

K N O W L E D G E

EQUALS SPEED

By Dawn Weaver

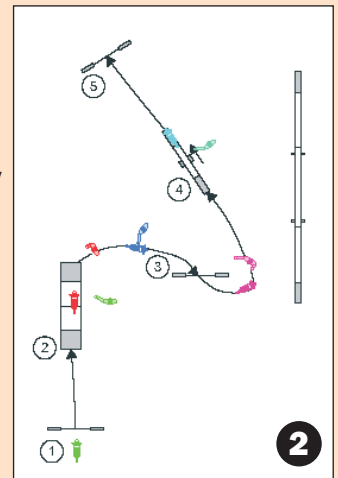


Crufts Singles at Tunbridge Wells

This class was judged by Lee Gibson and I thought I would review it with knowledge equals speed in mind.

I think this is one of the best courses I have seen for a long time. This is because I feel it was a test requiring many different skills including obstacle discrimination, stride regulation, varied contact skills, speed, and good handling. So many courses these days apparently lack imagination in what they test. Does a judge believe he has tested a skill by the time the handler and dog have achieved, say, 5 pull-throughs? Does he really need 5 pull-throughs to test that skill? Judges seem to think that Grade 6/7 courses must be difficult so include these regularly, often to the exclusion of any other handling manoeuvre. Lee's course was difficult but without a single pull-through in sight and more importantly, it flowed for the dog. My dogs really enjoyed running this course.

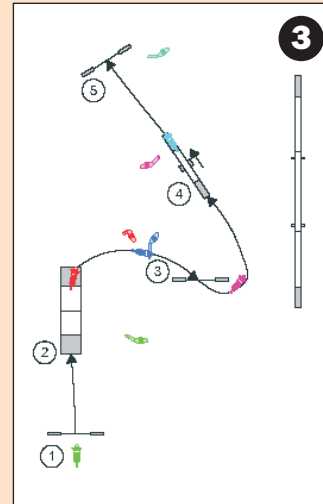
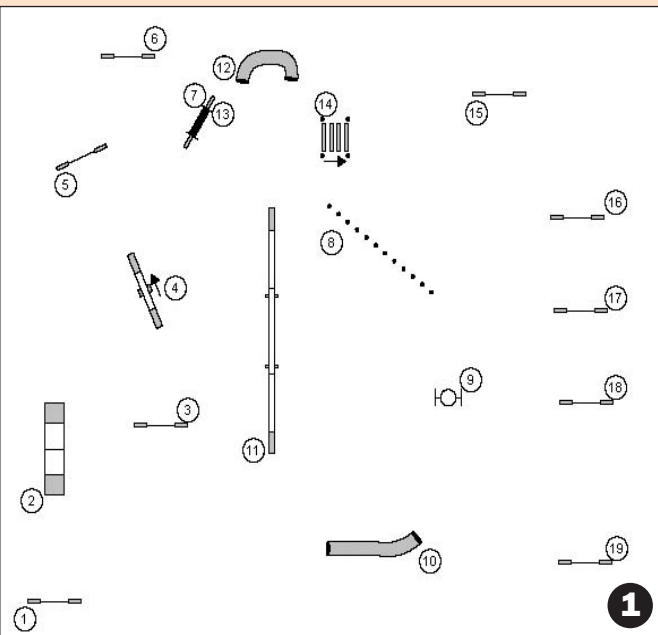
Let's look at this course in detail. Obstacle numbers 1 to 4 looked pretty straightforward. Handlers commanded their dogs to 'Wait', went roughly halfway past the A-frame and recalled, then performed a front cross at the base of the A-frame and another front cross on the wing of number 3 so they handled the see-saw with their dog on the left, as shown right.



This worked well on the whole but if you look at the handler's position in relation to the dog's in Diagram 2, you will see that the dog ends up more or less level with the handler from the bottom of the A-frame onwards. This wasn't a problem until jump 6 which had to be done from the far side. As you can imagine, quite a few dogs took number 6 from the wrong side. The problem was mainly caused by the handler being slightly behind the dog on the see-saw after doing the double front cross at the start. Ideally the handler needed to be ahead to push the dog out. If the handler was a fast one combined with a steadier dog, then this

choice of handling was fine. However I knew most of my dogs would leave me standing after the second front cross as other people's dogs did so I handled it differently, as shown left.

Notice the lateral distance with the first handler position. This meant I only had to turn to send my dog over jump 3 and didn't have to move forward. It also meant I wasn't at the





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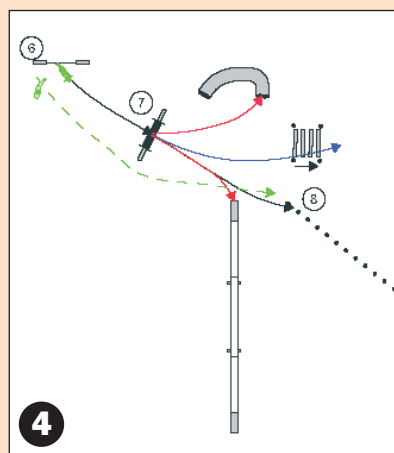


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base of the A-frame facing my dog for the front cross. This is beneficial as, if you face your dog anywhere on a course, he is going to slow down. This applies to contacts in particular. I also started nearer jump 1 than most handlers so my dogs were chasing me on the course right from the beginning; this also stopped me from getting into position too quickly and remaining static in front of my dog, which would have been demotivating. Some dogs looked at the dog-walk on the way round the wing of jump 3 but my dogs have learnt a 'turn around the wing only' command so I knew I could send them over jump 3 and leave them to it while I ran past the see-saw and just stepped across (blind turn). This put me nearly up to jump 5 before my dogs hit the end of the see-saw which was a good place to be and none of my dogs missed the push out for number 6. By handling like this I didn't get in the way of my dogs at any stage; they knew where they were going next and were able to chase me throughout.

From jump 6 to the weaves created the most problems, the majority of people preferring to stay on the right of their dog and race them down to the weave entry. I did this with my two Small dogs but both looked hard and hesitated at the dog-walk before picking out the weaves. There were lots of missed weave entries for differing reasons. If the handler stayed on the right, the dog veered towards him because of having to veer out around the wall. Remember that the dog had no view of the weaves because of the wall. By the time the dog had looked at the dog-walk and looked back, it was really

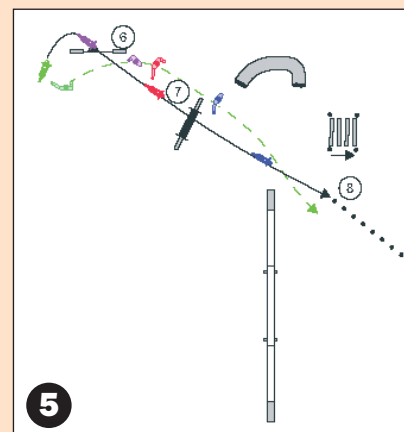


difficult for him to enter the weaves correctly due to the angle in. Alternatively, if the handler was faster than the dog, his path pushed the dog straight towards the off-course long-jump. See above diagram.

In Diagram 4 you can see that the handler's path

(dotted green line) has to veer out around the wall and then in again past the dog-walk. This pushes the dog towards the off-course obstacles before the handler can direct the dog to the weaves. I decided

that because my dogs had no view of the weaves, I wanted to face the direction in which I wanted my Large dogs to proceed from jump 6 so I put in a turn behind the jump, as in Diagram 5.

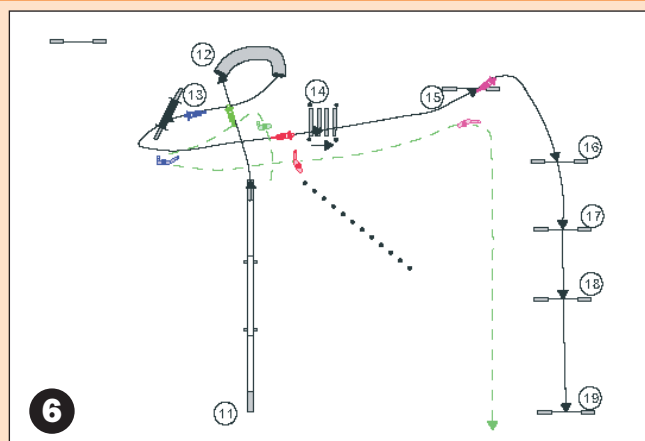


This sent the dog slightly wider around the back of jump 6 but rather than be eliminated after the wall! The important point here is that the handler needed to ensure he had done the turn and backed off out of the dog's way next to the far wing of jump 6 to get the right line in order to send the dog forwards. If the handler turned in the wrong place, he ended up central to the wall and had to pull to the left to get round it, which then directed the dog to the tunnel or long-jump. This was definitely the trickiest part of the course and where most of the eliminations occurred. Handling it in this way and creating the right path for the dog, with knowledge equals speed in mind, meant that all four of my Large dogs confidently went straight to the weaves. (In other words I actually got it right on this occasion!)

The next part of the course was the speed section. The dog-walk was handled on both sides and seemed to work fairly well either way. If the handler was going to run down the right side of the dog-walk, then it was best not to get ahead at the weaves because it is far easier to send your dog ahead when the handler isn't in view. If the handler is in front, slowing down the dog will usually do likewise. I ran on the right of the dog-walk for all of mine except Puzzle (my Papillon). I did a front cross onto the dog-walk because he also pulls off better than he pushes at the other end of it.

This cleverly designed course had another trap waiting at the end of the dog-walk. Handlers that pushed too hard at the end of it ended up saying goodbye to their dogs over the wall instead! All it needed really was a subtle half-step to get to the correct end of the tunnel. It was also much better if people had an independent contact behaviour here otherwise they had to be level with or facing their dog, which made the obstacle discrimination afterwards difficult. The next consideration was whether to bring your dog round the left or right pillar of number 13 (the wall), on the way to the long-jump. I chose the left wing and handled it generally as shown in Diagram 6. With Puzzle, once again, I chose to handle on the left side of the long-jump instead and rear-crossed number 15 as I never risk running towards him as he is so small I don't like running towards him from the side (but don't ever suggest he is small because he thinks he is a Rotty!).

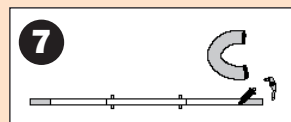
Although I was clear with three of my dogs and lucky enough to have some top places, the other three had a fault each. My young bearded x, Breezer, just missed the weave entry and went into the second pole, due mainly to inexperience. With Freeway I loitered too long at the wall and didn't create the right line to jump 15, but was pleased we achieved the difficult bits before that. To compensate I then over-pushed Minky to number 15 and she went wide after it and knocked the poles on jumps 16 and 17 because she went diagonally over them! Lee had put these two jumps at minimum distance so that most dogs had to bounce them. This meant making sure



the dogs were in a straight line and the handlers didn't race them down the finish line.

What I particularly liked about this course was that the angles onto the contacts were good and I didn't need to worry about the safety of my dogs while running the course. Also there were a variety of exits from the contacts which meant you needed good and independent contacts, so although the A-frame went sideways afterwards, the dog-walk was slightly off-set to the subsequent tunnel and the see-saw was straight on. I think the dog-walk caught out quite a few because of the amount of acceleration generated by the long run to the number 10 tunnel and back again with the handlers also ahead.

I personally don't like to see on a course, every contact followed by the next obstacle set back from it. Not only do these courses not flow for the dog because they virtually have to come to a standstill to turn back, but it tests only one skill and means any handler who doesn't have good contacts can rely on getting in front of their dog and blocking the exit to get the contact. Apparently judges are doing this more and more because it makes the contacts easier to see and, therefore, judge and ensures the handlers all have to handle on the same side and are therefore out of the way. But surely we should be setting courses, particularly in Championship Classes and Qualifiers, to test a range of dog and handler skills. I don't see what is so clever about the dog only just getting into the contact area and then jumping off the side of it into, say, a tunnel set back from it rather than the dog running through the contact area. Is it really preferable to constantly drag our dogs off the side of contacts? An example of this is shown in Diagram 7.



In this country, unfortunately, we don't see a lot of obstacle discrimination which is such a pity. (An exception was Dave Jolly's Champ Jumping course recently; another good course.) We mainly see tight courses where all handlers have to do one front cross followed by another to keep changing direction after each jump, or else lots of pull-throughs. Sometimes



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judges set a course with a major trap in it that no handler can achieve and so proves nothing. If I see a course where my dogs would have to keep changing direction after landing in the opposite direction, as shown in Diagram 8, then I would withdraw as I feel that, over time, I am going to put too much physical pressure on them. Their long-term health is my major concern and I don't enjoy seeing my dogs constantly having to pull-up short, and often slipping in the process with each change of direction.

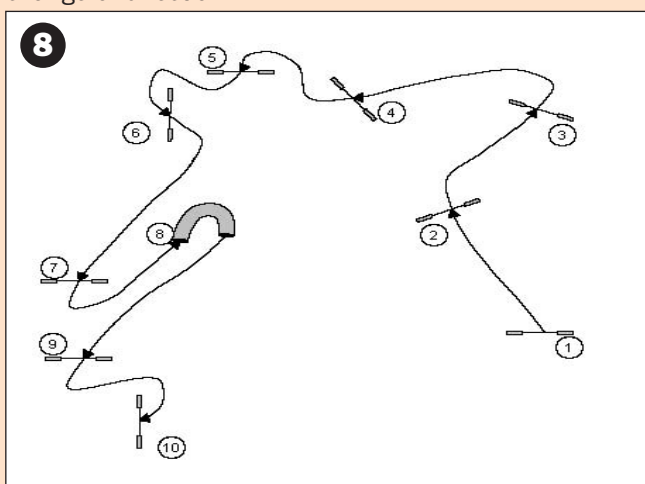


Diagram 8 shows that every time the dog lands he has to brake sharply and turn very tightly; from jump 4 onwards the obstacle that would be obvious to the dog isn't his next direction and a lot of the time he has only a very short braking distance which is when dogs often slip and fall as they don't want to take the wrong obstacle.

Many people go up in arms if you suggest there is anything wrong with a course but I do not understand this reaction. I too judge and I want to know if a handler has concerns over his dog's safety. If it is to do with

obstacle discrimination - as was the case with Lee's course - and your dog hasn't been taught this skill, that is a different matter altogether. It is the physical impact courses have on our dogs that is important. When judging I actively seek feedback about the course I have set from handlers with different speed dogs before I ultimately set my course. I don't want to get the safety aspect wrong for anybody's dog if possible. Yes, judges do give up their day to judge and without this commitment we wouldn't have our sport, but our dogs don't have a voice and we need to stand up for them too. Handlers with steady dogs wouldn't see a problem with the course in Diagram 8, but those with a speed dog most certainly would.

A good course is one that can be made to flow with good handling, has good angles onto the contacts and tests a variety of skills which handlers can tackle differently to bring out the best in their particular dog. If you see a course that has to be handled on the same side and in the same way by everyone, then this won't bring the best-trained dog and handler to the fore.

Dawn Weaver has been competing in agility for over 20 years. Two of her dogs are Agility Champions: Ag Ch Tonring Just a Puzzle, the only Papillon ever to have become an Ag Ch; and Ag Ch Piquant Painted Sunshine with 11 Championship Tickets is the only dog to have won Olympia for 3 consecutive years and has also won silver and bronze medals at the IFCS World Championships. Dawn has 3 large dogs with Tickets, one of which (Promise) won the Large Crufts Singles 2009 and another (Minky) has won Gold and Silver medals at the IFCS World Championships.

Dawn's book "Knowledge Equals Speed!" is out soon. Visit www.dawnweaveragility.com for more information.