

# Agility Coneheads

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Practice Makes Pawfect

Cones are not an official obstacle in agility competitions, but mastering them can lead to agility success. I'm not talking about the small cones with numbers you might see labeling the course path in a competition. I'm talking about the taller cones you see on a highway or warning about a wet floor.

Cones taller than the dog. These are very useful in teaching a number of concepts before the dog even takes an agility jump.

The first skill you train with a cone is for the dog to circle around it. The final behavior will be sending your dog out to the cone to circle around it in the direction you indicate, either partially, fully or multiple times before coming back or following you in a different direction. Why is this useful? Let's break it down. 1) You send your dog out - to a cone, to a jump, to a tunnel, etc. 2) They circle around it - improves flexibility and good practice for wrapping tightly taking a jump. 3) Circling in the direction you indicate - they take the jump going in the correct direction. 4) Circling partially, fully, or multiple times - doing what you ask while at a distance from you. 5) Coming back - allowing you to reward for a recall. 6) Or following you in a different direction - again, working with you while staying at a distance.

Luring and shaping are two ways to teach the dog to go around the cone. In both methods you start by standing one dog's width away but facing the cone with the dog at your left side. As always, we start small. You can start by luring the dog clockwise around the cone with your left hand holding food, allowing them to take food as they go around. Or shaping the dog to go around by rewarding when they look at the cone and then reward each step they take around the cone by tossing food just past where they are around the cone. It's best to use food that doesn't bounce or roll when tossing in this application. In either method, increase the challenge for the dog in small step but don't get stuck rewarding the same effort for too long. You are looking for understanding from the dog, not just following the food. You can increase the challenge by expecting more steps around before rewarding, using your hand without food as the 'lure', continuing to circle the dog more than one revolution, stepping back 6 inches so the dog has to go further away from you to get to the cone.



Work with circling the dog for a minute or two then step away from the cone for a play break. After a small break, try again. Start where you were successful, then ask for more. Don't be afraid to go back to rewarding for a smaller effort if the dog gets confused. Once you think the dog has some understanding about circling in one direction, try the other. Expect to struggle with your mechanics in the different direction. Start with dog on your right, using your right hand to lead or reward counter-clockwise around the cone. Work on circling off and on for about 5-10 minutes then call it a day.

What? You don't have a traffic cone lying around? For smaller dogs, a 5 gallon bucket would work. For bigger dogs use a stake or toilet plunger with a cut-off pool noodle slid over it (Pool Noodle Upright or PNU) to give it some thickness. Search for "PNU Wraps" on YouTube for examples and more training ideas. Once the dog knows how to circle you can use trees or telephone poles when out in the world for a quick practice with no equipment.

Now that you have your dog circling once around your cone or PNU in either direction from a couple of feet away, work on different amounts of distance and circling; 90 degrees, 180, 270, 360, multiple wraps. Make the dog's reward appear where they should be coming out of the turn.

Next you start adding multiple cones for doing figure-eights, clover-leaves and free-form patterns. In doing these patterns and changing the directions your dog is circling, you will be doing handling maneuvers you will use later on agility courses. We will cover those in a later article.



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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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