Running Contacts: Is Your Dog a Natural?

By Linda Mecklenburg

Have you seen dogs that perform the A-frame at top speed, vaulting over the top, onto the downside into the yellow and off without hesitation? Have you wondered how that was taught? Usually, if you ask about the training technique used, the response will be that it was not taught, the dog "just did it naturally." *

A true running contact executed at *full* speed, with no deceleration, is totally dependent on the dog's natural stride length. If the dog's natural stride is the correct length, no "training" is necessary for the dog to hit the contact zones. In fact, most contact training techniques are contraindicated for these dogs as they require the dog to *shorten* the stride and/or slow down. Most dogs that hit the contact zones while moving at top speed are hitting them incidentally; the dogs have no awareness of the behavior and haven't been "trained" to do so (despite what their owners may claim!). They are just running over the obstacle. A good test to see whether the dog has been "trained" to perform the contact zones is to switch it to non-regulation equipment such as an A-frame or dogwalk with 8' ramps. Is the dog's contact zone performance still consistent?

Many of the methods used to obtain running contacts are purely dependent on the dog's natural stride length and it makes no difference what "training" technique is used. If the dog's natural stride length is not correct, the training will fail. For example, hoops on the descent side of the A-frame force the dog to lower its head and attempt to create "muscle memory" for that behavior on the downside of the A-frame. Lowering of the head on the A-frame descent is not a natural behavior for most dogs, and when you remove the prop, the dog is not likely to lower his head any longer. Often the hoop also forces the dog to add a stride that it would not naturally take, so when you remove the prop, that stride is not taken. However, using the hoop may allow the dog to develop confidence striding over the obstacle, and if his natural stride carries him into the contact zone, voilá! The hoop technique gets credit for "training" a running contact. If the dog's natural stride is too short to carry him into the contact zone and/or the dog doesn't add the extra stride that the hoop forced, oops! The hoop method is considered to have failed.

Knowledge of stride length is important if you expect your dog to perform the contact obstacles at top speed. Depending on the dog's stride length, some dogs can run right through the contact zones. The average small-sized dog with a 2' long (or "two-slat") stride at top speed is more likely to be successful with a running A-frame where the contact zone is 42" long than a very large-sized dog with a 5' long (or "five-slat") stride.

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* ***Coming soon via Clean Run:*** *A technique that helps to regulate the dog's striding on the contact obstacles and develop natural running contacts in those dogs that have the potential.* ***Below:*** *A photo of Linda's Border Collie, Stellar, demonstrating his two-stride A-frame. Photo by Lisa Sponsler.*

Figure 11 shows the front feet going to the ground and the dashed line depicts the rear feet coming to rest on the contact.

At 5'6", some large dogs can actually put one stride on the up ramp and one stride over the top of the A-frame, landing in the contact zone for a two-stride running A-frame as shown in **Figure 12.**

When being trained with a hoop, large dogs may very well add a stride on the down ramp to allow them to run under the hoop as illustrated in **Figure 13.** But, when the hoop is removed, it isn't long before the dog reverts to what comes naturally, and the dog will not take the second stride on the downside.

Large-Sized Dogs at 6'3"

Many large dogs can perform a three-stride A-frame when the apex is at 6'3" as shown in **Figure 14.** When the A-frame is higher, the climb is more difficult, and the dog's stride usually shortens. This results in a four-slat stride length and a nice three-stride running A-frame for many larger dogs.

It is important to note that the same number of strides is taken when the dog performs a well-executed two-on/two-off wait for release. These dogs typically take three strides to traverse the A-frame. The fourth stride carries their front feet to the ground while the rear feet remain on the down ramp. From this position, the handler has the option to release the dog without a pause. The striding for a large dog with a three-stride running A-frame is exactly the same, the fourth stride carries the dog to the ground. A natural running contact, for large dogs, is not that much faster than a perfectly performed two-on/two-off with an immediate release. This is not the case for mid-sized dogs that usually have to add at least one stride on the down ramp to allow them to control their momentum to stop at the bottom. Even with an immediate release, a well-trained two-on/two-off will be slower than a natural running contact for mid-sized dogs.

If the dog hesitates at the apex rather than striding over, the dog's stride on the downside will not carry it far enough to reach the contact zone as shown in **Figure 15** (compare to Figure 7). From just above the contact, it is more natural for the dog to go straight to the ground rather than take a stride on the ramp. On 6'3" A-frames, this is particularly true because the descent is so steep.

Have you ever watched a large dog perch on top of the A-frame as shown in **Figure 16** and spend precious seconds as the handler attempts to coax it down? Then when the dog does descend, it bails right over the contact? The dog is merely taking one natural stride down the ramp. If the handler then responds in a negative fashion, most likely the dog is going to be reluctant to descend the ramp the next time as well.

Very Large-Sized Dogs at 6'3"

Some large dogs have a *very* long stride length. Even at 6'3", they will carry over the apex so far that they land too far down on the downside as shown in **Figure 17.** There is no room for the third stride; it is more natural for the dog to go straight to the ground. These dogs will also be accused of bailing over the contact zone when, in fact, they are just doing what comes naturally. They are unlikely to achieve a natural running contact. Their stride length is just too long. That doesn't mean that a running contact can't be taught, but the dog will have to shorten its stride length to do so.

Mid-Sized Dogs at 6'3"

While mid-sized dogs can do a nice, three-stride A-frame at 5'6" fairly reliably, 6'3" can pose a problem. For most dogs in this size range, the steeper climb up the 6'3" A-frame does not allow the dogs to perform at full-stride. The dog's stride on the downside will not carry him far enough to reach the contact zone as previously depicted in Figure 15. Mid-sized dogs can usually achieve a reliable natural running contact on the 5'6" A-frame, but it may not transfer well to 6'3".

With these dogs, a bit more speed on the approach might allow the dog to stride over the top far enough to reach the contact with one stride on the downside. Or, a little less speed might be advisable. If the dog has a bit less momentum on the approach so that it doesn't have the ability to stride over the top at all, some mid-sized dogs will then take two strides on the downside as shown in **Figure 18.**

The A-Frame In Summary

If the dog doesn't mount or stride over the obstacle the same way every time, some contacts will be missed. *Dogs are not robots.* There will always be some variation in their stride length. A dog whose natural striding normally gets it into the contact zone may have difficulty if the A-frame is going uphill, if the angle of approach is awkward, or if the dog has no momentum.

Dogs with natural running A-frames usually require that the handler take just a bit of extra time to ensure they have a straight-on approach and decent speed. The dogs must be adequately motivated and must be moving at full stride. Often these dogs will not drive forward if the handler is behind the dog and this will affect the natural running contact.

Mid-sized dogs can usually be shown how to naturally stride over the 5'6" A-frame, but 6'3" creates problems. Large dogs can usually be shown how to naturally stride over a 6'3" A-frame, but will often have trouble at 5'6". About the only dog that is likely to hit the contact zone every time with natural striding is one with a one-foot stride length!

The Dogwalk

So far, this article has focused on the A-frame, but certainly, natural striding is important on the dogwalk as well. Remember, the more strides it takes to traverse the contact obstacles, the more variable the performance. It is difficult to reliably predict striding across the dogwalk because of the greater number of strides involved. Small dogs with two-slat or three-slat stride lengths *should* logically be able to stride right through a 36" or 42" contact zone without a problem. However, dogs moving at top speed will often look for the fastest route to the ground, and these dogs may very well choose to leave out a stride at the end of the ramp as shown in **Figure 19.** This is no different from leaving out a stride on the approach to a jump to achieve a flat trajectory. It is always faster to omit strides.

As the size of the dog increases, the stride length increases, leading to fewer strides across the obstacle and a less variable performance. Large dogs with approximately a six-slat stride length on the dogwalk can achieve five strides as shown in **Figure 20** when moving at top speed on the approach. However, a dog with this long of a natural stride can stride right over the up and/or down contact zones, depending on how the dog mounts the board.

A natural running contact at full speed is more likely to be achieved on the A-frame than the dogwalk, though it's possible on both regulation obstacles.

In Conclusion

The natural striding of the dog often determines the success or failure of true running contacts, not the training technique.

- If the dog's natural stride is the correct length, no "training" is necessary for the dog to hit the contact zones on regulation equipment.
- Not all dogs have the potential for natural running contacts; however, many mid-sized dogs can reliably perform running contacts on the 5'6" A-frame and many large-sized dogs can do so on the 6'3" A-frame.
- Running contacts are affected by the dog's striding, which depends on many factors, including the approach, speed, the height of the A-frame, and often handler position.
- A true running contact executed at *full* speed, with no deceleration, is totally dependent on the dog's natural stride. If the dog *is* a natural, though, it is a sight to see.

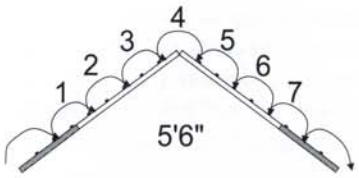

Figure 2—A small-sized dog's striding at top speed over a 5'6" A-frame. There are seven strides taken here.

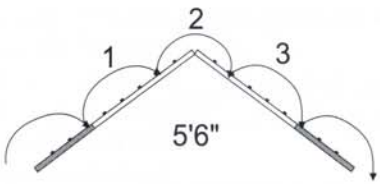

Figure 3—A mid-sized dog's striding at top speed over a 5'6" A-frame. There are three strides taken here.

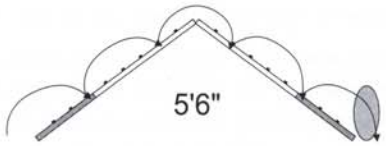

Figure 4—How a hoop might be placed to "train" this mid-sized dog to hit the contact.

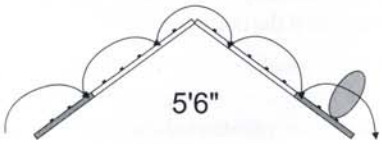

Figure 5—Another hoop placement a for mid-sized dog. However, neither hoop is training anything if dog strides over the top correctly as shown.

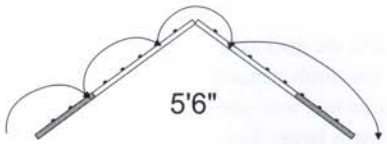

Figure 6—A mid-sized dog would have to jump from the position shown to leave out the third stride. Most dogs find it easier to just run down the obstacle.

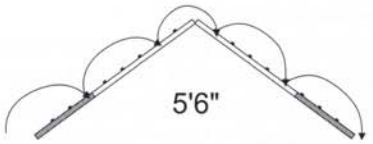

Figure 7—If stride #2 does not carry the mid-sized dog far enough over the apex and onto the down ramp, stride #3 will not carry the dog into the contact zone.

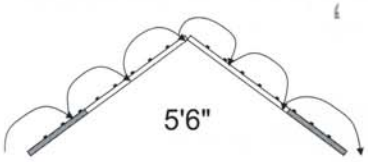

Figure 8—If a small-sized dog's natural stride is not long enough, it won't quite reach the contact zone. However, putting in an additional stride would cause a nose plant.

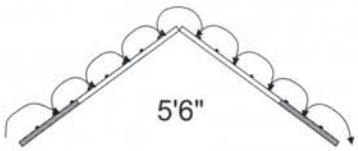

Figure 9—The dog with a two-slat stride length, as shown, is the small-sized dog most likely to have a nice natural running contact on the A-frame.

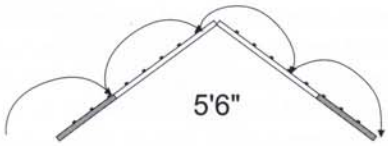

Figure 10—This is what will happen on a 5'6" A-frame if the dog's natural stride length is longer than four slats. This large-sized dog has a five-slat stride length.

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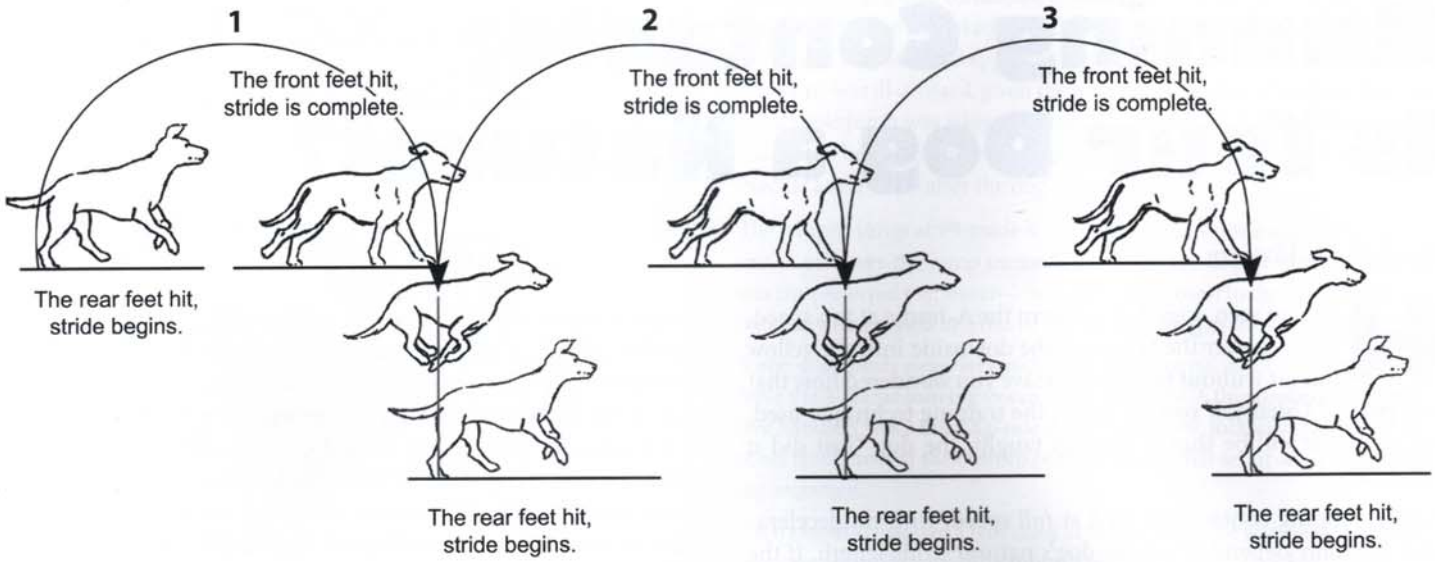

Figure 1—Each arc represents one stride.

For the purposes of this article, consider that a stride begins when the dog's rear feet hit and ends when the front feet hit as shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 2 represents a small-sized dog's striding over a 5'6" A-frame. The first arc depicts the jump onto the A-frame with the front feet, but the first stride is not counted until the rear feet hit, followed by the front feet again. The last stride, where the front feet land on the ground not the A-frame, is not counted. There are seven strides taken on this A-frame. **Figure 3** depicts a mid-sized dog's striding over a 5'6" A-frame. There are three strides taken on this A-frame. These two diagrams are meant to show examples of the striding that often occurs at top speed for these sizes of dogs; they are not going to be true for *every* dog.

The more strides it takes to traverse the contact obstacles, the more variable the performance. It is difficult to reliably predict striding across the contact obstacles for small-sized dogs. However, as dogs increase in size, their stride lengths increase and fewer strides are taken on the contact obstacles. The fewer strides it takes to traverse the contact obstacles, the faster and the more *predictable* the performance on regulation equipment.

The A-Frame

Mid-Sized Dogs At 5'6"

Most mid-sized dogs predictably perform a 5'6" A-frame in the same number of strides at top speed. Mid-sized dogs that have reliable, consistent running A-frames are typically performing the obstacle with three strides on the actual obstacle. In Figure 3, the dog has taken one stride on the up ramp, one stride over the apex, and one stride on the downside. This imaginary dog has a stride length that is about 4' long; therefore, each stride covers four slats of distance. This is how most successful running A-frames are performed. A running contact is one performed at full speed with minimal hesitation (a trotting contact is not considered "running"). Most mid-sized dogs have the appropriate stride length to learn to do this if they have adequate motivation. A dog with appropriate stride length that does not move at full speed will not be successful. **Figures 4 and 5** show how a hoop might be placed to "train" this dog to hit the contact. But a hoop is unnecessary and isn't training the dog to do anything if the dog is striding over the top correctly.

Few mid-sized dogs will leave out the stride on the down ramp once they find how natural it is to just run down. **Figure 6** shows where the dog would have to jump from to leave out the stride. It is easier for the dog to just stride down the A-frame, and therefore most do, whether a hoop is used or not.

Even if the dog has the correct natural stride length, problems arise if the dog hesitates at the apex, rather than striding over. If stride #2 does not carry the dog far enough onto the down ramp, stride #3 will not carry the dog into the contact zone as shown in **Figure 7**. Similarly, the dog may hesitate at the top, then take one stride on the downside. If that one stride is not long enough to carry the dog into the contact zone, the dog will be accused of "blowing" or "bailing" the contact when in fact it was an unnatural distance to take a second stride on the down ramp (see also Figure 15).

Small-Sized Dogs At 5'6"

If the dog's natural stride length is not long enough, (for example, only about three slats in length) the dog's stride on the down ramp is likely to not quite reach the contact zone as shown in **Figure 8**. If these dogs add another stride on the down ramp, the result will be a nose plant in the dirt. It is not natural striding for these dogs to hit the contact zone when running. These dogs are in the gray zone between having a two-slat stride and a four-slat stride and will be tough to train a reliable running contact. The dog with a two-slat stride length, as shown in **Figure 9**, is the small-sized dog most likely to have a nice, natural running contact on the A-frame.

Large-Sized Dogs At 5'6"

Problems also arise if the dog's natural stride length is longer than four slats. **Figure 10** shows what happens on 5'6" A-frames with most larger dogs that have a five-slat stride length. Even with a four-slat average stride, larger dogs ascend with more power and may carry farther over the top with the second stride than the mid-sized dogs. There often is no room for the third stride; it is more natural for the dog to just go straight to the ground. These dogs will also be accused of bailing over the contact zone when in fact they are just doing what comes naturally. If trained to do a wait for release and the expected performance is for the dog to stop in a designated position at the base of the A-frame, only *then* it is fair to imply that the dog did something wrong by striding over the contact zone.

These dogs, when performing a "two-on/two-off" wait for release, are the ones that often miss the yellow with their front feet, but their rear feet come to rest in the contact zone after the front feet are on the ground.

Examples of Dog Sizes

Small-sized: Papillon, Corgi

Mid-sized: Shetland Sheepdog

Large-sized: Border Collie, Australian Shepherd

Very large-sized: Doberman, German Shepherd

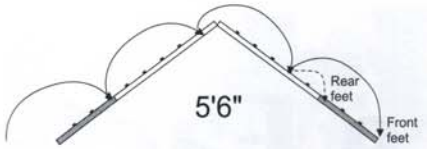

Figure 11—This dog's rear feet come to rest in the contact zone once the front feet hit the ground. The dashed line depicts the rear feet coming to rest on the contact.

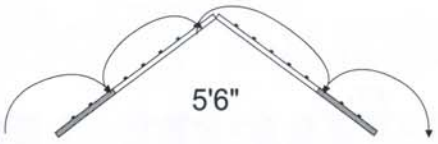

Figure 12—At 5'6", some large dogs can put one stride on the up ramp and one stride over the apex, landing in the contact zone for a two-stride running A-frame.

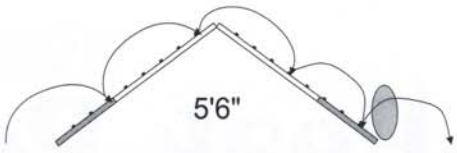

Figure 13—When being trained with a hoop, large dogs may very well add a stride on the down ramp to allow them to run under the hoop. But once it's taken away...

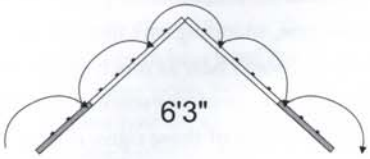

Figure 14—Many large dogs can perform a three-strided A-frame when the apex is at 6'3". When the A-frame is higher, the climb is more difficult, and the dog's stride usually shortens to a four-slat stride length.

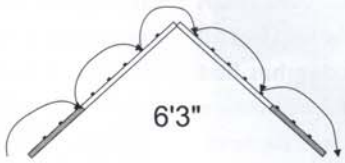

Figure 15—If the dog hesitates at the apex rather than striding over, the dog's stride on the downside will not carry him far enough to reach the contact zone. It is more natural for the dog to then go straight to the ground.

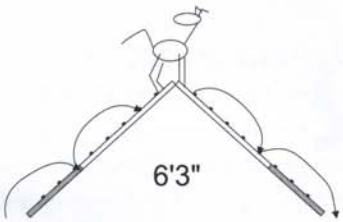

Figure 16—After spending precious time perching on top of the A-frame, this dog "bails" right over the contact when it does descend. In reality, the dog is merely taking one natural stride down the ramp.

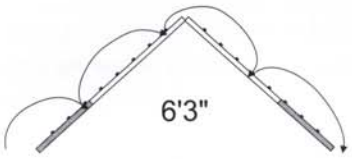

Figure 17—Some large dogs have a very long stride length, and even at 6'3", they will carry over the apex so far that they land too far down on the downside. There is no room for the third stride.

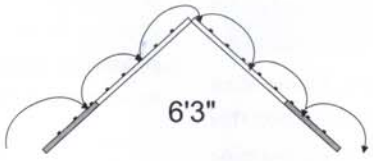

Figure 18—With a bit less momentum on the approach so that it doesn't have the ability to stride over the top at all, some mid-sized dogs will then take two strides on the downside.

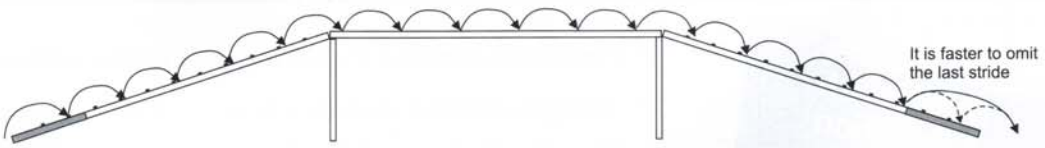

Figure 19—Small dogs with a two- or three-slat stride should logically be able to stride right through a 36" or 42" contact zone without a problem. However, dogs moving at top speed will often look for the fastest route to the ground and may choose to leave out a stride at the end of the ramp.

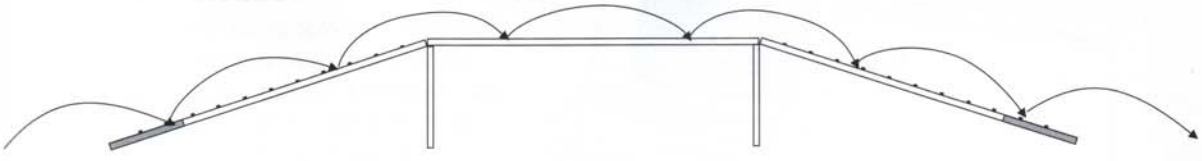

Figure 20—As the size of the dog increases, the stride length increases, leading to fewer strides across the obstacle and a less variable performance. Large dogs with approximately a six-slat stride length on the dogwalk can achieve five strides