

Silence is Silver in Agility

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Verbal cues are a key part of your handling communication with your dog. Or are they? When dogs communicate with each other, sound takes a back seat to body language and facial expressions. When your dog is 'listening' to you, they are noting your posture and face as well as any words they recognize. There is a Gary Larson cartoon of a man talking to his dog and all she hears is something like "Blah Ginger, blah blah blah blah blah walk? Blah blah blah blah, Ginger? Blah blah treats blah..." According to a ZME Science article, most dogs know (respond with looks, wags, actions, etc.) 89 words and phrases. About half of those were classified as 'commands'. For agility, we try to teach a bunch more, starting with the obstacle names then moving on to directional cues like "Go On".

But how many of those verbal cues does the dog fully understand. If they 'knew' them all, we could sit in a chair, not moving and just guide the dog through the agility course with just words. Yes, there are people who have trained to that level, but most of us must support the verbal cues with all our non-verbal cues: arms, feet, body location, motion, where we are looking. And if some of those cues give the dog conflicting information? In most cases, the dog will go with the non-verbal cue. This is why you hear people come off a course saying "I was yelling for that A-Frame and he still took the off-course jump." He read the body and feet pointing towards that off-course jump as more convincing than the verbal. Because he is a dog and the dog-to-dog communication said "jump".

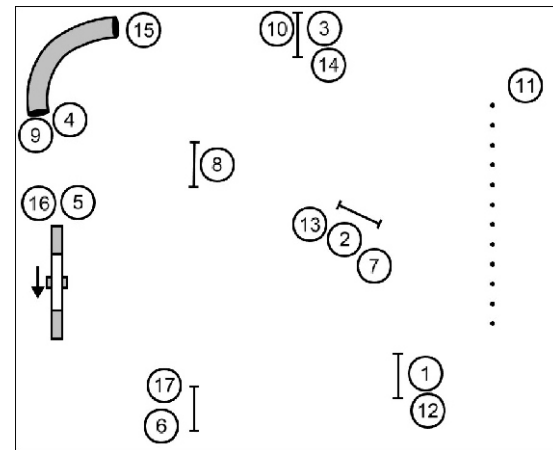
This emphasis on non-verbal cues has saved many a run as well. Countless times I have called out the wrong obstacle name or "Left" when I should have said "Right".

When all the other cues are indicating something different, the verbal is ignored.

How many people do you know who talk too much? They may go on about what you consider trivial or unimportant things. They may repeat themselves, feeling that you don't understand them, or their idea needs more emphasis, or they feel you aren't paying attention (which may actually be true). And the more they talk, the more you tune out or avoid them. Your dog may feel this way about you. Changing the trivial/unimportant into something exciting and relevant is a matter of making the subject worthwhile for the dog (i.e. rewards), which is a different article topic. People attend to the words of someone who is concise and succinct. The words of those that don't say much generally matter the most. We need to be that person for our dog on course.

You need to analyze a course and decide what truly requires a verbal cue. Hint: most jumps don't. If the obstacle is on the dog's path and they are continuing straight, you probably don't need to call it out. Think about how you would navigate for a person driving. You give major landmarks and enough information for smooth turns. And if the person starts to veer off the path, you will give a correcting cue. "Not this turn, the next one."

Here is an example of what verbals might be used on this course (and where the dog would be when it is called out): (start line) "OK", (as dog commits to #3, depending on where you are positioned) "Come Tunnel", (as dog enters #4) "Teeter", (as dog commits to #7) "Tunnel", (as dog exits tunnel) "Weave", (after #17) "Good Boy!". And that's it. The rest of the obstacles are either on the dog's obvious path or need to be handled with non-verbal cues. Note that I'm calling out the 'major' end-of-line obstacles. Saying "Jump" for #2/7/13 doesn't really



Agility course

give the dog much information. You could actually run this course with only one verbal: "OK".

If your dog is totally ignoring verbals, train to making it worth their while. Train your dog to respond to a single cue by using it only once and consistently reward for correct reactions. Jackpot for speedy, immediate response and you'll get that response more.

Next time you practice a sequence or a course, take a vow of silence after you release the dog. See how well your dog reads your non-verbal cues to get to the correct obstacle. Where do you need verbals? (1) When you can't be there. (2) when your motion needs to conflict with what the dog should do (and you must really train this), (3) when your dog can't see you, and/or (4) when you fall down and need them to go on. In general, use verbals like you would a strong spice, less is usually more, but some is very tasty. Better Practice!



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