape in the context of doing that job.

Movements are of two essential types, fast dog and slow dog, or pushing and pulling. What is the real difference in handling a fast dog, and handling a slow dog? With a fast dog the handler is more likely to be behind the dog, and pushing. With a slow dog the handler is likely to be in front, and pulling. To be sure, most dogs truly are not fast dogs, and most dogs are not slow dogs. Most handlers should have both kinds of movements in the handling repertoire.

The Laws of Dogs in Motion

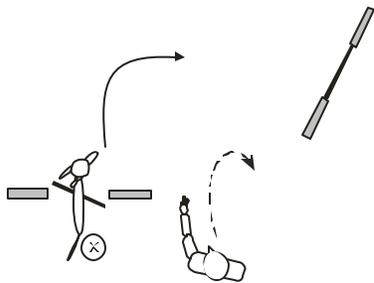
- ? The dog turns when the handler turns
- ? The dog adopts a path parallel to the handler's path
- ? The dog gets his speed cue from the handler's speed
- ? The dog gets his direction cue from the handler's shoulders, toes, hips, and movement
- ? A dog ahead of the handler tends to curl back to the handler's position

It seems silly to speak of science when, if you think about it, agility is a game we play in the park on the weekends with our dogs. Yet if we observe the science of dogs in motion and understand the implications of these Laws, our capacity for understanding the affect of our own motion on the dog's motion is enhanced; our chances for success in competition increased.

Notice that each of the laws of dogs in motion is correlated to the handler's motion. Agility is a dance, in which the handler leads and the dog follows. Nearly all errors on course are errors by the handler and are errors in the handler's movement. I've never approved of a handler blaming a dog for something that happens on course because it is better than a 9 out of 10 chance that the handler caused the error. Understanding the laws of dogs in motion will help us improve our handling and be an effective leader for the dog on course.

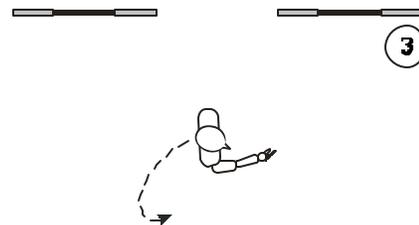
The dog turns when the handler turns

This is an awesome and important revelation in agility handling. What we do with our body is ten times more compelling to the dog than what we do with our voice. The great handler speaks with his movement first, and uses verbal cues only as confirmation to the dog.

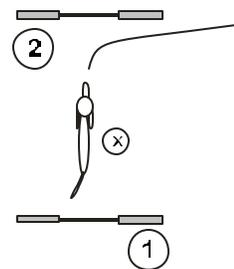


Most dropped bars are caused by handler error. In this illustration the handler begins his turn from the first jump to the next when the dog arrives at the spot marked "X." This causes the dog to change his feet up in the air, and to drop the bar. This is a matter of handler discipline. The handler should not begin the turn until the dog is committed up and over the jump. Do you want the perfectly timed turn? Who doesn't!

The handler should look to the dog for the cue to begin any turn. At a jump the perfect timing for the turn is at some point after the dog has reached the apex of his jump. Anything before that is early. And frankly, depending on whether goes the course, anything after that might be late.

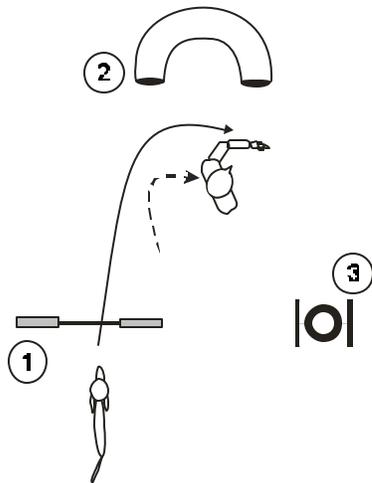


This illustration shows an error common in the crossing turn. The handler actually begins the turn well before the dog arrives at jump #2. Consequently, the dog never actually arrives at jump #2. The dog turns, when the handler turns. The dog has earned a refusal.



So where should the "X" be. Where is the spot at which, when the dog arrives, the handler should begin the turn?

This is very easy to figure out. Draw a line describing the dog's path. When the line turns, that is the exact position at which the handler should begin his own turn.

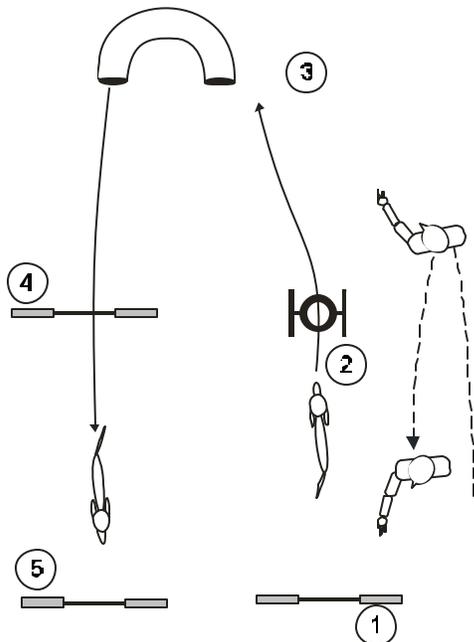


Refusals are almost always caused by misdirected movement by the handler. Oddly, one of the obstacles most likely to earn a refusal on course is the pipe tunnel. Here's an obstacle that has no bars to drop, and no contacts to miss, but it NQs as many dogs as any jump or contact obstacle. Do you know what it means when the judge holds up one fist? It means, thank you very much for your money, you will not qualify today.

The handler should always work through commitment. That means we continue to work in the direction of the obstacle, we continue to face the obstacle, we hold back the turn, until the dog is committed. Commitment, in terms of the pipe tunnel means that the dog is in it. I often, somewhat wryly, chide my students. "Work to the entry! Not the exit!" Actually, the handler is obligated to show the dog the entry to the pipe tunnel. He'll find the exit by himself.

The dog adopts a path parallel to the handler's path

This is a simple concept. A dog will tend to work parallel to the handler. This is true regardless of the distance apart the dog and handler are working. Admittedly, novice dogs will tend to tuck in to the handler's position. This is partly due to their insecurity in being away from the handler. And it is partly due to the dog not having been taught the "mission" of obstacle performance.



In this illustration the handler is using the parallel path concept to do a bit of simple "layering." Layering is when the handler works the dog apace, putting obstacles that aren't to be performed between his path and his dog's path.

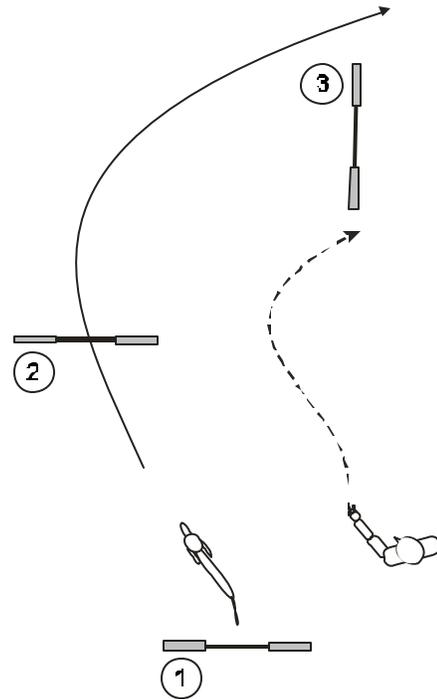
There are a couple of reasons the handler might do this. Following jump #5 we might have a tricky kind of turn to the dog's left for which the handler has a compelling interest in having a "control" position. By layering the sequence the handler saves himself a half dozen steps or so. This might also be a simple scenario for a distance challenge in a Gamblers' class, as played in the USDAA or in NADAC.

Note that for the dog to actually work in a path parallel to the handler, the handler should establish a path to which the dog may work. This means the handler should be in motion. The worst thing the handler could do in this scenario is come to a stop, face the wrong direction, and flap his arms.

The implications of a dog working in a path parallel to the handler have implications beyond layering, and gamblers' exercises. This illustration shows a common error in handling movement.

The handler is working through the first two jumps in a line that is about 10' away from the dog's position. Yet, out of the turn he pulls around and comes up right next to the wing of jump #3. What he's done is actually push the dog out around the jump by applying pressure against the dog's path. The dog, working parallel, continues to hold the 10' space separating him from the handler, and runs around the jump the handler intended to present, incurring a refusal penalty.

Being mindful of the law suggesting that the dog works in a path parallel to the handler, the handler should be aware of the distance at which he is working from his dog, and respectfully maintain that distance in order to properly direct the dog. In this illustration, the handler should have pulled his turn about 5' short of jump #3 so that the dog is presented, in a parallel path, with the center of the bar.



The dog gets his speed cue from the handler's speed

For most dogs, the handler is the pace setter. If the handler walks, the dog will walk. If the handler runs, the dog will run. Think about it this way, if the handler sets the pace for the team, why should the handler ever set a slow pace? It's important to understand that the handler's motion might not be constant on a course. If the course gives long straight lines, the handler is obligated to run like hell. However, in tightly turning situations, the handler should slow down the pace just enough for the dog to handle the challenges in a controlled fashion.

The handler should play "chase and reward" games with the dog during training. That is, the handler runs while generally cavorting and whooping it up, and ends a sequence with a game with a toy or the toss of a ball. We want to give the dog the idea that agility is a running game with lots of fun and reward. Obviously, we'll also want to avoid using aversive or harsh corrections when our objective is joy and speed and a sense of fun.

There is a dog of a type that some handlers should be aware. This type of dog tends to get discouraged if the handler gets too far ahead. He'll slow down to a trot, or even come to a complete stop if the separation becomes too great, as though to say, "What's the use?" For this dog the handler should make judicious use of real estate. A good example is a strategic movement called a Scoop. When the dog goes into a pipe tunnel, the handler will hide himself near the exit. At approximately the instant the dog emerges from the tunnel the handler will take off running in the direction of the course. The handler has conserved real estate so that he can be nearby the dog, and running, rather than far down field, possibly slowing down or stopping altogether.