

# But the Tunnel Was Right in Front of Him!

BY LINDA MECKLENBURG

*Editors' Note: This article was first published in Clean Run in July 1997. We feel that this article warrants reprinting as it contains information useful to newcomers in the sport. There are also those that may have read the article two years ago, and now find themselves in need of a reminder as THEY are now the instructors.*

The handler's ability to direct his dog around the agility course is crucial to the success of the run. The dog's attention is directed toward the side of the handler when running the course. The handler must bear this in mind as he directs his dog to the obstacles. With its attention focused on the handler, the dog's field of view is limited. Although an obstacle may appear to the handler to be directly in the dog's path, the dog may run past as though it never saw the obstacle. Many refusals and run-outs occur because the handler did not adequately ensure that the intended obstacle was within the dog's field of view. Thoughtfulness about what the dog is focused on, together with appropriate handler positioning and verbal commands, may prevent errors on the course.

To understand what the dog sees while it's on course, the handler should imagine that the dog's field of view is limited as if the dog was wearing blinkers like a racehorse.

If the intended obstacle is straight ahead, and the handler is fast enough to maintain position with the dog, the dog can focus on both the handler *and* the obstacle ahead. **Figures 1 through 4** illustrate the dog's field of view\*. As the handler's position changes, the dog will keep the handler within its field of view. As long as the handler is ahead of the dog or even with the dog, the dog can maintain focus on the handler *and* on the job at hand.

If the intended obstacle is on the side of the dog *opposite* the handler as shown in **Figure 5**, the handler must direct the dog's attention away from himself for the dog to see the obstacle. This is difficult to do with intermediate dogs that are not yet confident. Looking away from the handler to locate an obstacle on a verbal command is a skill gained through experience and training. A similar situation arises if the handler attempts to run a curved series of obstacles on the outside of the arc. If the handler is fast enough to remain ahead of the dog, the dog is able to maintain both the handler and the obstacles within its field of view. If the handler gets behind, the dog's attention is directed to the outside, away from the obstacles as shown in **Figure 6**. The handler must direct the dog's attention away from himself for the dog to see the jumps.

\* NOTE: These drawings do *not* attempt to depict the dog's *actual* field of view, which is in fact larger than shown.

## Related Readings:

- "Get Outta Here!", *Clean Run* Vol. 2, #19
- "One Potato Two Potato", *Clean Run* Vol. 2, #27
- "Working on the Send-Away", *Clean Run* Vol. 2, #29
- "What's the Buzz", *Clean Run* Vol. 3, #6
- "What's the Buzz", *Clean Run* Vol. 3, #7

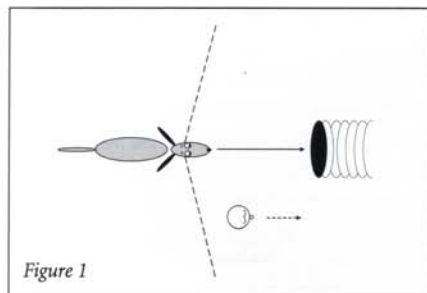


Figure 1

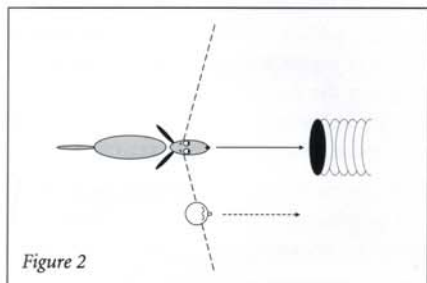


Figure 2

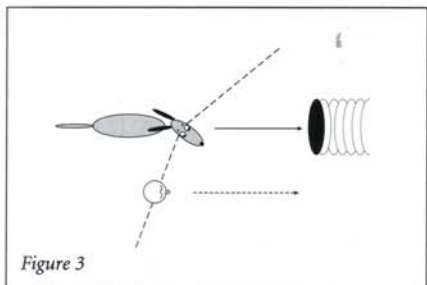


Figure 3

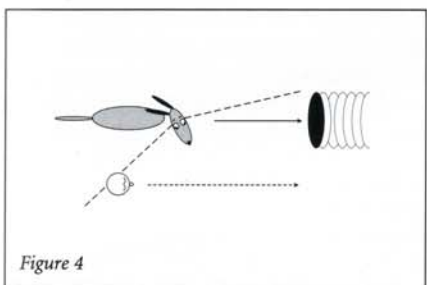


Figure 4

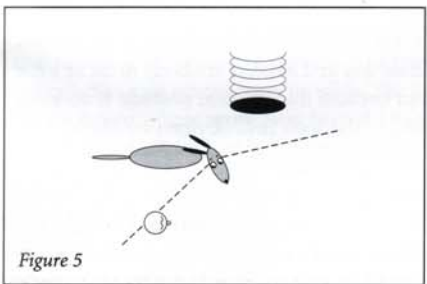


Figure 5

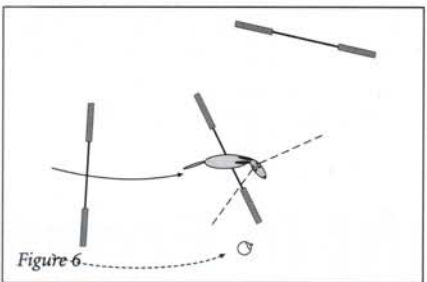


Figure 6

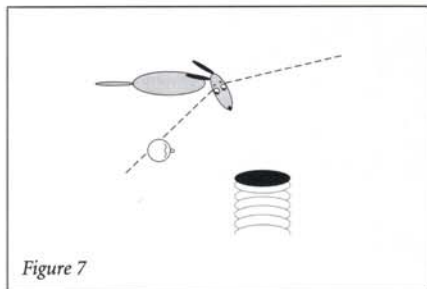


Figure 7

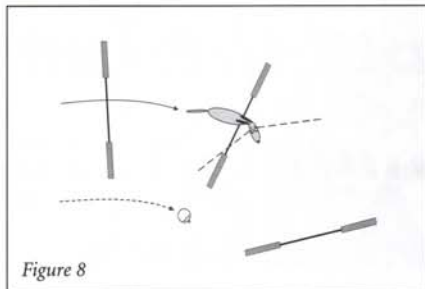


Figure 8

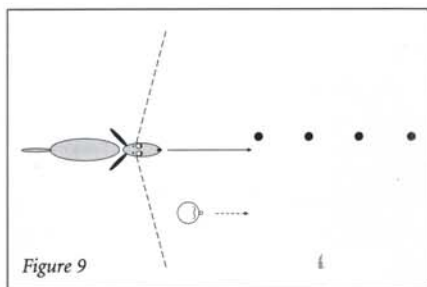


Figure 9

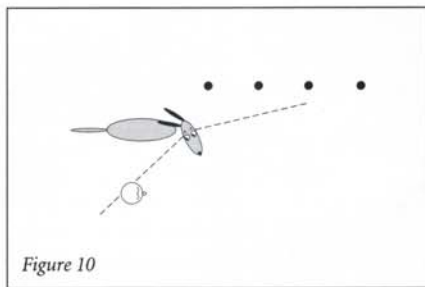


Figure 10

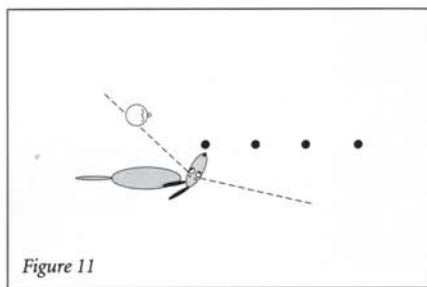


Figure 11

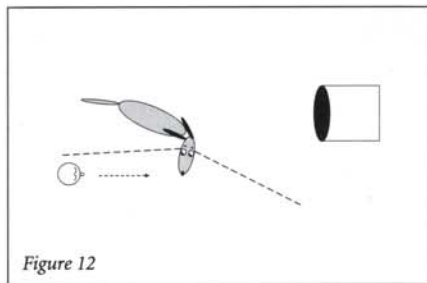


Figure 12

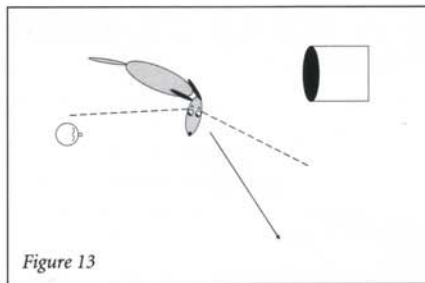


Figure 13

Where the handler is on the *same* side of the dog as the intended obstacle, as in **Figure 7**, both the handler and the tunnel are within the dog's field of view. This handler should be able to direct the dog into the tunnel easily, as opposed to the handler in **Figure 5** whose dog must look away on a verbal command to locate the tunnel. Similarly, if the handler runs a curved series of obstacles on the inside of the arc, the dog is able to maintain both the handler and the obstacles within its field of view. The handler shown in **Figure 8** should be able to direct the dog over the jumps easily, as opposed to the handler in **Figure 6** whose dog must look away on a verbal command to locate the next jump.

If the course allows, it is desirable for the handler to adjust his position so the intended obstacles are always within the dog's field of view.

Some handlers find that their intermediate level dogs surprisingly make weave pole entries more reliably from the off-side. With the dog on the handler's left, unless the handler is ahead of the dog as in **Figure 9**, the weave poles are not within the dog's field of view as shown in **Figure 10**. The dog must look away from the handler on a verbal command to locate the poles. Compare this situation to that in **Figure 11** where the handler is on the same side of the dog as the obstacle. With the dog on the handler's right, the handler and the weave poles are *both* within the dog's field of view. This handler should be able to direct the dog into the poles easily (assuming the dog understands offside weaves), as opposed to the handler in **Figure 10** whose dog must look away on a verbal command to locate the poles.

If the handler isn't fast enough to maintain position with the dog, the dog's attention will be directed toward the handler's position *behind* it—not ahead. As the handler's position gets farther and farther behind, the dog will inevitably deviate toward the side of the handler as shown in **Figure 12**. When this happens, the intermediate dog and handler are likely to incur a run-out because the intended obstacle is no longer within the dog's field of view (see **Figure 13**).

A handler positioned behind his dog sends the message "slow down, we're not going forward". The dog has no way of knowing that the handler is merely unable to keep pace and has not

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intentionally positioned himself behind. (Consider the handler's position if he *wanted* to reverse direction; the handler would slow down. In this case the handler has *not* actually changed pace, but his position behind sends the same message to the dog). The dog is unlikely to continue on in a straight line unless specifically trained to ignore the handler's position and go ahead on a verbal command. Looking away from the handler to locate an obstacle and proceed ahead to it on a verbal command is a skill that must be gained through experience and training.

The classic example of a run-out induced by the handler's position behind the dog occurs when the course design concludes with a straight line of jumps toward the finish. Nothing could be more difficult for the intermediate dog, particularly a fast one that outruns its handler. By the time the dog gets over the second jump in the sequence, the handler will be behind. The dog's attention will be directed behind him, not ahead. An intermediate dog lacks the experience and training required to ignore the handler's position behind and to focus on the obstacle ahead on a verbal command alone. The dog is likely to bypass the last jump because it is not within the dog's field of view as shown in **Figure 14**. Unfortunately, the dog will often cross the finish at this point and incur a failure to perform at the last jump.

If the handler is not fast enough to maintain position with the dog, an off-course is likely where obstacles are frequently placed in close proximity to test obstacle discrimination. If the handler is behind the dog, the dog's attention will be directed behind him, not ahead. This may result in the incorrect obstacle becoming the primary obstacle in the dog's field of view as shown in **Figure 15** (in this example the A-frame is the correct obstacle).

Dogs must learn to look for an obstacle when given a verbal command. The handler should teach the dog a command that encourages the dog to look ahead for an obstacle and continue forward regardless of the handler's position. Many handlers use a *Go!* or *Go On!* command as shown in **Figure 16** which means "continue on present course, the obstacle ahead is correct; ignore handler position." To be effective, this command *must* be timed so that the dog processes it while still moving straight ahead and has the intended obstacle in its field of view.

The handler should also teach the dog a verbal command and arm signal that encourage the dog to look to the side away from the handler for an obstacle and to move laterally away from the handler's position. A *Get Out!* command is used by many handlers to mean "move/look laterally (sideways) relative to handler position". An opposite arm signal can be used as an adjunct to the verbal command. The *Get Out!* command may help to direct the dog to the tunnel on the opposite side of the dog as shown in **Figure 5**, or to the tunnel ahead of the dog as shown in **Figure 13**. The *Get Out!* command may help to direct the dog to the A-frame instead of the tunnel as shown in **Figure 15**. In **Figure 17**, if the dog is focused on the handler's position behind it, a *Get Out!* command may successfully salvage the situation and maneuver the dog out to the intended obstacle as illustrated. In **Figure 18**, if the dog is focused on the handler's position behind it, a *Go On!* command is now very inappropriate and may in fact result in the dog jumping the incorrect obstacle on the right. A *Get Out!* command may successfully maneuver the dog out to the intended obstacle.

The handler's ability to direct his dog around the agility course is an important skill. When running a course, *the dog's attention is directed toward the side of the handler*. The handler must remember this as he directs his dog to the obstacles. It is desirable for the handler to adjust his position on the course so that the intended obstacle is within the dog's field of view. At more advanced levels of competition, this is not always possible. The handler should teach the dog commands that encourage the dog to look or move away from the handler should the course demand. For the commands to be effective, it is then handler's responsibility to understand when it is appropriate to use them and to do so in a timely fashion. 🐾

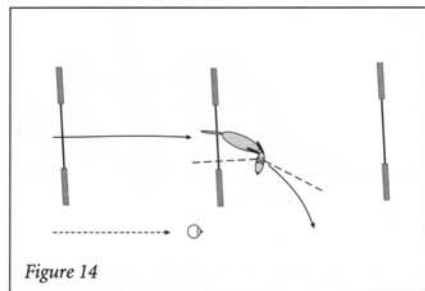


Figure 14

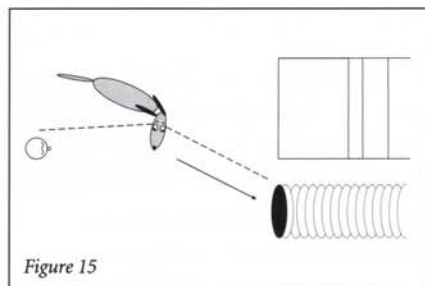


Figure 15

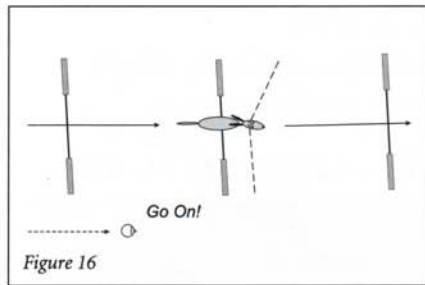


Figure 16

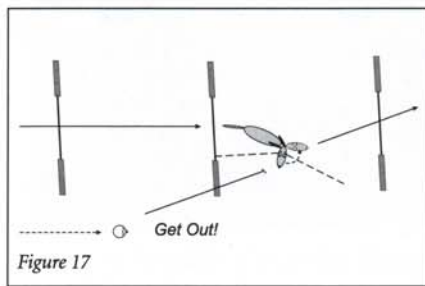


Figure 17

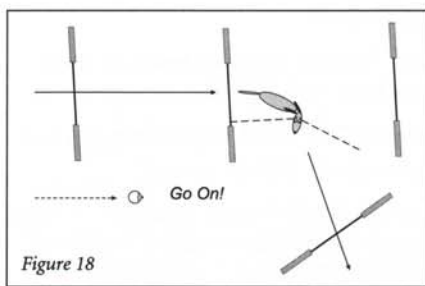


Figure 18

Him...!