

Weave Been Better at Agility

By Christy Gammage,
Practice Makes Pawfect

In dog agility, weave poles are one of the harder obstacles to train. Most of the other things a dog does in agility have corollaries in normal canine behavior; jump over a log, climb a hill, crawl into a den. Repeatedly wiggling left and right through trees is not an efficient movement pattern to get to a new hunting ground. But performing the weave poles successfully does emphasize how 'agile' a dog must be to do well in competition. Weaving, like jumping high, is tough on the dog's body. And like jumping, most trainers wait until the dog's bones and joints are fully developed at a year or more before training these skills in earnest.

In competitions, dogs are expected to perform 6 or 12 weave poles in a row (although one organization allows 9 poles). The dog must enter the weave poles with the first pole at their left shoulder and move through each subsequent 24" gap between poles without stopping or skipping a gap. Most mistakes in competition happen at the beginning, where the dog doesn't enter the first gap correctly or skips it, and at the end, often leaving the weave poles prematurely ("popping out") after the 10th pole. An ideal performance of the weave poles involves the dog finding the correct entry from any approach angle without help from the handler, adjusting their speed to bend back through the next gap, continuing through all the weave poles regardless of what the handler is doing, and exiting after the last gap towards the next obstacle the handler has indicated.

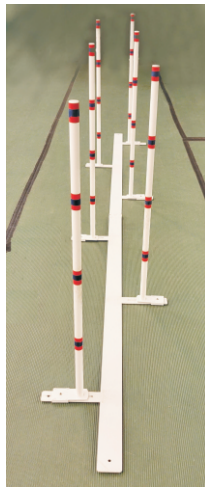
There are multiple ways to train the dog to perform weave poles. Most novice people start by luring the dog through the

gaps with food. This works to some extent, but this does not encourage the dog to truly understand what is being asked other than follow the food. The dog is often very reliant on where the handler is and what they are doing. Eventually the dog may figure out weaving independently, but there are better ways.

Some trainers use guide wires or fencing to make a path through the weaves. This allows the dog to be in more of a thinking mode while learning the footfall pattern through the weaves. The reward comes at the end of the weaves, inspiring the dog to get through as fast as possible. This method encourages correct performance first and speed comes as the dog get more proficient and confident. Once the dog is confidently moving through the weaves, the guide wires are gradually raised up the weave poles until they are irrelevant to the dog. If fencing is being used, it is moved away or removed in sections. If the dog starts skipping or popping out, the guides can be reinstated. Often the start and end guides are the last to be faded out of the picture for the dog.



Channel weaves are a different method of training weaves. These weaves allow the alternating poles to be moved away from the centerline so that, at first, the dog just runs straight through a channel to their reward at the end. The poles are then



gradually moved closer towards the centerline causing the dog's path to start wiggling from side to side and eventually fully weaving. This method encourages speed first, then gradually the dog learns how to move their feet and body in the weaving motion. If the dog starts skipping or popping out, the poles are widened and gradually brought together again. A different variation, called Weave-o-matics, uses weave poles that slant away from the centerline in an alternating pattern. The dog can still see a clear path to the end, but their foot pattern must move around the base of the poles. As the dog learns to go through the weaves, the poles are gradually straightened until they are vertical along the centerline.

Susan Garrett popularized arguably the favorite method of weave pole training used currently. It is called "2 by 2" (2x2) training and starts with just 2 poles. The dog is trained to go through those 2 poles from all different angles. The next step would be to add 2 more poles a short distance away from the first two poles.

Many trainers have used and created their own variations on the original 2x2 method. Depending on which variation you try, the second set of poles may be straight in line with the first set or angled such that it is similar to the channel setup and the dog can see a clear path through both sets. In either case there is a larger gap between the first and second set of poles than normal. The sets of poles may be initially handled as if they are two separate obstacles. All different approaches to the first set of poles are practiced and gradually the pairs of poles are brought closer together (and/or straightened if they were

initially angled). As the dog gains understanding and confidence, additional sets of 2 poles are added to the end or the beginning, with or without a larger gap. This method focuses first on correct approaches and speed then gradually builds up the dog's understanding and duration of their job.

If you noticed, all these methods use the incremental changing of the weave poles to allow the dog to figure out what works and what gets rewarded. If you want truly independent weaves, then you should also be working all these methods with you in different positions: running alongside, recalling them through the weaves, and sending them to the weaves from all different angles and distances. All these repetitions are a big reason people wait to train weaves until the dog's body is fully developed. One benefit of the 2x2 method is that you can do a lot of that with only 2 or 4 weaves which is much easier on the dog's body than a set of 6 or 12. Regardless of the method you use, train in short sessions with only limited repetitions, rewarding each time to keep the dog fresh and enthusiastic.

While having an 'official' set of weave poles or specialized weaves like 2x2s, channel or weave-o-matics is helpful, all these methods can be done with cheaper 'stick-in-the-ground' weave poles. It is just more work moving them and spacing them at the regulation 24 inches. Even cheaper are plastic step-in fence posts normally used for livestock electric fencing found at your local farm store for ~\$2.60 each. The only caveat is to ensure that the dog's path passes by the smooth side of the post to avoid catching hair.

Some dogs learn better with one method than another and some of these methods can be melded together like using the 2x2s in a channel formation or angling a few poles outward to help keep the dog from popping out. As in all training, observing the dog and keeping them happy and engaged will lead to success in weaving. Happy Practicing!

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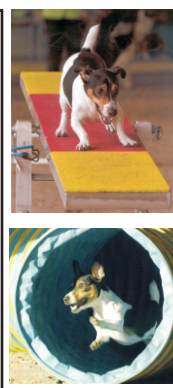
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