

# Collecting Agility

By Christy Gammage,  
Practice Makes Pawfect

Last month we talked about when you and your dog should run wide-open around an agility course. It is great fun, but in the wrong place can lead to several problems: off-course obstacles, knocked bars and wide turns that cost you extra time. So now let's look at when the dog should be in a "collected" frame, taking short strides, ringing their hind-end more under their center of gravity. Much like a dressage horse, you still want the impulsion that you would get with speed, but you want it more like a compress spring, ready to be unleashed, usually up and over something. Instead of the long flat trajectory you get when they are in extension, where on course do you want the dog to collect, taking smaller strides and taking-off closer to the base of a jump? Turns! If the course takes a hard left after that jump, you want the dog already prepared a couple of strides before they lift off. Letting the dog know a turn is coming up immediately after the jump allows them to prepare their body and land the best take-off and landing spots to make a tight, time saving turn. Unlike a horse, we aren't sitting on them to directly regulate their stride so this needs to be trained. Agility handlers use their location on the course, their body position (eyes, chest, arms, feet, etc) and motion to show the

dog the next obstacles. Most handlers also use verbal cues to indicate to the dog which way to turn and even how sharp the turn might be. These verbals can be basic words like "left", "right", and "come" or more agility focused like "switch"/ "back" (turn away from me), "in" (come between two obstacles), "check" (check in with me or just shorten your stride) and more. It is up to the handler to create the language and train the dog what each word means.

The tightest turns are usually a 'wrap' where the dog takes the jump and immediately turns around the side of the jump to go back in the direction they came from. Another place extreme collection is used when the dog is sent to a jump with

the cue to go past it and take it coming back in the other direction, known as taking the 'backside' of a jump. Both require the dog to know in advance what they should do when they get to the jump. Usually both handler position/motion and a verbal cue is used, but sometimes you can't get there and

need to rely on just the verbal cue.

Even taking a jump straight may require some collection or stride adjustment to get to the correct take-off spot. Take-off too soon and you may land on the bar.

Take-off too late and you may hit the bar on your way up. If the dog is jumping in extension, the trajectory or bascule may be too flat and the bar will come down.

Much like horses, jump grids with tight or varied spacing between the jumps can help a dog find a good jumping form and learn when to collect and extend.

Other obstacles may also need some collection. Both to adjust striding to start the obstacle or because a turn or wrap is required at the end.

The teeter-totter is an obstacle on which most dogs must collect to perform well. Otherwise, they will be off the end before it hits the ground, called a fly-off, which is a serious and dangerous fault. If the dog is expected to stop in the yellow of the A-Frame or Dog Walk, they should be collecting themselves on the down ramp

for a less abrupt and easier on the dog performance.

Tunnels are nicknamed 'puppy cannons' because most dogs love running fast through them. If you need a sharp turn at the end, the dog needs to know that going in so they can be ready to turn at the exit.

While you might not have thought about it, weave poles also require the dog to collect when coming into them. Even from the straightest approach, the dog must make a quick sharp turn after entering between the first and second pole to get through the gaps before the third pole. If the previous obstacle means you are also coming from a sharp angle those turns are even harder. Too much speed and the dog either runs straight through or misses a pole.

Every course has places where you want the dog to really extend their body and other places where they need to collect for sharp turns and safe performances. Your job as the handler is to recognize where those places are on course and give your dog the information in time for them to make the adjustments. Your job as trainer is to work with the dog to give them the skills they need to be able to adjust their bodies and respond to your cues. Your job as a partner is to tell them what a good dog they are for playing this game with us.

Happy Practicing!



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