

K N O W L E D G E

EQUALS SPEED

By Dawn Weaver



I've been reprimanded by one of my novice Club members for catering only for the more experienced handler in my last two articles. I could have quibbled but I thought she might have a point and so gave in gracefully! Here, therefore, are some thoughts about how, when handlers start competing, they can protect and even build on their dog's long-term speed.

1. After spending months or even years training your dog, you are now going to a show to compete. Your first thoughts on arrival are: What do I have to do to book in? What is 'booking in'? There are so many people and their dogs are so good compared to mine. I am going to look silly! Which ring am I running in?

These are your first thoughts. Now let's look at your dog's first thoughts: Look at all those dogs, I've never seen so many. That dog is eyeing me up thinking I am his next dinner! I need protecting, so I will get mum's attention. Oh! She is staring at all the dogs too. She looks terrified! This must be a really scary place if she is worried. Look how tightly she is gripping my lead with a grim look of determination on her face. Right, better be on my guard. She may need my protection! I don't think I want to come here again.

Conclusion: your dog needs you to be confident in this environment and providing him protection. You are there to give your dog a pleasant experience and ensure that he will enjoy shows for years to come.

2. So now you have found your ring (hopefully not dragging the dog around with you), and you are going to walk the course. Obviously the best thing to do is to watch other

handlers walking it and run similarly, right? Wrong! Surely every dog is different and you have trained your dog to run using your handling techniques and in a way which you feel is right for your dog. Otherwise you will worry and confuse him by trying to do things which he has never done before.

3. Now it is time to queue with your dog. Or is there an alternative? Do you want your dog standing with you getting bored? I don't want my small dogs in particular to find out I can be boring! So perhaps you could get a friend to hold your dog while you queue? Or bring a small crate to the ring? I find some dogs in the small dog queue have attitudes the size of a Rottweiler - this includes Puzzle by the way! Since I don't want anything worrying to happen to my dog I don't queue with them if there is any other alternative.



Puzzle in action. Courtesy of Alan Score

4. When leaving your dog in a 'Wait' at the start of a course, think about how he may be feeling. Your protection has gone and there are probably dogs quite close behind him which he can't turn and look at, because he has to watch you as he is worried about how far away you are going. So again, be your dog's protector and just ask other handlers, politely, if they would mind giving your dog some space. Ask other handlers to watch your dog on the start line when you leave him just to see if he looks happy and raring to go, or miserable and worried. Not leaving him for so long or so far in the 'Wait' will help too.

5. Never be negative with your dog, either in the ring or when you leave it. Whatever your dog has done, he will have achieved plenty of good stuff on the course and by always being positive you will ensure that the ring is a great place to be for your dog. In fact, fast eliminations are my speciality! I still walk out of that ring feeling elated that we have got 90% of the course right. My biggest joy is that my best friend chooses to join me and spend time with me on that course. What a privilege.

Remember it is not life or death - just a dog show which is a hobby for relaxation and enjoyment - so make sure that your best friend enjoys it to the maximum too.

6. Last but not least, make sure you have planned where your reward will be when you leave the ring. The quicker you

reward your dog the more likely he is to associate it with the agility. Getting your lead or jacket or checking your time should come well after rewarding your dog!

Having kept my promise, I think it is time to look at a training sequence, one that caused lots of problems on one of my training days – see Diagram 1 below. Although the obstacles start at number 1, you could hit this sequence in the middle of a course so I am assuming the handler won't be ahead of the dog. Take a moment or two to think about how you would run it.

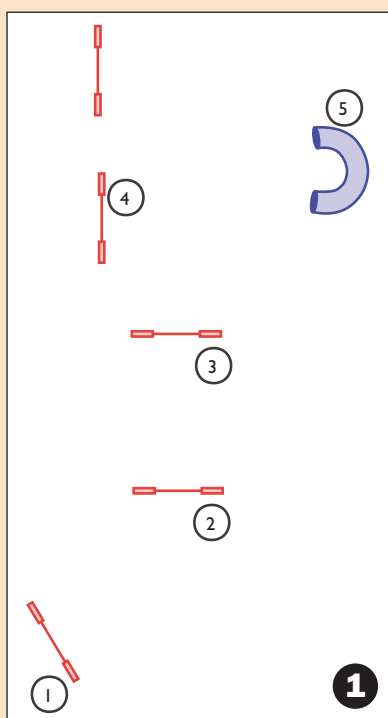


Diagram 1

Now look at Diagram 2 – this is how the majority tried to handle it. Most of the problems were encountered between jumps 3 and 4 with the dogs wanting to go straight on, or veer towards the tunnel which the handlers weren't expecting. However notice that their handler path is actually cueing straight on. Another problem was the pull-through to the tunnel. Handlers turned towards their dogs and shouted which meant they were actually facing the jump

they didn't want their dogs to take! So, in other words, the handler in this diagram wasn't giving his dog an accurate direction to drive to.

Diagram 2

Let's look at how we can combine obstacle discrimination with speed. We want our dogs to be accurate in which obstacle they take, but we also need to give them a direction to drive in so they can maintain their speed. Diagram 3 shows you how to achieve this.

Diagram 3

Notice how the handler drives into jump 2 instead of staying wide of it. This pushes the dog out to take the jump on the outside of the jump pole but sets the dog up for a better line towards jump 4. It also means the handler has space to move to the left as he runs down the jumps, so his line also cues jump 4 better. If the handler stayed wide at jump 2 (as in Diagram 2), then he had to pull out wider to cue jump 4 and therefore wasn't in any position to indicate the pull-through. It is also preferable if the handler is driving the dog from behind when approaching a rear cross, so he doesn't stop in front of the dog (which would also cue the dog to stop).

The next difference is the rear cross itself. Notice that the

blue handler is raising his left hand on the approach to jump 4, which starts to turn his shoulders in the direction he wants the dog to take next (the right). Then, very quickly, before the dog takes off but after he is committed, the handler turns in the new direction (straight at the tunnel entry). The left arm is also dropped so that he doesn't cue the off-course jump and the right arm is used as a 'collection' hand across the handler's body (but without turning towards the dog). I also give a call-off command. Once given, this command will pull the dog away from the off-course jump and he will look for my next handling manoeuvre.

This way of handling ensures that my dog can keep speed

throughout the sequence without me stalling him, either by facing him or by not giving him his next direction accurately or quickly enough. All it takes is for the handler to trust his dog and his training and not to worry if things go wrong. Much better to get a fast 'E' than a slow clear - in my opinion anyway!

As your dog probably won't be used to being handled in this way, rather than attempt and subsequently fail at this sequence, backchain it and start with jump 4 and the off-course jump much farther away. Then gradually work back and then move the off-course jump closer.

