

## Contact Training

Objectives of a contact training program:

- The dog runs the contact obstacles
- The dog assumes a two-on/two-off position
- The dog leaves the down contact zone only when released by the handler
- The dog performs down contacts independent of the handler's position.

Regardless of training initiatives, if the handler constantly places himself in the context of the performance when handling, the handling develops into cues for the dog. The dog may not perform the contact obstacles reliably in the absence of these cues.

Our objective is to take the handler *out* of the context of the performance of the contact obstacle. The performance requirement remains the same, regardless of what the handler does. This isn't to say that the only value in teaching the dog an independent contact performance is in preparation for USDAA gamblers. There are times even in a standard course that the handler can solve a judge's riddle by taking a strategic position on the course while *trusting the dog* to perform the contact obstacle.

And further, a properly trained dog will not only perform the contact obstacles reliably, but will do so at top speed! Speed is an equal part of the equation. Who cares if a dog has a reliable contact performance, if that performance costs him 8 or 10 seconds, instead of 2.4 seconds.

### Teaching Two-On/Two-Off Contacts with a Target

This training technique is based upon a prerequisite skill, teaching the dog to eagerly run to touch the target with his nose. A "target" is a clear plastic square, or a round margarine plastic lid used as tool to teach your dog the two-on/two off position at on the down-side contact zone of the dogwalk or of the A-frame.

#### Step 1 – Introduce the Two-on/Two-off Position

For this exercise we will push a short table against the down ramp of the dogwalk, so that the dog doesn't have very far to travel to get to the target (about the length of the down contact zone).

Quite simply the handler will draw the dog into a 2-on and 2-off position. The front feet are on the ground while the back feet are on the plank. It is okay if the dog actually sits on the contact. So long as the dog holds that position the handler will reward the dog with food treats (occasionally repeating the operant word "bottom" or whatever word the handler desires to use for this performance.

You will have to develop a word to release your dog from the position on the bottom of the ramp. "Okay!" should do the trick.

Note: If your dog leaves the ramp you should neutrally break off the reward and praise and simply walk away from the obstacle. We're leaving it to the dog to figure out what it is that earns him the reward, and what makes the reward stop. The dog can be very clever about figuring this out. Once he gets it... you'll have a contact trained dog.

#### Step 2 – Vary the Handling Position

You want to be careful in the early stages that your position and movement doesn't make you (the handler) a part of the performance. To that end, once your dog is proficient with step #3, you should begin to vary your handling position relative to the dog and the ramp of the dogwalk.

Remember, for this exercise we have pushed a short table against the down ramp of the dogwalk, so that the dog doesn't have very far to travel to get to the target (about the length of the down contact zone). This step has not changed the arrangement of the training props.

Varying your handling position means you'll work the dog on your right side, and you'll work the dog on your left. You'll work from the opposite side of the target. You'll work five feet away from the dog, and you'll work eight feet away from the dog.

When you add a bit of distance to the exercise the dog will be more likely to step off the ramp. Again, if your dog leaves the ramp you should gently, neutrally, pick up his rear end and put it back on the ramp. Continue with this step until you can rely on your dog to stay in position without regard to what position you have taken relative to the dog and the ramp.

### **Step 3 – A Step Back in the Chain**

For this exercise we will push a *tall* table against the down ramp of the dogwalk, so that the dog has farther to travel to get to the target (about half the length of the down ramp).

Repeat the work you did in steps #3 and #4.

We are avidly interested in this step in the speed the dog is working. We want no kind of hesitation of slow-footed work. So your command to work the dog should be upbeat and adamant. You should avoid at *all costs* any suggestion of nagging the dog, meaning silly words intended to slow the dog down like *easy* or *wait!* We don't want a slow performance. We want the dog to run down the ramp and assume the two-on/two-off position.

If your dog will not run, you should return to a previous step to reinforce the reward for touching the target. Find a way to be more upbeat, electric, and energetic.

### **Step 4 – Running the Full Length Obstacle**

This will be the easy step if you have faithfully followed all of the previous steps without being in a big hurry. Encourage your dog to run the length of the dogwalk. Be motivated yourself and highly animated. As the dog begins the descent of the down ramp, give your "Touch" command, and look for your dog to assume the position.

You should spend a lot of time with working at a distance and *whenever* possible, removing yourself from the context of the performance. You should work 5 feet laterally from your dog; and you should work 10 feet laterally from your dog. You should work equally on the right and on the left. You should also leave your dog on a sit/stay and lead out to the other side of the dogwalk and call the dog over.

At this stage of your training you should *not* sequence another obstacle *after* the dogwalk. For many dogs doing another obstacle is a reward. So if your dog breaks the two-on/two-off position and goes on to another obstacle, then he has been rewarded for breaking the position. You want to avoid that at all costs.

It is okay, however, to work a sequence leading up to the dogwalk. It is a good idea to use a sequence, especially a jumping sequence to begin work on the dogwalk. Jumping gets the dog up to speed and that is how you want to practice the dogwalk, with the dog working at full speed.

### **Step 5 – Proofing the Performance**

When your dog is running the length of the dogwalk to the two-on/two-off position, you should begin proofing the performance. You can do things like continuing your motion, while requiring the dog to stop. Or, you could stop altogether, requiring your dog to go on. A more advanced proofing exercise would be for you to move in an oblique path while your dog goes right down to the bottom of the ramp. You should introduce this increasing lateral distance modestly at first, taking only a 20° angle away from the ramp. Then as you are confident in your dog's

performance you can increase the severity of the angle, about 10° at a time, until you are moving fully 90° away from the ramp and the dog.

### **What You Can Do at Home**

The first two steps of this training program are perfect for work at home. You can introduce the dog to the target and do independent sends to the target in the living room. If you would only commit 15 minutes a day to this kind of training, you can take these foundation skills to the training center and get immediate returns from creating that foundation.

The first two steps are perfect for work in a stairwell at home, if you are lucky enough to have one.

The later steps require that you have a contact obstacle in your backyard. Though this training method specifically calls for a dogwalk, the method will work as well on an A-frame. It's quite easy and inexpensive to build adequate training obstacles for the back yard. If you have a table, or even a sawhorse, all you need to do is fix ramps going up and going down securely and safely to completely work through this training method. You don't really need painted contact zones either. A two-on/two-off method is pretty unambiguous. If you've got that position, you'll surely have your dog walking through and standing in the contact zones.

The most important thing you have to remember is to be patient. As a student once described step #1, "Do it. And, do it again. Do it over and over again. Do it until you think you are going to die. Then do it some more." You'll never be sorry for taking too much time and too many repetitions on a training step. You'll be eternally sorry for not taking enough.

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