

Agility – Contacting Success

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Practice Makes Pawfect

The Pause Table, the A-Frame, the Dog Walk and the Teeter Totter; obstacles that the dog has to jump up onto or climb over. These are commonly called “Contact” obstacles referencing the contact zones that the dog must touch to successfully complete the obstacle. The zones are marked in yellow in the US and may be different sizes based on which organization’s specifications are being used. Outside of competitions, why does it matter if the dog touches these areas of the obstacle? They were developed for safety. You don’t want the dog getting hurt by launching from the top of a tall obstacle or trying to get on from a really bad angle.

In future articles we will discuss the particulars of each obstacle, but as always we start by breaking down the dog’s performance into very small pieces. For contact obstacles the dog has to know where his feet are so they can all be on the object. The dog must get on something above the ground. The surface may feel different to their paws. No matter how well built, the obstacle will not be as steady as the ground. Learning to handle all of these aspects will also help the dog in normal life.

The most basic requirement is for the dog to have all 4 feet on the obstacle. To do that they need to know where their feet are. The front feet are pretty easy but some dogs (and puppies especially) don’t realize they



A tippy board is a mini teeter

have a back end. Teach your dog exercises or tricks that make them move their hind feet independently. Teach the dog to step totally into a short sided box, backup away from you a step or two, back up to a different surface on the ground behind them, pivot their hind end around their front feet, individually lift a hind leg to touch something. There are many online how-to videos.

Now the ‘getting on’ part. If you already let your dog on the furniture, that counts. Logs and rocks while out on walks are also great for teaching your dog to climb or stand on things. Getting in and out of a car helps. Solid benches at the park are great for practicing getting on things (skip the ones with the expanded grid-like metal). The vet’s table...be sure to reward this one heavily.

Next let’s look at the tactile feel. Your dog can already handle a number of surfaces: grass, dirt/sand, concrete, carpet, tile, maybe even upholstery. How



A fallen tree can provide a new obstacle

coordinated are they on each surface? How do they handle slick surfaces? What if the surface is wet or cold? What about plastic, rubber and artificial grass? Contact equipment will either be a granulated or textured rubber or historically painted with sand mixed in or sprinkled on for traction. When asking your dog to get on something, make sure there is enough traction they will feel secure. Don’t scare them by trying to use slick or wet surfaces where they may slide off. Actively seek out new surfaces (or less favored surfaces) for the dog to walk, sit and down on. Remember, rewards increase confidence.

Now the tricky one: movement. The teeter obviously will move and essentially fall out from under the dog. But the table and dog walk can also have some movement. Initially look for really solid things to practice with (and check for stability before having your dog get on it). But once your dog is fearlessly jumping on

things, we need to add some movement. With movement, traction is even more important to the dog.

Couch cushions are wobbly. Inflatable dog (or human) conditioning equipment is another good option. Placing a short table or bench outside on a slightly uneven surface is an easy start. You can buy or build a tippy board or wobble board. A tippy board is like a mini teeter; a short board with an inches high pivot point halfway that makes it tip forward and back. A wobble board is usually a large round piece (like a table top) that has a single centered pivot point so it can tip in any direction.

When starting your dog on any unstable surfaces, start with very small movement and DO NOT FORCE THEM. Give them full control of if they want to get on (rewarded heavily) and if they want to get off (accept but don’t praise). They will only be confident if they can make the decision themselves. Start with and increase in small enough increments that it is a non-issue for the dog. Only increase the movement when the dog is very comfortable with the current amount. Regaining confidence once lost is much more time consuming than building it with small increments in the first place.

As always in agility, if you try for big leaps up the ladder you may fall. If you take lots of tiny steps, rewarding all the way, you will fly up that ladder of success.

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