

Agility Target Practice

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Practice Makes Pawfect**

Rewards are why we all do agility. While our rewards are usually emotional or social, the rewards for the dog can be more physical and immediate; food, toys, play. When using physical things to reward, proper reward placement can really clarify what we want from the dog and speed up training. The underlying training concept is to put the reward where you want the dog to go. Giving the dog a physical target to move towards adds both simplicity and precision.

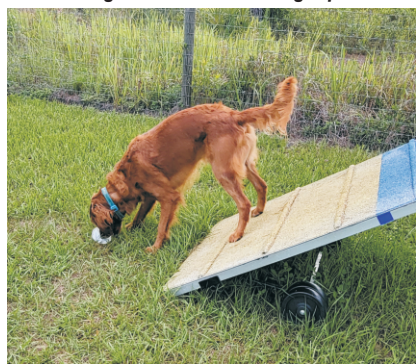
"Well, I always just hand the treat to my dog." That trains the dog to stick close to you, constantly be looking at you, and never go any faster than you can run. While there are times when you want that extreme handler-focus, most of the time in agility we want the dog looking forward and running fast to the next obstacle on the course. The more distance between you and the dog, the shorter your path and the faster the dog can run without waiting for you. To train that distance, the dog needs to be rewarded out at that distance.

When training animals, we often use props. One of the first props you might see when starting agility is a "target plate". A plastic lid from something like a yogurt or sour cream container works well. An example in use: a treat is placed on the this 'plate' lying on the other side of a jump. The dog is then sent over the jump to eat the treat. The dog is rewarded for taking an action that moves away from the handler.

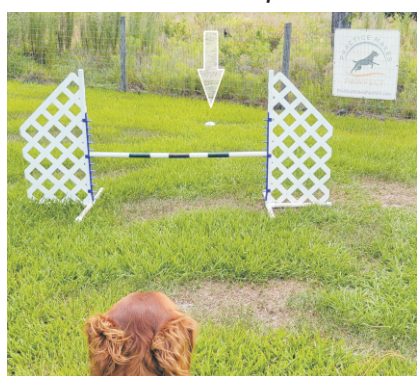
Another common place for using target plates is when training the contact obstacles. The plate is put at the end of the contact so the dog can comfortably eat a treat from it when in the proper 2-on-2-off position with their front feet on the ground and rear feet still on the A-Frame or Dogwalk. While you may initially train that 2o2o position with you holding the treat low to the ground, transitioning to using a target plate takes you out of the picture and still rewards the dog for driving to the end of the contact. Now you have the handling



Placing the treat on the target plate



Two on-two off correct position



The arrow points to the target AFTER the jump

flexibility to send them on ahead or be way off to the side.

"But my dog just runs around the obstacle and eats the treat." OK, we need to get more sophisticated. If you have a training partner, they can guard the treat if the dog cheats. Have them just cover the treat with their foot, remaining neutral otherwise. Alternatively, they can put out the treat when the dog performs correctly.

You can buy automated treat dispensers like a "Treat and Train" or a "Ready Treat". You hold a remote control that only allows access to a treat when you push the button. A cheaper DIY option is a closed container with treats. Start by placing a treat on the top of the container and just sending them to eat the treat with no obstacles. After 2 or 3 times doing that, don't put the treat on top, but still send them to the container. Then you run over and pull a treat out of the container and feed on the container. The dog learns to run to the container and wait for their treat there.

If your dog is toy-motivated, placing a toy instead of a loaded target plate works the same way. The dog has a visible target to drive towards. While

ideal when first training, that visibility can become a liability.

When using props, like the target plate, toy or remote treat dispenser, you eventually must fade the prop out of the picture, and gradually stop relying on it being a visual cue that the dog will get their reward there. For toy rewards, instead of pre-placing the toy, you wait until the dog performs the obstacle, then throw the toy to the reward location. For target plates, instead of using a large highly

visible plastic lid, start using smaller, then transparent lids that are less obvious. If you started the training with an automatic treat dispenser, transition to a target plate then fade that out. Also use back-chaining to your advantage by gradually adding more obstacles to the start of a sequence that ends at a reward location.

There is another type of 'target training' that you may hear about. In this concept the dog touches an object with one of their body parts. Nose targeting is training your dog to put (and keep) their nose on an object; examples are the palm of your hand, a ball at the end of a stick, or the plastic target plate before being rewarded. Chin targeting is when your dog is trained to put their chin in your hand. This can be very useful for cooperative care and husbandry procedures. Foot targeting is having your dog put one or two of their feet on a flat platform or in your hand. These are great for body awareness and movement exercises.

Whether using a target plate, treat dispenser or placed toy, getting to the target must be rewarding for the dog. The more rewarding, the faster the dog and their learning. Just like we should have a clear end result in mind for our training, providing the dog a target to move towards will streamline their learning process. And like all targets, keep working towards getting that bullseye. Better Practice.

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