

Common Agility Patterns

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Practice Makes Pawfect

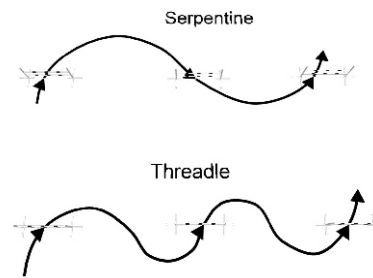
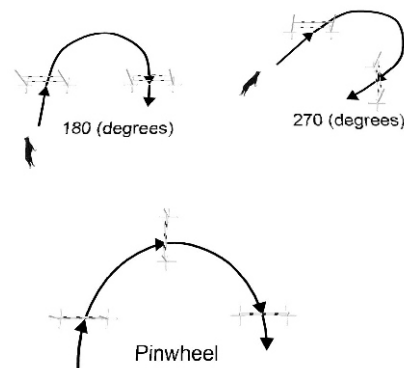
Each dog agility course is different. The obstacle layout is different and the dog's path through the obstacles will be different. The dog's path may look like an intricate doodle when drawn out on a paper course map. However, there are some definite patterns you will see consistently used in course design.

The first and simplest pattern is just a straight line over a number of obstacles. So, your first task as an agility handler/trainer is to teach your dog to go in a straight line to a reward at the end of the line. Train your dog to go to the reward, regardless of where you might be relative to the dog. Send them ahead of you, run at a lateral distance to them, or be ahead of them (but not necessarily going to the same end point). In all these cases, the reward should be already in place where you want the dog to drive towards: toy on the ground (or thrown ahead), food on a target plate, or remote treat dispenser. Sweeping turns are just a variation of a straight line.

The next patterns are sharper turns. Those turns can be 90 degrees, 180 degrees or even 270 degrees to the next obstacle. Handler cues, both verbal and physical,

should be taught to turn the dog. Easiest handling is when you are on the inside of the turn, relative to the dog. Then a basic 'come' cue combined with your running path, turning shoulders or a half-cross (where you turn toward the dog and bring up your opposite hand to call them toward you) can work. If you are on the outside of the turn, then you need cues to turn your dog away from you. (And probably some reflection on if there was a better way to plan your path so you don't have to run around the outside.) Verbal turn cues can be relative to the dog's point of view (Left/Right) or relative to your position (turn away from me or come towards me).

A simpler variation of the 180 and 270 degree turn is a Pinwheel, where the dog takes 3 obstacles in a circular fashion. Having the extra obstacle makes the path more clear to the dog even if the start and finish obstacle are the same as the 180/270 turn. Once you have the dog confidently going through the pinwheel with you standing between the jumps, your goal should be to add distance to the obstacles and have your position stay further away from the middle of the circle, eventually handling it from the outside of the circle. With the obstacles sufficiently spaced



apart, you can alternate between a flat 180 with just the first and last obstacle and then try a pinwheel where the dog must go out to the middle jump.

Additional common patterns in agility courses involve obstacles in a line, but each obstacle approach is perpendicular to the line of obstacles. In a Serpentine, you might jump the first obstacle going away from you, the next obstacle coming towards you and the final obstacle going away from you again. You can train your dog starting with a line of jumps as described at the beginning of this article. Then you slightly twist each obstacle (turning the middle one the opposite direction). Now the dog's straight path would involve some slicing across the jumps. Keep gradually twisting the obstacles until the dog's path starts to resemble a wavy line or 'serpent'. Once the jump bars are all in a straight line, you are doing a true serpentine. Another way of thinking about a Serpentine is that it is two opposite 180 degree turns strung together, resulting in an "S" shaped path.

The Threadle uses the same obstacle layout as the Serpentine but possibly spread further apart. In a Threadle, the dog jumps the first obstacle, but then you call the dog to come between obstacles 1 & 2 ('threading the needle'). They then take the second obstacle from the same side as they did the first obstacle. The handler pulls the dog between obstacles 2&3 and the dog jumps the 3rd obstacle in the same direction as the first two. In this example all 3 obstacles were jumped going away from the handler.

In all these patterns, you must train them with the dog on your left, the dog on your right, the dog ahead of you, the dog trailing behind you, the dog 5-10-15 feet away from you. As the dog performs these patterns, you may also need to perform a Front, Rear, or Blind Cross to get your dog on your other side and yourself in the correct position to handle the rest of the course.

Master all these pattern variations and you are well on your way to agility success. Better Practice!



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