

Clean Run

I asked Janet Gauntt to design a weekend's training for us. Janet's reply, by email, was argumentative, indifferent to the design standard of the *Clean Run*, and quite different from the way we do things. In short, it was brilliant. This issue of the *Clean Run* presents Janet's training plan in its entirety.

Although the lesson plan is for the Intermediate class only, this is excellent reading for anyone who is in the position to have input to the design of a training program. We are already talking at Good Dog about redesigning the way we do Advanced training to accommodate some of the practical issues raised by Janet.

I'd like to hear back from the subscribers to the *Clean Run* about Janet Gauntt. I would personally love to see her contribute on a regular basis. So let me know what you think; and I'll let her know.

-- Bud Houston

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Designing and Instructing the Club Agility Training Session

So someone says to you:

Your assignment is to design a weekend curriculum for an advanced class and an intermediate class. You have exactly 15 minutes between classes and only 2 or 3 hands to help you transition the exercise sets, so the sets need to be easily adaptable. Your field is 200 x 175. Your equipment includes:

- A-Frame, Teeter, Walk & Cross-Over
- pipe tunnel & collapsed tunnel
- 6-set, 4 3-set, 12-set weaves
- single-bar jumps, a double and a triple
- Table

There are about 20 students in each class, so there should be 4 or 5 stations for each class. Problem dogs include: 2 slow and shy shelties; several slightly out of control dogs (shelties, corgies & aussies)

The advanced class includes a couple MAD dogs, two AAD, 7 or 8 AD, and the rest pre-starters. The intermediate class is comprised mostly of handlers who have been training for less than a year.

You need to draw each set; set up the objective; and inform the instructor of possible problem areas and any fixes you anticipate.

Bad news Bud. Were this my club, I would refuse the assignment as-is. I ask for certain conditions when I design classes.

1. I want to have equipment time with my own dog in a class I am not teaching. As I don't take payment for teaching, this is how the club pays me back for this and all the other instructing I do.
2. I don't teach back-to-back classes. Agility sessions usually last on the order of 1 hour & 15 minutes (including the equipment setup and/or pick-up time). It's very hard to be enthusiastic as an instructor if you teach for 2 1/2 hours solid. Enthusiastic students and dogs come from enthusiastic instructors.
3. I don't teach alone. It is not possible for me to do a good job of monitoring 4-5 exercises going on at once. An unmonitored training session can quickly produce a problem that would have been trivial to nip in the bud, but is hard to stop once it is ingrained. Also, I have noted that unattended exercise sets are quickly monopolized by students who either are experiencing a problem that they are struggling unsuccessfully without guidance to solve, or - I'm sorry to say - by students that are just plain (consciously or unconsciously) selfish. People are also notoriously bad at judging their own performances. Someone will run a set successfully, they think, and stop.

You as an outsider will notice that there was a refusal at obstacle so & so or that you have time to pop out for lunch while the dog does the dog walk or that that toenail in the contact was nothing more than sheer providence. And so you will get them to work on those things that they don't realize is a problem.

4. If a student isn't there to say 'Yo' (standing there without dog, ready and willing to help move equipment) when attendance is called, he/she is not allowed to participate in the first exercise set in class.

So... on these conditions, I agree to teach/design one class for you. I expect to participate with my own dog(s) in the other class. For the purposes of this discussion, I agree to teach your intermediate class. Ask me some other time how I would design/run an advanced class.

Administration of the Intermediate Training Session

You have exactly 15 minutes between classes.

That's fine. It takes my classes about 15 minutes to set up three different exercises.

...and only 2 or 3 hands to help you transition the exercise sets,

Nix on the "only 2 or 3 hands". When I arrive at class, I arrive with three copies of the class exercises for the day. Attendance is taken, then I pass out the course diagrams to different people each week (everyone must learn to course build). I then follow up behind them tweaking the arrangements slightly as needed. Dogs must be secured while equipment is being set up; this is both a safety & fairness issue. No one is to be excused from equipment setup for physical reasons; if nothing else they are capable of walking and carrying jump poles or directing equipment setup. If they aren't capable of doing that, they shouldn't be doing agility that day. After all equipment is set up, everyone gathers together with their dogs, any unsupervised training patterns are briefly explained (we don't usually number training patterns) & I split the group up into the day's working groups.

Working groups are balanced in ability and size. I do not for example lump together all the fast dogs or the slow dogs. I want groups to finish up exercises at approximately the same time. I also want everyone in the class to observe different problem and solutions (today's students may be tomorrow's instructors). If the class splits nicely in size among the height divisions 12/18 and 24/30 I will often do that, otherwise I just arrange the groups such that they are balanced in ability.

so the sets need to be easily adaptable.

In our club, we used to try and coordinate the exercises between the classes, but we gave up. Overall, we have a very good work ethic within the club when it comes to moving equipment. When everyone's working at it, it takes very little time to set up for the next class. Also the nature of the exercises needed by the two levels are so different, that not much time is going to be saved.

For maximum teaching efficiency in our club, we always have two designated instructors per class (there are 15 - 20 students in a class). When we are outside & have plenty of room, I design three exercise sets; two with an instructor and one without.

Designing the Intermediate Lesson Plan

Every lesson plan (at the intermediate level) should satisfy the following requirements:

1. one exercise should emphasize control in the form of good callofs, side switching and/or directional control.
2. one exercise should emphasize dog experience in the form of an awkward approach to at least one piece of equipment -or- a discrimination.
3. the remaining exercise should emphasize flow. No callofs, minimal side switching, etc. Just speed & fun.
4. dogs should be able to get experience on every piece of equipment every week.

You will notice there are no distance exercises planned. These days I am of the opinion that distance exercises should be withheld until the Advanced level of classes.

You'll also notice there is not a whole lot of emphasis on developing complex handling skills. Today's Starters courses (USDAA) and Novice courses (AKC) are fairly simple in design calling for no more than 1 or 2 side switches and no more than 1 or 2 callofs. Class lesson plans should therefore be balanced between developing basic equipment performance (remember most students do not have equipment of their own at home), good flow & a speedy, motivated performance, and some only relatively simple handling skills.

When I have space, I tend to design training patterns that are 7 or 8 obstacles in length. This is because that gives me the option to put in a couple of jumps or tunnels to get a dog up to full speed approaching some critical part of a training pattern that would be trivial at a slow speed or taken from a standstill. Also, numerous psychological experiments tell us that human beings can easily memorize 7 or 8 items. This is half of a typical Starters or Novice course. Make the students memorize courses by halves & this should directly carry over into their course planning skills; they just need to coursewalk and think of the course as two separate training patterns. If your working area is such that you can lay your training patterns end to end and you have time and dog energy left at the end of a class, you can reinforce this lesson by getting the class to run the two training patterns together as if they were a full course.

Running the Intermediate Level Class

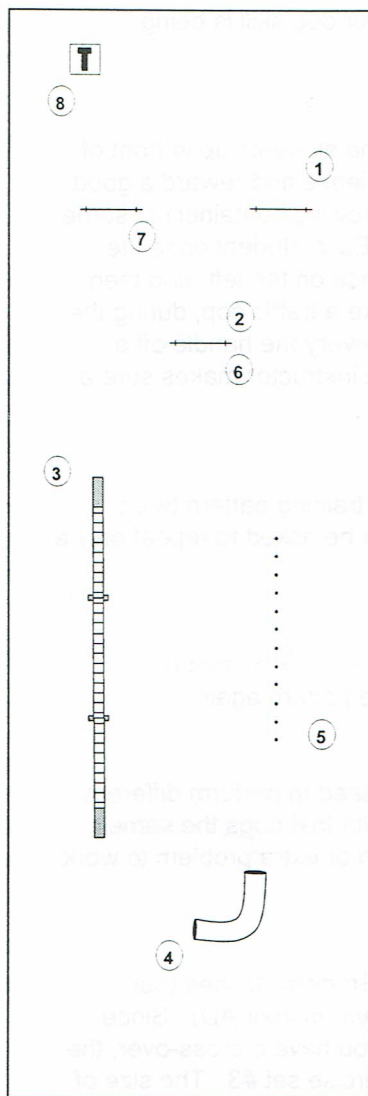
Barring medical problems or dogs being worked back from a layoff, all dogs at the Starters (Intermediate) level begin the exercises at whatever is currently defined as 'full height' for that dog; the handlers may choose, depending on how tired their dog is getting, to opt for lower jump and/or A-frame heights towards the end of the session to keep the dog fresh and enthusiastic.

One of the things I have noticed about designing a good lesson on developing handling skills is that it is impossible for the handler to focus on developing these skills if the dog is of an experience level or of a certain nature or in one of those training plateaus such that the dog is just plain having problems with the equipment. You can design a course section planning to have the students work on switching behind at a certain obstacle and then find, due to a problem with either that obstacle or another obstacle earlier in the sequence, that the dog is too slow or too unmotivated or too rattled by the time the dog & handler arrive at that brilliantly thought out teaching segment you had planned. And so, they take nothing from the lesson you had planned for them or, worse, they waste class time or become frustrated working out a problem on an obstacle.

Speed, motivation & correct obstacle performance are the goals in pre-practice. I line the students up in front of the selected obstacle and they work their dog over that single obstacle, followed by a release and reward a good distance past the obstacle. The reward ideally is a thrown toy or food (in appropriate throwing container) or some good physical game the student has worked out with the dog; less ideal is just praise. Each student does the selected pre-practice obstacles(s) three times being sure to handle once on the right, once on the left, and then either crossing behind or reworking the dog's weakest side. The instructor just works like a traffic cop, during the pre-practice: "Everyone line up behind John", "First dog", "Next dog", "Next dog", "Now everyone handle off a different side, please", etc. If the pre-practice obstacle to be worked on is a contact, the instructor makes sure a contact method appropriate to that dog is being performed correctly.

A dog who experienced problems with a particular part of the pattern may be asked to just work on that bit followed by a release 2 or 3 times on his next turn rather than working through the whole pattern again.

The following lesson plan is taken directly from the lessons we ran this Saturday in our Starters classes (our equivalent to your Intermediate class - this class is for dogs that have one leg or less towards their AD). Since your equipment list does not indicate that you have a long jump, but does indicate that you have a cross-over, the only change I would make would be to substitute the cross-over for the long jump in Exercise set #3. The size of your working area is similar to ours; just lay the training patterns out side by side.



Exercise set #1:

Diagram Key: 3 is dog walk, 4 is open tunnel, 5 is weave poles (12), 8 is pause table, all else are jumps.

Set #1: Ackward approach exercise.

Pre-practice obstacles: Dog Walk - release and Weave poles - release. Hoop should be available for exit end of D/W contact for those students using that method. Following pre-practice, students are to walk the full training pattern & plan their handling. The training pattern is 1 through 8; no lead-off permitted at start. Dogs able to do this on their first pass without problem are to perform a different variant on the second pass: 8-7-2-3-4-5-6-1. Or handlers will be asked to pick a different obstacle to switch behind at. For example, if they left handled the dog to obstacle #4 and then switched behind, they should try to switch behind at obstacle #4.

Some dogs at this level, despite the pre-practice will have a problem with the angled approach to D/W #3 and instructor should work to determine with student the best way of straightening the dog up for the approach. Another common problem is to miss the proper entry to W/P #5. In the event of missed entry, students are to work the dog properly to the end of obstacle #5, release & reward. Then restart the training pattern at pipe tunnel #4 to again approach the weave poles at speed.

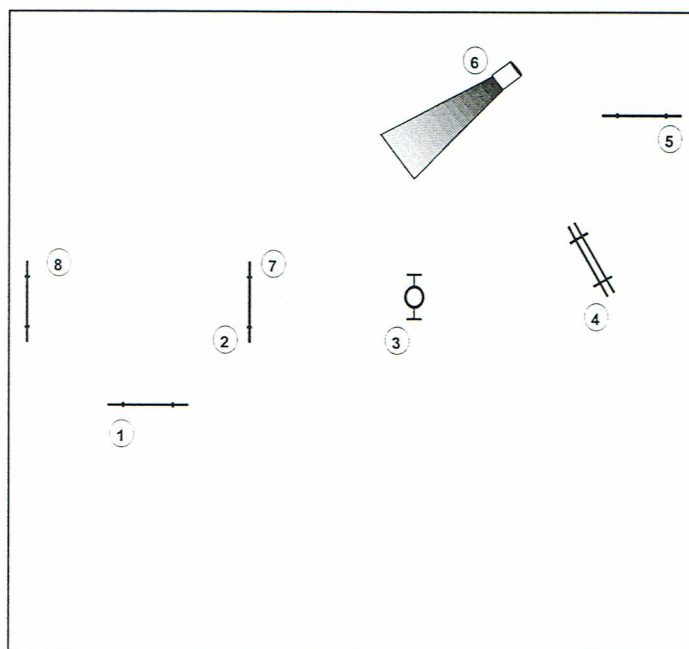
For dogs that are unable at this point in their training to sustain good flow for the full 8 obstacles, student should do 2 or 3 obstacles, release & reward, followed by the next 2 or 3 obstacles in sequence, release & reward, etc.

Exercise set #2:

Diagram Key: 3 is tire, 4 is double, 6 is the A-frame (connect the dots to see the A-frame :), all else are single bars.

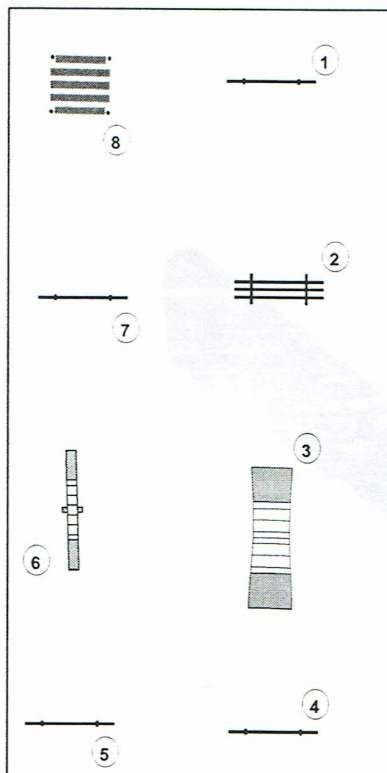
Set #2: Control exercise.

Pre-practice obstacles: Aframe #6 - release, and simple sequence tire #3 - double #4 - release. Exit hoop and/or entrance hoop should be available for dogs training to that method. Instructor should supervise whatever contact method is elected. On Double pre-practice, distinct jump command (ex: "Big Jump!") should be used to emphasize to the dog that the jump is wider than usual. Same rules apply as explained in the prepractice for Set #1.



Following pre-practice, handlers are to walk the training pattern & plan their handling. Lead-off permitted, but note to students that course is more difficult (and a greater challenge to their developing handling skills) if lead-off not performed. Expected problems: dogs off-coursing to the A-frame at #2 - #3 and dogs off-coursing to jump #1 at #7 - #8. Other possible problems: flattening over jump for those handlers who cross behind at double #4. For those handler/dogs for whom this training pattern is trivial, the pattern is to run backward 8 - 1 with the requirement that no lead-off is permitted & handler must start to the right of jump #8.

For off-coursing to the A-frame at #2 - #3. Handler should position dog on stay just after jump #2, walk out & indicate tire, then return to dog and run dog over tire and maybe the double, then release. Handler should then return and restart pattern at obstacle #1. For dogs for whom the A-frame persists in being a big magnet, the instructor should be prepared to step in and block the 'frame. For off-coursing to jump #1 at #7 - #8: handlers generally just need to repeat this beginning with their dog stopped at the base of the A-frame and pointed on the #7 - #1 course line; most handlers can work out the timing of their "right" or "come" command correctly after 1-2 additional tries. Instructor should be prepared to step in & block jump #1 if dog is too heavily patterned or insistent on ignoring handler, as well as work on proper command timing/body language with the handler.



Exercise set #3:

Diagram Key: 2 is triple, 3 is collapsed tunnel, 6 is teeter, 8 is long jump. All else are single jumps.

Set #3: Flow, fun & familiarization.

This is an unsupervised exercise set. Students that are assigned to exercise Set #2 can practice this set when it is not their jump height. Pattern is simply to run obstacles in sequence 1 - 8 with release in the middle and/or at the end. Slow/unmotivated dogs should have more frequent releases. Dogs needing more control can be called off; for example 1-2-3-calloff-6-7-calloff. Since these dogs are at the intermediate level rather than the advanced level, snookering type calloffs should be avoided (for example 1-calloff-3-4-5-calloff-7-8). On this particular set, some good reminders for the students are to remember to give their spread jump commands for the triple & long jump and to work on nice, straight performance of the collapsed tunnel (no side cloth-hugging!).

Some Additional Design Guidelines

1. Don't try to design a set of exercises that's going to fix everyone's problems. It can't be done in a hour.
2. Keep a training log of what the class has worked on lately. This will alert you as to obstacles and common obstacle configurations that you haven't worked on lately. It is very easy to for example, forget to set out the long jump. Then you and your students go to a trial where the judge seems determined to make up for all those other trials where he/she didn't use the long jump.

3. After class while it is still fresh, confer with the other instructor & see if there is any pattern to the problems you are seeing with the class; for example - if many dogs in the class are slow on the see-saw or knocking bars on the triple or can only make correct entry into the weaves if they are stopped or slowed down before the obstacle - you know you have been neglecting this & need to work on this. It is not a bad idea to keep notes on the individual students either. This can act as a rough metric so that you can determine whether or not your class is making progress in those long months between trial seasons.
4. Keep copies of courses you have seen at trial. If you are having trouble thinking up a training pattern, these can be a good source of inspiration. Also, when designing you can unconsciously lock yourself into using certain configurations. Or not using certain configurations because you think of them as "unfair" (unfair or not, you and/or your students are going to see them at trial so you may as well "Train, Don't Complain" as Jack Godsil used to say).

