

The One-Rear-Toe-On Contact Method

By Linda Mecklenburg

Most of the more reliable contact methods require the dog to assume a position at the end of the contact obstacle and wait for a release from the handler. The handler may withhold the release in control situations or may release the dog immediately if she desires a running contact. The dog's understanding that he must wait in position until cued by the handler is the primary factor responsible for the success of these methods, not the specific position. Several positions may be taught to the dog, each with advantages and disadvantages. The most common is the two-on/two-off position where the dog is taught to stand at the end of the contact obstacle with his front feet on the ground.

Rather than teaching dogs a two-on/two-off position, which focuses on the performance of the front half of the dog, I teach the one-rear-toe-on (1-R-T-O) position. Both methods require the dog to run to the end of the ramp and assume a position, then wait for a release. The 1-R-T-O method teaches the dog to focus on what he is doing with his rear feet rather than his front feet (or his nose). Maintaining contact with the board is the desired behavior, not necessarily a specific position. Focus on the rear feet helps the dog understand exactly what he is supposed to be doing.

Advantages and Disadvantages

With the 1-R-T-O position, most dogs can maintain momentum on the down ramp for at least one stride length farther before decelerating. This helps promote faster contacts and leads to smooth transitions to running contacts when the dog is released in a timely fashion. When the dog is performing the 1-R-T-O position correctly, his back is level with the ground and he is in a standing position, with one or two rear feet still in contact with the ramp. He is nearly off the contact obstacle. This position does not require the dog to decelerate quite so abruptly upon making contact with the ground. This position is particularly desirable on the A-frame, where the two-on/two-off position is thought to be physically stressful on the dog.

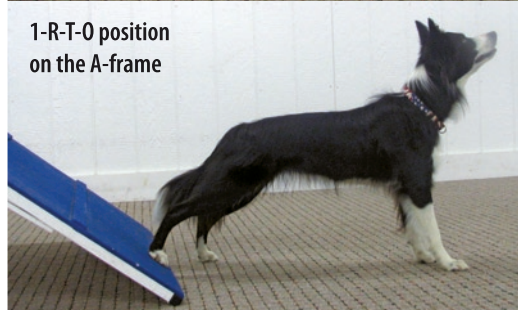
The primary disadvantage of the technique is that occasionally a dog will misjudge his momentum on descent and overrun the position, ending up standing on the ground without contact with the ramp. If he then steps back with his rear toe to assume position, he will incur a fault. At lower levels of competition, when the primary focus is to lay a solid foundation for the future, such a fault is of little consequence. As long as the dog overruns the ramp infrequently, it is best to accept the stand on the ground as the wait-for-release position for that attempt. If he chooses to step back, accept that performance. Asking the dog to step back, however, may create bad habits and the dog may view it as a correction. If the dog becomes concerned about overrunning, his performance will slow. At higher levels, when you want speed, the dog will be released immediately; so if he overruns the board, no fault will be assessed. The benefit of this technique outweighs the potential risk of an occasional non-qualifying score that may occur at the lower levels, when speed is not a factor.



1-R-T-O position on the dogwalk



Another 1-R-T-O position on the dogwalk



1-R-T-O position on the A-frame



Another 1-R-T-O position on the A-frame



1-R-T-O position on the teeter

PHOTOS BY SUSAN CRANK

The 1-R-T-0 Position

The desired position is a stand on the ground with one or two rear toes maintaining a connection with the contact obstacle. The performance criteria ultimately become contact with the plank with any part of a rear foot, not two front feet on the ground. You should have as much of the dog off the obstacle as possible, so only one front foot on the ground is not acceptable.

The following photos all show acceptable 1-R-T-0 positions.



PHOTOS BY SUSAN GRANK

Training the Position

To start, use a 5' long, 12" wide, and 1"-2" thick board flat on the ground. You'll also need a handful of treats and a clicker.

Step 1

When introducing your dog to the board, click and treat him for *any* interaction with the board. With the board crosswise between you and your dog, wait for him to step on the board with a front foot. Because you have treats in your hand, it usually won't take long for him to come toward you and offer this behavior. Click and treat him for stepping on the board (usually he will use a front foot, but you should click for any foot). At first, toss the treat behind the dog so that he has to go get the treat. This effectively repositions him for a new and different approach to the board for each repetition.

After the dog is consistently stepping on the board with a front foot, click and treat while he *maintains* contact with the board with his front foot. Whenever you treat the dog on the board, you must release with a verbal *O.K.* and pull him off the board to restart the exercise.

Step 2

The second step is for your dog to offer to step onto the board with two front feet. Again, at first toss the treat behind him, and then click and treat as he maintains contact with the board.

Once he is offering to step on the board with two front feet, it is usually easy to progress to three feet, and then all four feet, on the board. Again, at first toss the treat behind him, and then click and treat as he maintains contact with the board. Whenever you treat your dog on the board, release with a verbal *O.K.* and pull him off the board to restart.

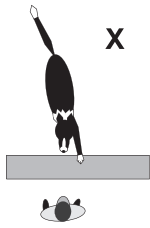
Once your dog is offering to climb onto the board and stand, encourage him to turn around on the board, maintaining contact. You want him to learn that staying in contact with the board is a good thing and that maintaining his balance on it is good, too. Click and treat after each turn while he still has all four feet on the board.

Step 3

The third step is to click for a step off the board with a front foot. At this stage, click and treat for a step off with a front foot while he maintains contact with the board with the rear feet. From this step, it is usually easy to progress to two front feet off the board.

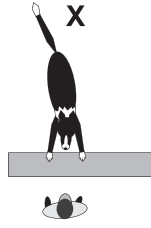
Once your dog is offering and maintaining a position with his front feet on the ground and rear feet on the board, encourage him to step forward and off the board with his rear feet. When he does, immediately step toward him. Most dogs will react by stepping backward. If the dog steps back and makes contact with the board with a rear foot, click and treat immediately. Also click and treat while he maintains contact with the board with the rear foot. This critical step builds his understanding that contact with the board with one or two rear feet is what you want.

Many repetitions are needed to instill the behavior. If he steps back with both rear feet, that is okay. As his understanding of the desired behavior increases, fade the step toward him and wait for him to offer a step backward onto the board with a rear foot. If the dog steps back and makes contact with the board with a rear foot, click and treat immediately. Also click and treat while he maintains contact with the board with the rear foot.



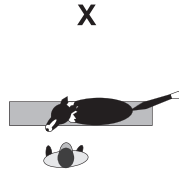
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Click for one paw and toss treat to "X." Then click and treat while he maintains contact with board and release with verbal O.K.



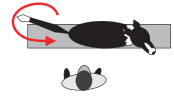
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Click for two paws and toss treat to "X." Then click and treat while he maintains contact with board and release with verbal O.K.



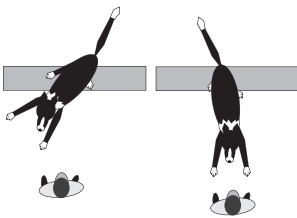
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Click for four paws and toss treat to "X." Then click and treat while he maintains contact with board and release with verbal O.K.



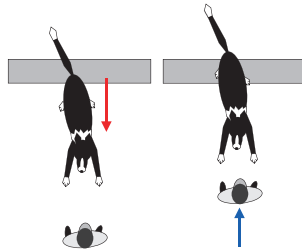
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Encourage dog to turn around on board. Click and treat after each turn while he still has all four feet on board.



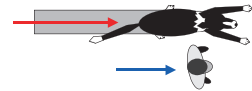
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Click for front paws off board and treat while dog is on board.



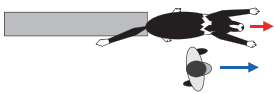
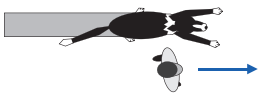
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Allow dog to step off board with his rear feet, then step toward dog. Click for rear paw(s) stepping back onto board and treat while dog is on board.



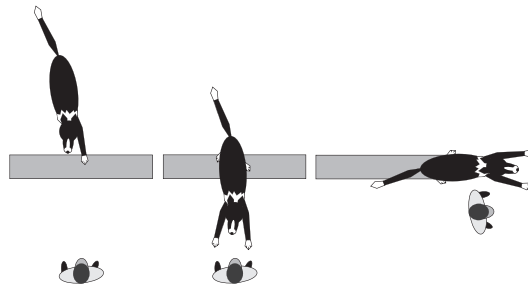
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Allow dog to walk plank. Stop at end when he steps off the board with his front feet. Click for rear paw(s) remaining on board and treat while dog is on board.



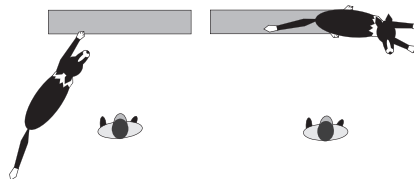
8

Allow dog to walk plank. Don't stop. Click for rear paw(s) remaining on board. If dog steps off, turn toward dog. Click for rear paw(s) stepping back onto board and treat while dog is on board.



9

Associate a command with the position.

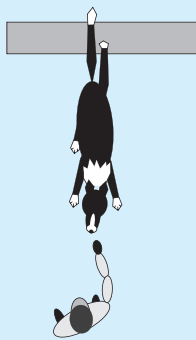


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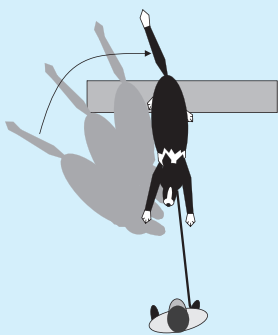
Ask dog to assume the position from anywhere when command is given.

The Rear Feet

To help further the dog's understanding of the importance of his rear feet, try to lure him forward, out of position. You will see whether he understands that maintaining contact is what you want by having him stretch forward as far as possible to get the treat, without stepping off the obstacle. Click and treat for maintained contact. Also test the dog by putting him on a leash while you stand facing him about 3' from the board or contact obstacle. If you give your dog his 1-R-T-O verbal command, you want him to be able to move into position with his back feet first. Prevent his turning and getting onto the ramp front feet first with the leash. (See illustrations and photos).



Lure him forward with a treat. Click and treat for maintaining contact with rear foot.



Ask him to step onto the board with rear feet only by using a leash to control front feet.

Training a New Approach

Until now your dog has been approaching the board crosswise from the side opposite you. His final position on the board has been off the side of the board facing you, not off the end as if it were a dogwalk. Next you progress through all the steps with the dog approaching the board from all angles.

In the next phase, move back and forth along the length of the board to encourage the dog to walk the plank. When you walk forward to the point where he steps off the board with his front feet, stop. This body language cue encourages him to stop as well. Most dogs willingly offer a 1-R-T-O position on the end of the board. Click and treat as he maintains contact with the board, whether it is with one rear foot or two. At this stage allow your dog to walk onto the board from the end. Sometimes walk forward until the dog reaches the 1-R-T-O position; sometimes reverse direction before he gets there. If he turns to follow and stays on the board, click and treat. You want him to learn that staying in contact with the board is a good thing and that maintaining his balance on it is good, too.

Once your dog is offering and maintaining a position with his front feet on the ground and rear feet on the board, eliminate the body language cue and encourage him to step forward and off the board by continuing to walk forward past the point where you were stopping before. When he steps off the board with his rear feet, stop. If the dog steps back and makes contact with the board with a rear foot, click and treat immediately. Also click and treat while he maintains contact with the board with the rear foot. If he does not step back, walk him forward off the board and start over. If he does not understand to step back onto the board, help him on the next try by turning to face him as his rear feet come off the board. This body language cue, your facing him, should be familiar to him because it is the same as when he practiced on the crosswise board. If he does not step back on his own, step toward him. Most dogs will react by stepping backward. If your dog steps back and makes contact with the board with a rear foot, click and treat immediately. Also click and treat while he maintains contact with the board with the rear foot. If he steps back with both rear feet, that is okay.

When working the dog lengthwise on the board, it is difficult for him to step back onto the board (this is one reason why it's preferable to start him crosswise in the first stages). He may have to feel around a bit to find the board to step back onto. It is critical to click at the exact moment he makes contact with the board. This is usually when the light bulb goes on for the dog that his rear foot is important. As his understanding of the desired behavior increases, fade the body language cues.

Once your dog understands to offer a 1-R-T-O position, go back to the crosswise performance and start to associate a command with the position. When you think he understands the command, go back through each step and cue him to the position with the verbal command while eliminating all body language cues. Once the dog understands the position, you can backchain the 1-R-T-O position on the contact obstacles (lowered) as you would with most other techniques. 🐾

Linda Mecklenburg is one of the leading handlers in the U.S. She has represented the U.S. in international competition on eight different occasions with three different dogs. In 2001, she and her BC, Awesome, were members of the USA team that became the FCI Standard Team World Champions. Awesome also placed 8th in the Standard Individual competition, thus having the best combined performance of all dogs at the FCI Agility World Championships that year. Linda teaches agility full-time at her Awesome Paws Agility Center in Ohio. She can be reached by email at awesomepaws@aol.com.