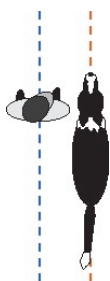


Using Heel Position in Agility, Part I

The foundation of my system of handling is based on my dog's solid understanding of a recall to "heel" position. I do not run the course with my dog at my side; rather, I base every handling maneuver on a recall to heel position. Every time I call my dog toward me on the course, my dog should expect to come to my side. Once he comes to my side, I may elect to have him remain there for a controlled situation, or immediately send him off again. I do not practice recalling my dogs to a position facing me (a recall to "front"), since this location is never an appropriate position to be in when running a course. When my dog fully understands the recall position and promptly recalls to heel, he will have tighter turns. He will have a better understanding of where he is expected to be and where he will be going next. That leads to confidence, which translates into greater speed and accuracy.

By Linda Mecklenburg



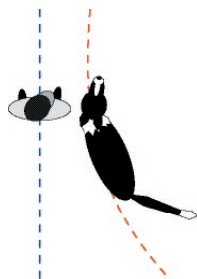
1

This position is the most desirable because my dog is at my hip, and lines bisecting my body and his are parallel (dashed lines).

Heel Position

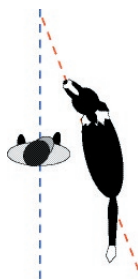
Heel position in agility is when your dog is at your side (either side), facing the same direction you are. He is at your hip and his body is straight, whether he is sitting or standing. If you imagine a plane bisecting your body front to back, that plane should be parallel to a plane that bisects your dog's body. He should not cross the plane in front or behind you. He should not curl his spine toward you or be in front of you. The slightest imperfections in heel position at the standstill translate into major deviations when you are moving at speed, so it is very important to be consistent and build a sound foundation. If his spine is curled away from you or if he is slightly behind you, that is acceptable.

In agility, the only recall your dog must understand is a recall to your side. A properly performed recall to heel encourages your dog to bend his spine away from you and shift his weight to his rear legs (particularly his inside rear leg). To be able to perform tight turns at speed, your dog must carry his weight on his hindquarters. The more recalls



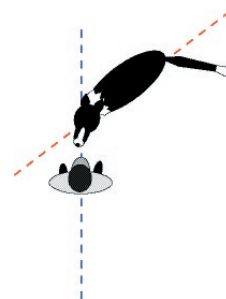
2

This position is acceptable; my dog's spine is curled away from me.



4

This position is unacceptable because my dog is not straight, and the lines bisecting the plane of my body and his will intersect.



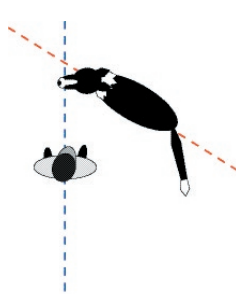
6

This position is unacceptable because my dog's spine is curled toward me and he is not at my side. He is not parallel to me, and the lines bisecting my body and his will intersect. He is not facing the same direction.



3

This position is acceptable because my dog is slightly behind me, and the lines bisecting my body and his will not intersect.



5

This position is unacceptable because my dog's spine is curled toward me, and he is not at my side. He is not parallel to me, and the lines bisecting my body and his will intersect.



7

This position is unacceptable because my dog is not facing the same direction, and he is not at my hip.



8

I recall my dog from behind me to heel position and have him remain there. I may be stationary or in motion.

to heel position that you perform with your dog, the more balanced your dog will become. Work to perfect your recall to heel first on the flat, then when the dog is coming at you with speed over obstacles. He should be able to come to heel position and remain there whether you are stationary or in motion. See **Figures 1 through 7.**

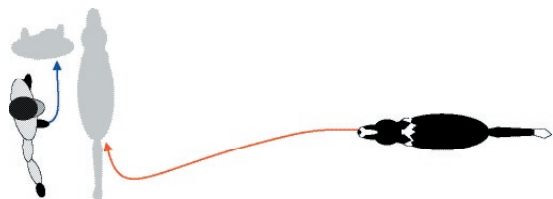
Stationary and Motion Recalls to Heel On the Flat

You should be able to recall your dog to heel from all angles on the flat when no obstacles are present. At first, practice recalls to heel when standing still, then progress to recalling your dog to heel from all angles when you are stationary and your dog is moving at speed. Then practice recalls when you are both in motion. Remember it is very important to build a sound foundation on the flat so that your dog thoroughly understands recalling directly to heel. He must learn to make adjustments and control his momentum so that he does not cross the plane of your body.

When recalling your dog, always present him with your inside* hand, shoulder and hip. When you are stationary, point your outside* foot in the direction you want your dog to face when he reaches you. This helps your dog know which direction he will be going, since your shoulders will be turned slightly toward him as you recall. When you are moving, your movement will cue him to the desired direction.

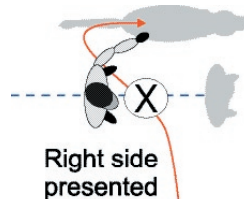
Remember, it is unacceptable for your dog to cross the plane of your body in front of or behind you. Do not allow your dog to cross the plane unless you cue him that there will be a change of sides. If he is free to cross the plane whenever he desires, you will be less able to manage his path. The success of many handling situations depends on your dog's solid understanding of this rule. To be consistent, do not ask your dog to cross the plane on a simple recall. Always present your dog with the desired side when recalling him. See **Figures 8 through 12.** 🐾

*Author's note: "Inside" refers to the side of the handler closest to the dog once he is in heel position. "Outside" refers to the side opposite the dog.



9

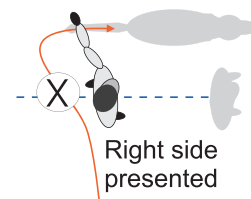
I recall my dog from a position lateral to me to heel position and have him remain there. I may be stationary or in motion.



Right side presented

11

My dog must never cross the plane of my body in front of me. If I want my dog to come to my left side, I should present my left side to him, not my right as shown here since this position forces him to cross the plane of my body.



Right side presented

12

My dog must never cross the plane of my body behind me. If I want my dog to come to my left side, I should present my left side to him, not my right as shown here since this position forces him to cross the plane of my body.



10

I recall my dog from a position in front of me to heel position and have him remain there. I may be stationary or in motion.

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 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.



PHOTO BY ANNE SMITH

Training and Practice

Teaching your dog to come to heel is easily accomplished by offering your dog a treat with your inside hand and luring him toward you. Draw his nose to a point slightly behind you, stepping back with your inside foot to help get him far enough behind you to allow him to easily turn and come to your side in the proper position. The position of your feet and the motion of your shoulder and hand signal as you lure your dog into position will become the same motion you use whenever you want your dog to turn toward you and come to your side when running a course. Every time you recall your dog, you should recall to your side so that it becomes a solid foundation skill.

Practicing recalls to heel repetitively has two goals: to sharpen your dog's responsiveness when you perform handling maneuvers on the course and to help your dog learn shift his weight to the inside and to the rear. To further improve his ability to shift his weight and turn, remember that your dog should never be allowed to cross the plane in front of you.

While he remains at your side, perform 90°, 180°, and 270° turns toward your dog in both directions. His spine should be curled away from you. When you are stationary, pivot toward him, dropping your inside shoulder back so that he has to back around the turn. Also perform turns toward your dog when you are both moving (first at the walk, then run). For more practice, move sideways or backward with your dog at your side. Actually running a full course with your dog in heel position is not your final goal. However, practicing many recalls to heel strengthens certain handling maneuvers on the course. In addition, practicing recalls to heel and turning while moving at heel will improve your dog's ability to make balanced turns at speed.

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