

# Using Heel Position in Agility, Part 3

By Linda Mecklenburg

## Advantages of Recalls to Heel

In agility, the only recall your dog needs to understand is one to your side. By always recalling your dog to heel position and always correctly indicating the direction he should be facing when he reaches you, your dog will more thoroughly understand where he is expected to go—assuming *you* know where you are going. Using your inside hand to recall your dog improves your ability to continue moving in the desired direction and improves your dog's understanding of where he is to go. If your dog always knows where he is going, he will be able to move more assertively and anticipate changes of direction so that he is always on the correct lead. He will be able to make his lead changes proactively rather than reactively.

For your dog to turn with maximum efficiency, he needs to shift his weight onto his hindquarters, particularly to his inside rear leg. Your dog may run with his weight on the forehand (particularly on the outside foreleg) and his spine curled away from you. When running this way, your dog turns ineffectively and will drift wide when moving at speed. As a handler you may cope with the problem by rotating your shoulders toward your dog (reverse flow pivot, false turn). If so, your action *will* encourage him to shift his weight onto his hindquarters. This does improve his ability to turn; however, in many cases it also checks your dog's speed and impedes your ability to continue moving in the desired direction. It also forces your dog to change leads at the moment you redirect him, rather than allowing him to make the choice of when it is best to change leads.

A recall to heel also encourages your dog not only to shift his weight to his rear legs, but particularly to his inside rear leg. Shifting his weight to the rear *and* to the inside, even further improves his ability to turn. It also increases his ability to move laterally toward you, which is useful for serpentines and pull-through sequences as well as for effective turns.

With a responsive dog that understands a recall to heel, turns will be tighter without loss of speed. Not only will your dog be better balanced to make the turn, he will start the turn earlier. In addition, often he will be able to predict which lead will be required and be prepared to make those adjustments.

If your dog is always required to come to a position parallel to you at your side and not allowed to cross the plane that bisects your body, you will be more able to accurately manage his path between obstacles. Your dog will also be less likely to curl back toward you if you lag behind or collide with you if you move in front of him. See **Figures 1 through 10.**



## Disadvantages of Recalls to Heel

The only disadvantage to using heel position in agility is that it requires training. You absolutely *must* make the effort to lay a solid foundation in your dog's recall-to-heel skills and be consistent about not allowing him to cross the plane of your body. He must be well-schooled and fully understand what is expected so that he responds promptly and appropriately, or you will not be satisfied with the results. If you do take the time to train a recall to heel, however, you and your dog will benefit from smooth and efficient course runs.

## Conclusion

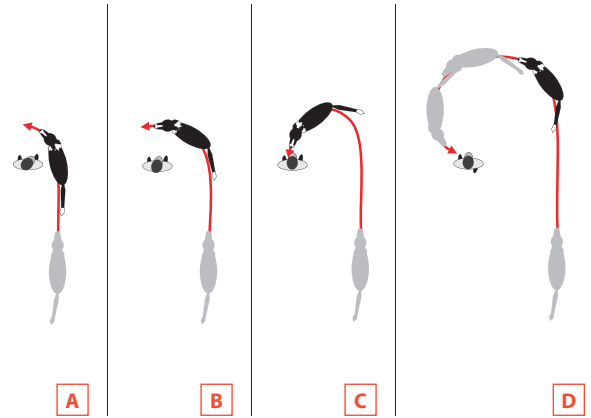
In agility, the only recall your dog needs to understand is a recall to your side. You should work to perfect your recall to heel first on the flat, then when your dog is coming at you with speed over obstacles. The more recalls to heel that you perform with your dog, the more he will learn to shift his weight to his hindquarters while turning, and the more balanced he will become. Recalling your dog to heel allows you to always be facing or moving in the direction you want your dog to go, so he always knows what is expected. This allows him to move confidently through the course with speed and to anticipate the appropriate lead.

Many years ago it was common for handlers to run with their dogs in heel position, and heel position was restricted to the handlers' left side. This technique lost favor as the dogs became faster and courses became more complicated. Handlers couldn't keep pace with their dogs and out of necessity developed the ability to run with the dog on either side, changing sides as needed. With further increases in speed, the dogs' turns became wider and wider. Handling methods evolved to deal with this problem. Have we now come full circle? Is running the course in "heel" position the wave of the future? Perhaps not the heel position we commonly imagine when thinking of an obedience competition, but a *well-trained* recall to heel, whether stationary or at speed, can be an effective tool that may lead to improved performance on the agility course. 🐾



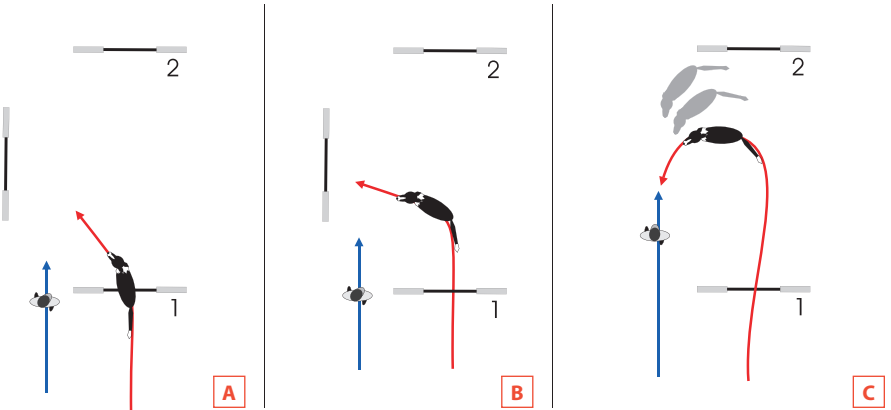
1

When considering how recalls to heel improve your ability to manage your dog's path, first consider these unacceptable recalls to heel. **1A** shows an unacceptable heel position at the standstill. My dog is curled toward me, his weight is carried on his outside front leg, and he is not parallel to me thus he is not facing the direction he needs to be going. This position will degrade further to **1B** and to **1C** when my dog has momentum. Finally, in **1D** my acceptance of seemingly slight imperfections of heel position in **1A** leads to a gross deviation when I attempt to recall my dog to heel when he is moving at speed.



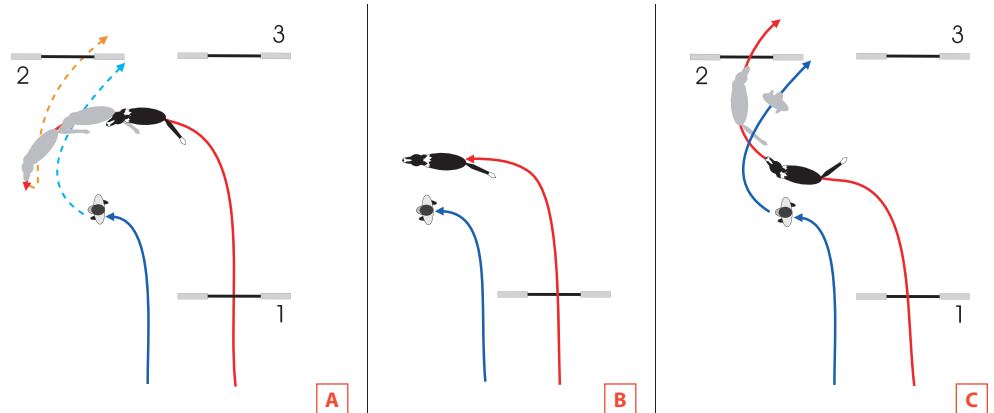
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Compare these examples to Figures **4A**, **4B**, and **4C**. Whenever I cannot keep pace with my dog, poor heel position at the standstill translates into difficulty getting my dog to move in the correct direction without curling toward me and crossing the plane in front of me when we are moving. This leads to further problems.



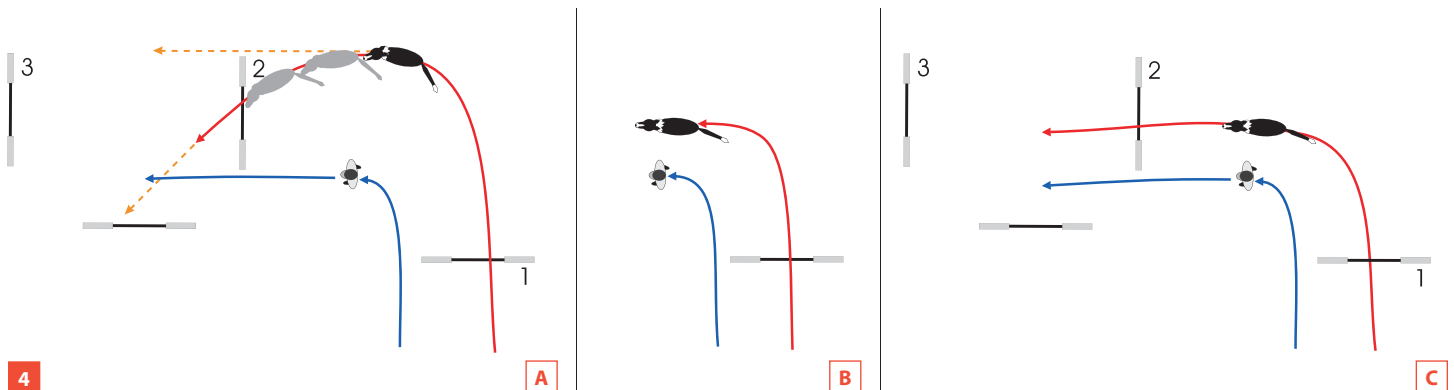
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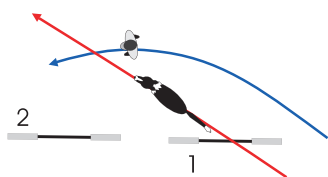
In **3A** my dog does not recall to heel appropriately and an awkward spin occurs as I cross behind my dog. **3B** shows a simple recall to heel. **3C** shows how **3B** translates into a successful, efficient **rear cross** on the flat.



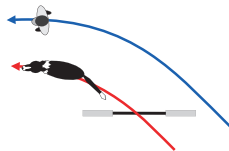
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In **4A** my dog does not recall to heel appropriately and an awkward, wide turn results. Three undesirable scenarios could result: 1) My dog will bypass jump #2, 2) my dog will jump #2 but collide with me upon landing, or 3) my dog goes off course. **4B** shows a simple recall to heel. **4C** shows how **4B** translates into a successful, efficient **shoulder pull**.

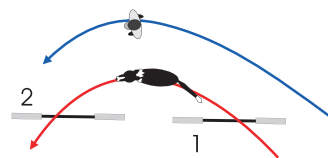




A



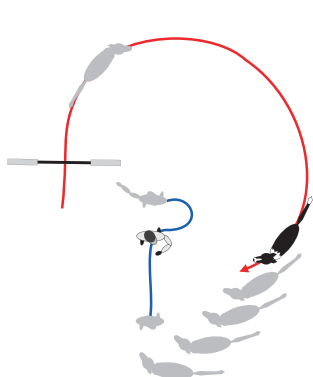
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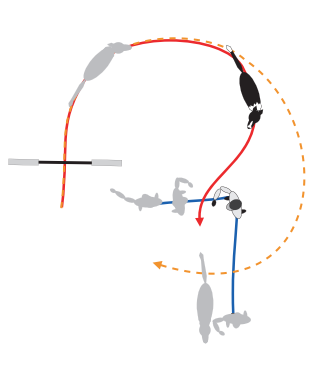
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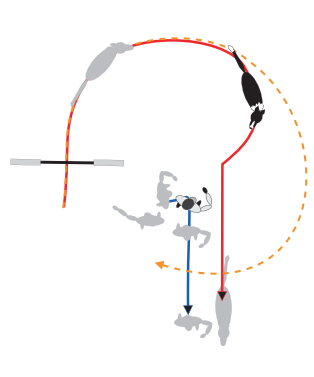
Despite my direction of motion, in **5A** my dog does not recall to heel appropriately and the result is a collision. My dog expected to cross the plane in front of my body when he should have been expecting to land in heel position. **5B** shows a simple recall to heel. **5C** shows how **5B** translates into a successful **shoulder push**. If I wanted my dog to cross the plane in front of me for a change of sides and rear cross, I would have used an outside (right) hand.



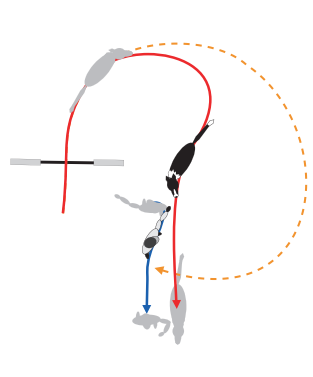
A



B



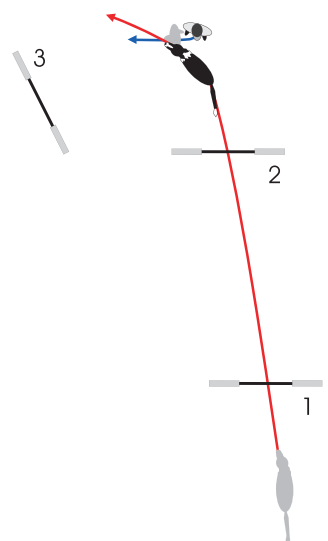
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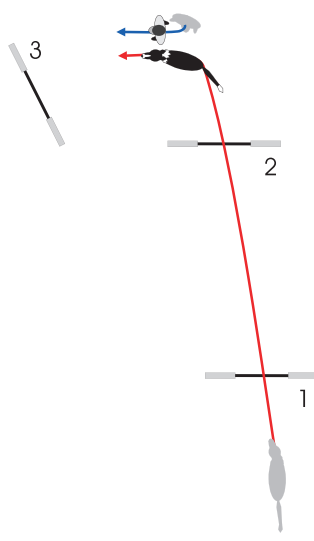
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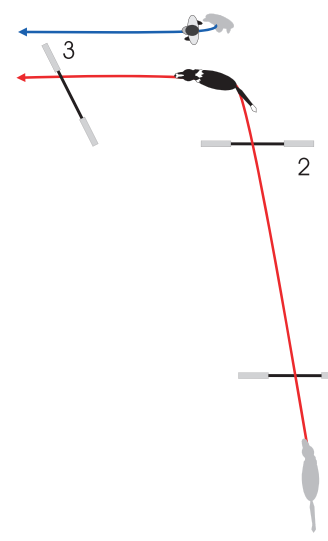
Despite my direction of motion, in **6A** my dog does not recall to heel appropriately and the result is a collision. My dog expected to cross the plane in front of my body when he should have been expecting to land in heel position. **6B** shows a simple recall to heel. **6C** shows how **6B** translates into a successful **shoulder push**. If I wanted my dog to cross the plane in front of me for a change of sides and rear cross, I would have used an outside (right) hand.



A



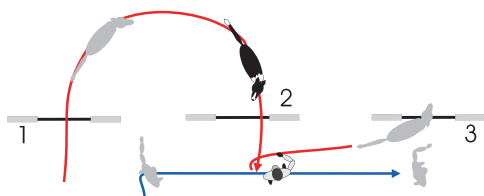
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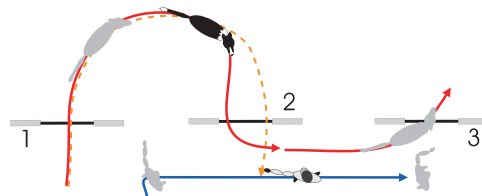
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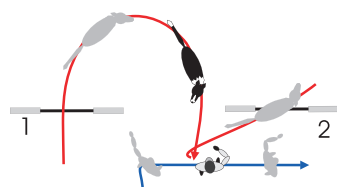
In **7A** my dog does not recall to heel appropriately and the result is a collision or a run-out to the right of #3. My dog expected to cross the plane in front of my body when he should have been expecting to land in heel position. He took one stride between #1 and #2 and landed with so much forward momentum he could not turn. **7B** shows a simple recall to heel over #1 and #2. My dog has taken two strides between #1 and #2 and jumps with a round jumping arc over #2. This allows him to come to heel position without overrunning, curling toward me, or colliding with me. **7C** shows how **7B** translates into a successful lead-out push. On an actual course, I would begin moving as soon as my dog had committed to #2 without actually standing and waiting for my dog to come to heel. However, in order to avoid errors similar to those shown in **7A**, my dog must be trained to be able to recall to heel in such a lead-out situation.



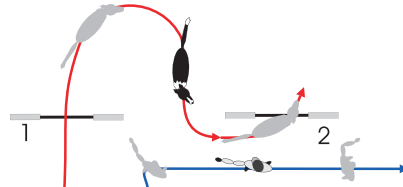
**A**



**B**



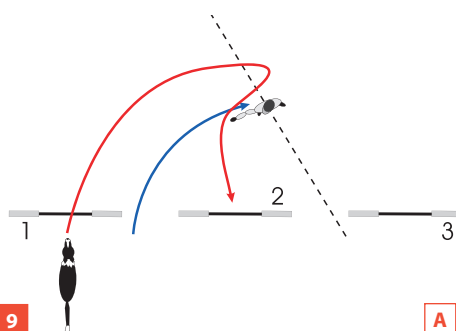
**C**



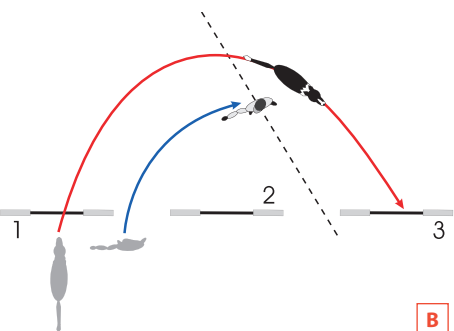
**D**

**8**

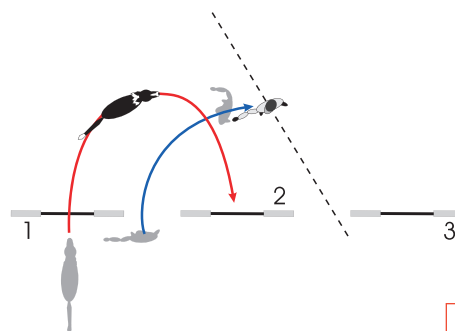
I perform a half front cross in **8A** using an outside hand (reverse flow pivot, false turn). My dog turns toward me and approaches #2 perpendicularly. He does not know where he is going after #2 so he maintains the right lead over #2 and changes to the left as I rotate my shoulders back toward #3. In **8B** I perform a shoulder drop in which my dog is recalled to heel using my inside hand. My dog turns toward me, recognizes what direction he must be facing when he lands off #2, and changes his angle of approach and lead appropriately. He lands off #2 knowing that #3 is the next obstacle. In **8C** I perform a half front cross using an outside hand (reverse flow pivot, false turn). My dog turns toward me and approaches the gap between #1 and #2 perpendicularly. He does not know where he is going after passing through the gap, so he maintains the right lead and changes to the left when I rotate my shoulders back toward #2. In **8D** I perform a shoulder drop in which my dog is recalled to heel using an inside hand. My dog turns toward me and recognizes what direction he must be facing when he passes through the gap, and changes his path and lead appropriately. In all four scenarios I rotate my shoulders toward my dog to turn him. In **8B** and **8D**, however, I use my inside hand instead of my outside hand which allows me to keep moving forward in the direction I want my dog to go. My dog turns earlier and more efficiently, and knows where he's going and what lead he should be on.



**A**



**B**



**C**

**9**

In **9A** I have just completed a front cross. My dog has not adequately learned that he should not cross the plane of my body and he goes wide behind me before coming to my side. In **9B** I am in real trouble. I have just completed a front cross. Once again, my dog has not adequately learned that he should not cross the plane of my body and he goes behind me. This time he not only goes wide, he goes off course over #3. In **9C**, I have just completed a front cross. My dog appropriately turns to come momentarily to heel position before I send him to #2, without crossing the plane behind me.



**Dogs don't get much cooler than this!**

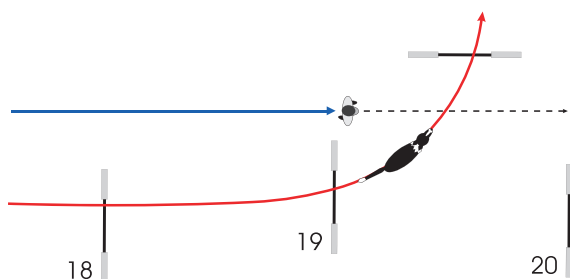
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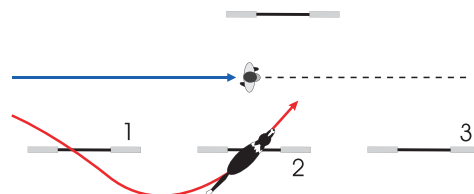
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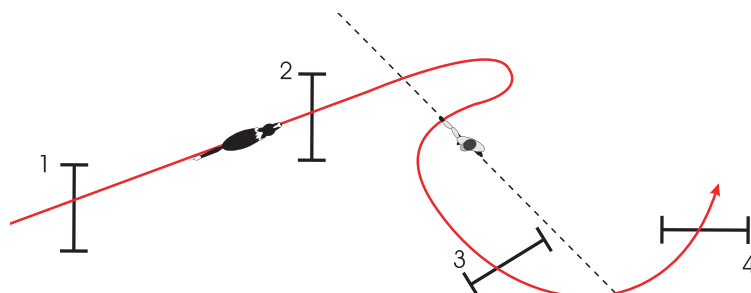
**A**



**B**

**10**

In **10A** I am accelerating forward but my dog has outrun me. He has not adequately learned that he should not cross the plane of my body and he curls toward me, leading to an off-course. In **10B** my dog makes no adjustments on his approach to #2 so that he will not cross the plane of my body and land in heel position. I must either let him cross in front of me, which will create a wide turn to #3, or risk a collision. In **10C** I have led out to perform a lead-out push. As I recall my dog, he makes no adjustments so that he will not cross the plane of my body behind me, creating a time-wasting serpentine in his path.



**C**

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](mailto:awesomepaws@aol.com).

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