

# THE 10TH POLE SYNDROME

By Linda Mecklenburg

Popping out at the 10th weave pole (or the second-to-last pole of any number of poles) is a common phenomenon amongst agility dogs. There are many reasons dogs exit the poles prematurely near the end of the obstacle. These include the body language of the handler, lack of understanding of the poles, anticipation of the next obstacle, and so on. However, often all of those issues have been ruled out and the dog is still popping out. Sometimes the dog is even looking up at the handler as if to say, “Did I do that good, Mom? Where do we go now?” The dog obviously believes its performance of the poles was completed and was correct.

This popping out happens consistently when the dog is two poles from the end, and most often happens when the handler is on the dog’s left (although it’s also possible with the handler on the right). It appears as though the dogs do not see the last two poles easily. Perhaps they have a “blind spot.” The problem worsens as the dog develops a rhythm through the poles and he is no longer searching methodically for each single pole. (It is very common in Open/Excellent A level.) It is also more likely to occur if the handler is even with, or behind, the dog (see **Figure 1**).

When the handler is ahead of the dog, or on the right, the last two poles are more obvious (see **Figure 2**).

However, the problem can still occur regardless of the handler’s positioning. The following solutions are geared toward helping the dog be aware of the last two poles.

- Handler positioning ahead of the dog helps. I usually position myself one pole ahead of the dog, and close to the dog, so that it can see the 11th pole *and* me.
- I teach the dog to accept a hand signal that redirects the dog back into the poles at pole 11 and 12. Being able to get the dog’s focus down and on the poles themselves helps (away from the handler’s face).
- I teach the dog an *Easy* command (slow down and be careful) away from the equipment and then I use it about pole 9 to help the dog realize he should no longer bounce through the poles with muscle memory— instead, he should think about what’s coming up.
- Handler motion using a path that converges toward the dog while in the poles may help this problem as well.

I find that novice dogs don’t usually have the problem because they are thinking very hard about the poles. Experienced dogs seem to learn to tune out the handler and look ahead for those last two poles. It is the dogs somewhere in between, those that think, “Hey, I’ve got it!” and indeed, might just now be discovering their rhythm and speed; those are the ones most likely to have the problem. Most work through it with help.

However, I have seen cases where I think a similar situation exists in experienced dogs. Often, if you place an obstacle or an *object* near the end of the weaves, the dog will pop out. I don’t think it is necessarily the temptation of the obstacle. I think it is the *proximity* of the object (see **Figure 3**). If you place a *wall* or a ring barrier or something similar at the end of the poles, often even experienced dogs will pop out. I believe the wall becomes overwhelming in their field of vision, and what they see as they near the end of the poles is the obstruction approaching, not the last two weave poles.

A similar situation arises if the poles are leaning the wrong way. The dog just doesn’t even see the pole (see **Figure 4**).

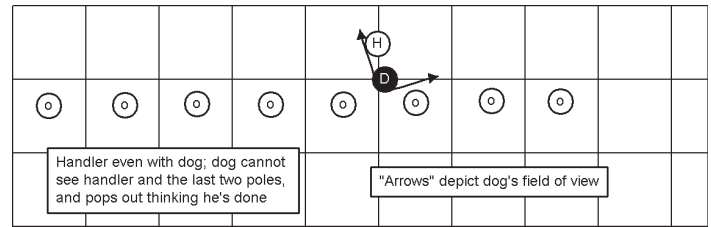


Figure 1

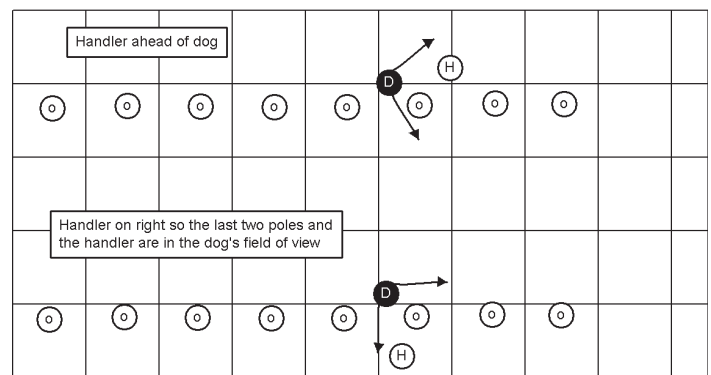


Figure 2

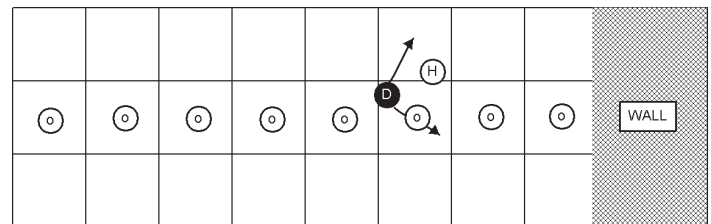


Figure 3

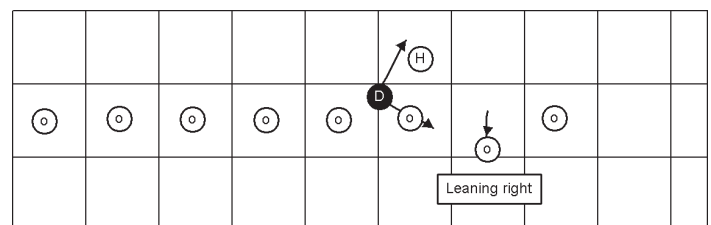


Figure 4

So, if I watch a class of high-level dogs, and dog after dog is popping out at pole 10, I will resort to the same measures I use with my inexperienced dog to help him see those last two poles and prevent a fault in my dog’s performance.

So if your dog is popping out near the end of the poles and all the potential causes have been ruled out and the reason is still unapparent, your dog may be suffering from “10th Pole Syndrome.” 🐾