

Working Your Backsides

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

At the higher levels of dog agility, you don't just take jumps going straight across or slicing over them at an angle. You often see what is called a 'backside' jump in a course. In this scenario, the dog must run past the jump and then turn 180 degrees and take the jump from the far side coming back in the direction that they approached the jump. Even harder is when the course continues in the same direction as the jump was originally approached, making the dog's path a hard Z or looping around one upright a full 360 degrees. These backside jumps are only done when the jump has wings (some width to the side portions of the jump) for the dog to wrap around. Asking the dog to do a backside around the narrow upright of a wing-less jump is very hard on the dog's body.

As in all training, you teach this in small steps. The dog should already be comfortable jumping straight on and at more severe slices. We can break a 'backside' jump into multiple aspects. 1) The dog's skill in circling tightly around an upright. 2) The dog's commitment to going to the backside. 3) The dog's commitment to going over the jump bar. 4) The handler's position. 5) The physical and verbal cues telling the dog that the upcoming jump is to be taken from the backside.

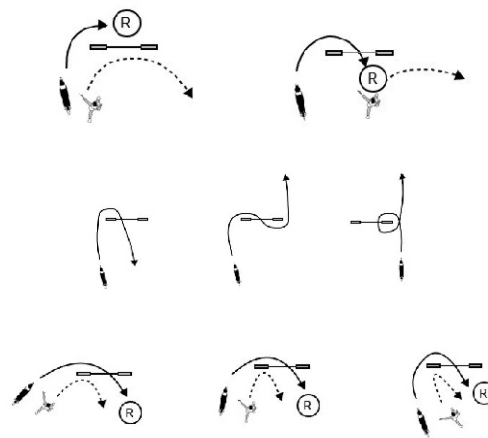
To help the dog learn how to curve their bodies while jumping, practice circling the dog around the wing over a very low jump. You can ask for 1, 2 or 3 wraps around the wing before rewarding. Your position can gradually move from being on the take-off side of the jump to being aligned with the edge of the jump. To prepare for the Z-shaped path, ask the dog to figure-8 over a jump, interspersed with

same side wing-wraps. Keep it exciting for the dog, work for only a couple of minutes and reward often during that time. When you see the dog is comfortable jumping in this tight arc, you can slowly move the jump up to normal height, but be aware this is strenuous effort for the dog, so only a couple of repetitions each training session.

Once your dog is physically accustomed to wrapping around a jump wing, let's add in the handler's guidance. First, decide on what verbal cue you want to use. Some examples of cues would be "Back", "Push", "Around" or whatever makes sense to you. Start with your dog coming at a low jump almost inline with the jump bar & wing. You will be on the landing side and the dog will be heading toward the take-off side at a shallow angle. Your path heads toward the outside edge of the wing as you turn your shoulders to bring the dog over the jump to their reward. Gradually make the angle steeper. Add your verbal cue during this process. Intersperse the backside training with just running with the dog over the jump normally using your normal jump cue and handler path. Start testing the dog's understanding by not going all the way up to the wing or not turning your shoulders as much, but still using the angled path toward the wing and the verbal backside cue. Don't forget to work both sides. To proof the verbal cue, gradually fade out the handler motion and/or add handler distance.

Use reward placement for any troubleshooting:

"My dog doesn't want to go to the backside of the jump." Start by placing or throwing the reward on the backside.



Add in your unpredictable movement as a distraction, until they understand to always go to the backside of the jump.

"My dog just runs past the bar on the backside." Lower the bar or remove it and show/drop/place the reward through the uprights before moving away.

"My dog isn't consistently doing X." Keep rewarding. The rewards explain to the dog the desired behavior. Make any changes gradually so the dog has an 80-90% chance of getting it right, and getting rewarded, each time. Practicing without any height to the jump allows you to do more repetitions without wearing out your dog.

Once your basic backside cue is solid, you can start practicing different exits, like continuing to wrap around the wing in a 360 loop, running off almost parallel with the jump or even zigging back to continue on the original direction. In each of these cases, the handler's path may continue past the jump on the same side that the dog went past, move across the jump and running straight or turning to pass by the jump on the other wing. The zig-zag path is most technical for the dog because they must change leads. The zig-zag path is the most difficult for the handler because they must be far enough ahead to not be in the way of the dog's jumping effort.

Your goal is an independent, verbally cued, backside performance by the dog regardless of where you are and which direction you are moving. The dog's job is to run to the back of the jump, go over the bar, and then catch up with you or move on to the next obstacle you've cued. Use small, clear training steps, with lots of rewards and people will be commenting about how nice your backside is. Happy Practicing.

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Christy Gammage
@agility@gammage.org
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