

Teetering on Agility Success

By Christy Gammage,
Practice Makes Pawfect

The Teeter-Totter (aka “Teeter” or “See-Saw”) is the most challenging of all the contact obstacles because it actually moves under the dog’s feet. In past articles we’ve looked at some foundation work for all the agility contact obstacles: A-Frame, Dog Walk, Table and Teeter. The dog must really know where their feet are (proprioception) and be comfortable, even eager, to get on unstable surfaces (wobble or tippy board, inflatable conditioning equipment or even just couch cushions). The dog should also be OK with loud banging sounds such as when the teeter hits the ground. If not, work on those things first, away from the actual teeter. There is much for the dog to dislike about the teeter: falling through the air, a loud bang and shock coming up through their legs when the teeter hits the ground, possibly a bounce and double hit at the end. That bounce can even toss a small dog in the air. The more you can train all the small pieces of the teeter before working with an actual teeter, the faster you will progress.



When introducing your dog to the teeter, there are a couple of different methods. You could start with the teeter either on or very low to the ground (like 1” off the ground) so the tip is miniscule. As the dog gains confidence, you gradually raise the teeter in tiny increments. This requires a very adjustable teeter construction.

If your teeter isn’t that adjustable you can use Pause Tables under each end. The dog jumps up on the table, walks across the teeter like a bridge to another sturdy table on the other end. Much easier to block up a table than a teeter. Again, you start with very little tip and then vary the heights of the tables to gradually include more and more tip. Work on removing the starting table first, then the landing table.

To train a fast performance, there are devices you can buy that holds the end of the teeter up in the air. “Teeter Teach-It” and “Tip-Assist” are examples. You train your dog to run up the plank quickly to their reward at the end of the teeter which stays high in the air. For small dogs you can just lift them off the end and take them back around for another repetition. Larger dogs may need a table to jump down onto and then onto the ground. When the dog is rocketing up to the top of the teeter (for that reward), then you can slowly adjust the height of the prop to allow minor tip, then more and more, as the dog gains confidence. This is a great method for very small dogs who must run all the way to the end to get the teeter to actually tip.

Rewards should always come when the dog is still on the teeter at the end. If they hop off, maybe praise, but treat only when they are standing on the teeter’s end. Also, strive to bring them onto the teeter from a straight approach and have them exit the teeter straight. Once it starts tipping and resetting after they exit, make a point to bring them far enough off that the teeter won’t hit their butt or tail as they leave which can also scare the dog. Walk or trot them off a couple of feet at least before stopping or turning.

All 3 of these methods rely on adjusting the teeter in very small increments as the dog gains confidence. Resist the urge to change the drop in large amounts even if the dog is doing well. If the dog is ever frightened by the drop, you will spend far more time backtracking and convincing the dog to get on the teeter than you would have



spent taking tiny steps. Encourage the dog to get on the teeter with treats or praise, but never force them using a collar or harness. It must be their idea to get on.

A slightly different training method is called the “Bang Game”. This time you fully prop up the starting end of the teeter (with a chair, jump standard or above products) and only work on the exit end with your dog. Again, start with the teeter having no movement, and ask the dog to come onto the down ramp from an angle, hopping on the board about 2-5 feet from the end while moving toward the exit end. This method trains the end performance (either 4 feet in the yellow or 2-on-2-off) and bringing the dog off with a straight exit. The handler positions himself alongside the end and brings the dog around their body for hopping on the side (slanting towards the exit), stopping at the end, then moving off straight. Once your handler mechanics are good and the dog is fluently coming onto the down ramp from both sides, stopping at the end and exiting straight, then you move the prop so the teeter now drops an inch to the ground as the dog hops on. Gradually adjust how high the other end of the teeter is in the air to increase the amount of drop. Since the dog is in control of making the teeter drop, they become comfortable with the noise of the teeter hitting the ground. Large dogs can hop on the teeter from the side even with the exit end a foot or more off the ground. For smaller dogs, you can add a Pause Table alongside which they can hop onto before hopping on the teeter. Keep adjusting until the starting end of the teeter is lower than the exit end. When the dog is

happily jumping on a high ended teeter, running to the end, riding it down, holding position until the teeter end hits the ground and exiting straight ahead when you release them, then you can remove the prop at the starting end of the teeter and try the full performance. Now focus on training the dog to mount the teeter from straight on.

The Bang Game is one way to help sound sensitive dogs associate good things with the bang at the end while it is still fairly quiet and gradually increasing as the height goes up. If your dog is very sound sensitive, then start your teeter training by treating the dog each time they hear another dog take the teeter and bang it down. The



goal is to counter-condition their emotional reaction to the sound. Bang = good!

Train all the separate pieces (sound, unstable surface, entrance, exit, end performance) and add the drop in small increments to get big success with your teeter performance. Happy Practicing!



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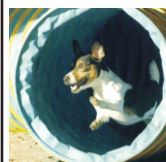
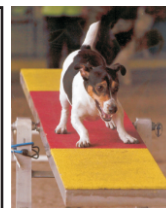
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