

# Technique Training in Agility

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Megan Foster of Fostering Excellence in Agility (<https://fxagility.com/>) has a wonderful podcast. A recent episode was talking about 'Technique Training' in which she describes introducing a new handling technique to the dog. She breaks this training down into very specific steps.

First she focuses on Handler Fluency. The handler must be able to consistently perform their physical cues with unconscious competency. The practice needed for the handler to learn any new movement will take multiple attempts. And then to become fluent (where you can do the move correctly 5-10 times in a row) takes even more repetition. All of these repetitions should be done without the dog. Why? If the handler is struggling to figure out what they should be doing, they are not giving the dog clear direction and therefore essentially training the dog to ignore the handler as they flounder around. Also, dogs can get bored after a few repetitions, losing interest and will disengage from the handler. To get those 5-10 clean repetitions, you should practice with minimal distraction so you can focus on that one thing. Have your dog put away, break up your practice across multiple training sessions if needed, and don't try to add in other skills. "Blocked or repetitive practice" means you focus solely on the pieces of what you are trying to learn. Once you, as a handler, can perform correctly, cleanly and smoothly 5-10 times in a row, you are ready to move on.

Now we add the dog into the practice session. Evaluate the dog's existing knowledge and experience. What foundational pieces and pre-requisite skills do they need to perform this new technique and do they have them? For novice dogs, the foundational pieces may be what we are training. You can often start training the new technique on the flat (no jumping needed). For other skills you may need a wing or a tunnel. We will again be doing multiple repetitions, so we initially want it easy on the dog's body and mind.

Beware the pitfall of doing the same thing over and over.

You should always be adjusting the training to vary the challenge; change or increase the challenge if the dog is succeeding, decrease or split out skills if the dog is struggling. Make micro-changes in every single repetition to keep the training fresh and progressing.

Back chaining is very useful when teaching a new skill. Train the very last part of the skill where the dog gets the reward. Then add the next-to-last piece of the skill, to the last part and then reward. With each repetition, another part of the skill is added on to the beginning. The dog is then consistently working from newer skills through more familiar skills to the reward.

If you start teaching something using a lure, change it into a reward as quickly as possible. If the behavior falls apart, there may be some prerequisite skill missing that needs to be trained first. Something like driving to a placed reward, committing to the obstacle or following more basic handling.

The next step in technique training is to introduce Either/Or scenarios. Is the dog really following our cues, or are they just patterned to do the skill we've been working on? Pick the opposite of what you have been training and ask the dog to do that instead. An example would be if you've been working on a "wrap" where the dog takes the jump but immediately turns around the wing and comes back, then ask them to 'go on' where the reward will be thrown or placed far past the jump away from you. Or if you have been training a "backside" where the dog goes around the wing to the backside of the jump and jumps towards you, ask them to just go straight over the jump away from you. Now mix it up; wrap to the right, backside, wrap to the left, straight jump, etc.

OK, we have handler fluency. We've trained the skill in small increments to the dog. We've tested that they are following our handling with either/or scenarios. Now we start adding this new skill into sequences that really focus on that new skill. Example, if you've been working on blind crosses, have a short sequence where you can do 3-4 blind crosses. Don't get distracted by other things, like if your dog breaks his start-line stay. Plan the sequence to

avoid any other known short comings. Once the short sequence with the new skill is successful, add in an either/or challenge by mixing the new skill in with the opposite or variation. Example: do the sequence by alternating front and blind crosses.

Finally, let's take our shiny new skill into the real world. We've been practicing on tailor-made applications of the technique. Now we have to fit it into a not-so-perfect scenario. Look at actual course maps for where this new technique makes sense. Build just the part of the course to practice the new skill, with a couple of obstacles prior so you have comparable speed coming into the situation. Are you still getting a high rate of success performing that technique? If not, find some more courses to try. After effectively performing the new technique in multiple real-world course segments, it should be very comfortable and ready to add into your trialing tool box.

Check out Megan Foster's Fostering Excellence in Agility podcast on your preferred system for the full episode. After listening, make a training plan and Better Practice.

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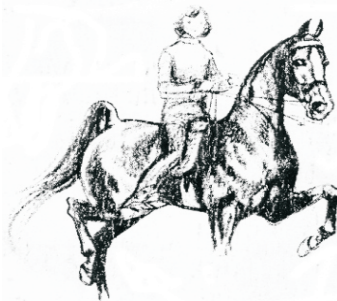
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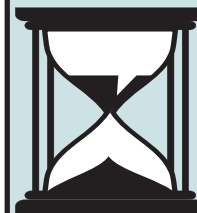


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