

K N O W L E D G E

EQUALS SPEED

By Dawn Weaver



As 'Knowledge Equals Speed' is to be the title of my book when it makes its debut, I thought that it would also be a good title and theme for a series of training articles. I make no apology that the way I train and handle my dogs is often quite different from the 'norm', so don't be surprised at some of my reasons for training and handling the way I do.

My handling and training methods have evolved from allowing my dogs to teach me how they want to be handled. For example, noting where they slow, however slightly, during a sequence, has taught me that they really do want to know where they are going next. Once I realised that all my dogs wanted was information or knowledge of the next direction, I started to think about how to do this so that they could happily keep driving forwards. Whenever my dogs go the 'wrong' way, I take note that I have cued them incorrectly, rather than just blaming my dog and learning nothing from them. Let's face it, this is what a lot of people do. I personally don't believe that dogs make mistakes on courses. The reason is that I know that I have either cued that direction to the dog or trained the dog to do that obstacle. I am directly responsible for everything that happens on and in between agility equipment.

I have another theory which may seem strange: I will always favour long-term speed over and above short-term gain. In other words, if there is a course where I can't get somewhere in time and would therefore have to push hard out of a tunnel, as in Diagram 1 (if I met this while on the move, not at the start of a course), I would allow my dog to carry on driving over the wrong obstacle to keep him flowing rather than him lose speed over time because I wanted a clear round on this course. This is because, if I couldn't cue the turn out of the tunnel in plenty of time, I would have to be right on top of my dog as he exited the tunnel to get that sharp turn and he wouldn't see me coming. I wouldn't want to risk a collision or take the ground he needed after the tunnel.

Likewise if I realised that I hadn't given my dog an early enough command to pull him from an off-course obstacle; rather than shout loudly and worry my dog, I would allow him to carry on over the wrong obstacle. There is no situation on an agility course that would ever persuade me to shout at my dog; it makes me cringe sometimes when I am judging and I see handlers do this. The

right course is never more important than my dog's feelings! - I did warn you that I look at things in a 'different' perspective! I believe that my dogs are only going to be happy to run fast for me if they know that I will never shout or unnecessarily break their flow in the ring. I want them to trust me that nothing bad is ever going to happen to them.

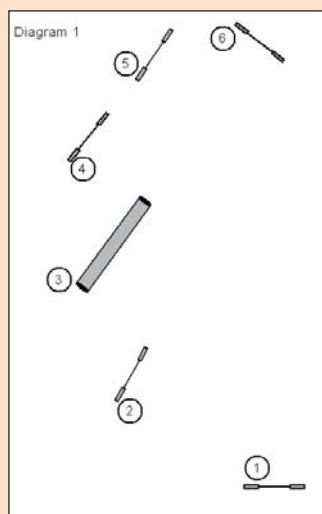
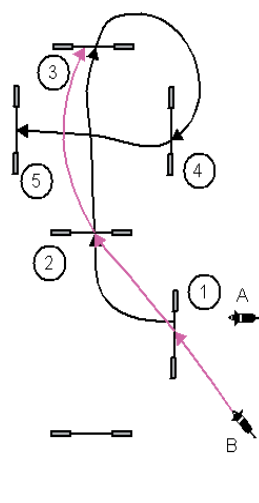


Diagram 2



Now, let's look at the title of this article again. If I can give my dogs accurate information about their next direction at all times, they can always be fast on a course. In other words, knowledge = speed. We should bear this in mind when looking at each sequence in these articles.

Diagram 2 shows a fairly common course sequence. The dog



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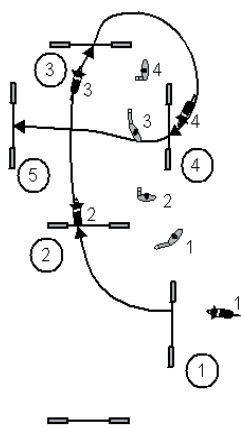
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(labelled 'A') shows where I would start with a long-striding dog. This is because it would be really easy for this type of dog to just bounce the distances diagonally across jumps 1, 2 and 5. To avoid this we want to make sure that the dog has done his cornering between jumps 1 and 2 and he is already straight to go across the box. 'B' shows the position I would start a small-striding dog which turns easily, doesn't bounce distances and can therefore take the direct route.

Diagram 3



If we look at the handling for this scenario, the main thing to remember is that the handler must be turning on the way to the next jump so the dog knows where he is going next.

In Diagram 3 (the handler position that corresponds to the dog position is numbered) you can see that at each point the dog is being given a direction in which

to drive. The handler is not running up to the jump facing straight on until the dog has taken off. What we need to remember is that our dogs have lots to think about when they are jumping. For example, the speed of their approach to an obstacle, which leading leg they are on, their take-off point and their trajectory across the jump pole. The least the handler can do is provide accurate information on the approach to an obstacle about the direction in which the dog is supposed to proceed. Handlers need to realize that the distance from a jump that your dog takes off from is always going to be equal to the distance that he needs to land in. Look at the difference in the landing place in the next diagram (where we want the dog to wrap around a wing), between a dog that is given no information and a dog that has the information he needs to enable him to shorten stride and corner.

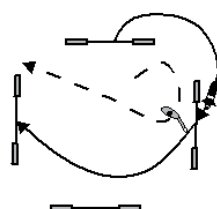
In the top Diagram the handler is cueing straight on when approaching the jump and, if that is the last thing

the dog sees before he pushes off, then he cannot shorten stride nor reduce power in the air. If the handler consistently neglects to inform the dog of his next direction while on the approach to an obstacle, he will end up with a dog making huge corners through lack of information, or a dog on a permanent short stride as he has to be ready when the handler decides to 'change his mind' while he is over a jump pole. I don't want to be unfair on my dog by providing late information or none at all, as I want him to be able to drive forwards using the full length of his natural stride, confident in the knowledge that I will be informing him - in plenty of time - for him to react for his next direction.

If we look at Diagram 3 again, it is handler position 4 that is really important. If the handler is already facing jump 5 as the dog drives around the corner of the box, then he will already know that the back of jump 2 is not his next direction. However lots of handlers end up in the wrong position here and you can see this in Diagram 5.

This is because handlers like to watch their dogs. If you are looking back at your dog in this instance then you cannot be cueing the next direction effectively, i.e. facing the direction in which you want the dog to drive. The handler should step back into the corner of the

Diagram 5



box and pivot on the spot as shown in Diagram 5. You may lose sight of your dog for a second but you will be cueing the correct direction.

More from Dawn next month.

Diagram 4

