

# Make Agility Training Loopy

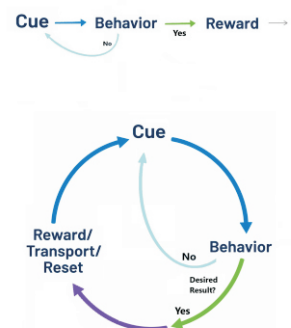
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Practice Makes Pawfect

Want fun & engaging training? Want clear, clean and efficient training? Then "Loopy" training is for you. Maybe you think of dog training in a linear fashion: Cue, Behavior, Reward. Then after a pause, repeat that linear process for another repetition. If so, you are missing out on a really powerful concept that can propel your training forward faster. Loopy training is a great way to remove the 'garbage' from your training sessions. The sniffing, the running off to see some distraction, the over or under arousal. That garbage usually appears between repetitions, after the reward and before the start of the next sequence. When you remove the garbage, your training sessions can be short, sweet and totally productive.

So what is Loopy Training? In simplest terms, it is when the dog ends the training sequence ready to immediately repeat that training sequence. It adds one more step in your training sequence: Cue, Behavior, Reward/Reset. That Reset step (which can be separate or combined with the Reward) takes the dog right back to being setup for the next repetition. In some training

scenarios, the dog is already positioned to act on the next Cue. Example: asking a dog to back up. You ask for a step or two of backwards motion, the dog complies and you reward. Unless you have backed them into a wall, the dog can immediately be asked for a couple more backwards steps. In other scenarios, the dog does not end up in a position to immediately be re-cued. Example: asking a dog to sit. You give the Sit cue. The dog sits and you reward. But the dog is still sitting. You can't ask for Sit again. You must get the dog to stand up first. One solution is that after you give the dog the reward for sitting, you toss a treat away and tell the dog to get it. The dog gets a second treat and is now standing, ready for another Sit cue. That Reset action brings the loop right back to the starting position.

But Loopy Training takes planning. When planning your agility training sequence, is there some (worthwhile) way to get your dog from the last obstacle back to the first one? It could be as simple as placing the last obstacle such that the reward is right next to the beginning obstacle. But not everything we ask of our dogs can end with the dog back at the 'start



line'. You may have to "Transport" them back to the beginning. A Transport strategy could be something like giving them multiple treats as you walk with them back to the start line. Or tug with them all the way back to the start. These are examples of the reward/reset/transport all being done at the same time. Alternatively, you can ask for other behaviors. Example: reward for the sequence, attach your leash and give a treat so leashing up is a positive experience, practice heeling with your dog back to the start, ask for a spin and sit then reward. Now your dog is back on the start line having had some good skills practice and a positive experience.

When planning your training session, in addition to defining your primary focus (say teaching your dog the broad jump) and determining the what/when/where of the reward, consider how to make your training into a loop. Can the reward be used to reset

the dog? Do you need a transport method? Which transport will keep your dog engaged and refreshed? One dog may want to work for food, so a remote treat dispenser at one end and a recall for a treat from the handler at the startline is the transport. Another dog may love toys, so a thrown toy at the end, which is brought to the handler to tug back to the start of the jump sequence works better for them.

Ideally your training loop is tight (as few non-goal behaviors as possible) and clean (no extraneous behaviors from the dog). If your dog won't recall quickly or plays keep-away with a toy, the above loops won't work. If you have split your goal behavior into achievable components for the dog, and planned your loop well, the loops should be quick, leading to a high reinforcement rate and the dog stays engaged. If the dog is succeeding, you can slightly vary each loop to practice other aspects of the goal behavior. The loops take on a rhythm; the dog knows what to expect and gains confidence. After 3-8 successful loops, you will want to give the dog a break and adjust the sequence or move on to other things. Sometimes the loop is so good, you won't want to stop, so have a pre-planned limit on the number of repetitions and watch the dog for physical or mental fatigue.

Next time you are out training, observe what you and your dog do between repetitions. Is there a way to make it Loopy? Better Practice!



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References: (1) The Veterinary Clinics of North America Vol. 18, #2, Aug. 2002, Pg. 355-369 (2) "No Sweat" Denise Steffanus, EquineAthlete, July/Aug. 1998, pg. 25-28

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