You Choose the Course

BY LINDA MECKLENBURG

"My dog just wants to do his own course."

"My dog was blowing me off."

"My dog hates call-offs."

How many times have you heard these comments? Usually, the dog is merely trying to please the handler. Having learned that agility means perform one obstacle followed by another, the dog, in its desire to please, anticipates and performs any obstacle that presents itself.

The most common exercise suggested as a solution to this problem is to set up a series of three jumps (or other obstacles) as shown in **Figure 1**. The dog is sent over the three jumps one or more times. Then the dog is "called off" the third jump, the handler asking for a turn after the second jump. The usual result is that the dog continues straight ahead as he had done previously, as shown in **Figure 2**. The dog anticipates that this is what will please the handler. Meanwhile, the handler is most likely screaming *Come!* or *No!* at the dog when it fails to turn and "call off" the third jump. The exercise has set up the dog for failure.

I prefer to set up the dog for success. Rather than starting with three jumps, the dog is asked to perform *one* jump situated away from the other obstacles. The dog is rewarded for coming promptly after one jump, then two, etc. The dog progresses up to three jumps in a row, but along the way learns that it is rewarding to *Come!* to the handler and to listen for the next command, rather than to anticipate.

In this article, the illustrations show the handler working the dog off the heel-side. All of the exercises should be performed equally and alternately working the dog off the left *and* the right.

Step 1

The handler sends the dog over one jump; no other obstacles are in the vicinity as shown in **Figure 3**. As the dog jumps, the handler pivots *away* from the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 4**. The handler extends his *outside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Alternately, as the dog jumps, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 5**. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. If the dog backjumps, withhold the reward and repeat the exercise.

Add a second jump for the next exercise. Though the jumps are aligned, the dog will not be asked to sequence them in a straight line. For Steps 2, 3 and 4, the dog is started between the two jumps, jumping outward.

Step 2

The handler sends the dog out over one jump. As the dog jumps the first jump, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 6**. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Once the dog is rewarded, command *Go Jump!* and send the dog over the second jump. As the dog jumps the second jump, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in Figure 6. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. If the dog backjumps, withhold the reward and repeat the exercise.
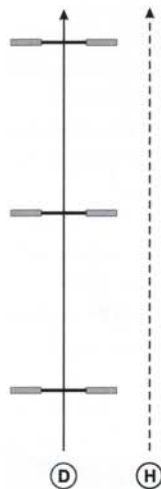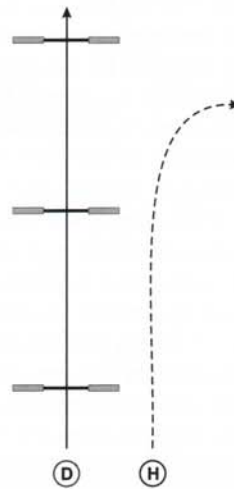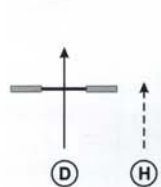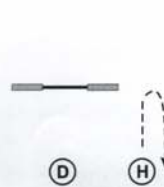

Figure 1

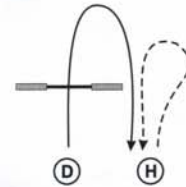Figure 2

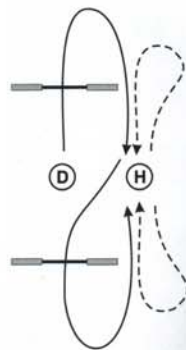Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Step 3

The handler sends the dog out over one jump. As the dog jumps the first jump, the handler pivots *away* from the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 7**. The handler extends his *outside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Once the dog is rewarded, command *Go Jump!* and send the dog over the second jump. As the dog jumps the second jump, the handler pivots *away* from the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in Figure 7. The handler extends his *outside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward.
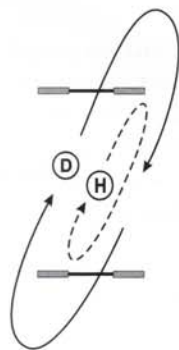
Figure 7

Step 4

The handler sends the dog out over one jump. As the dog jumps the first jump, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 8**. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Once the dog is rewarded, command *Go Jump!* and send the dog over the same jump from the same direction. As the dog jumps the second time, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in Figure 8. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward.
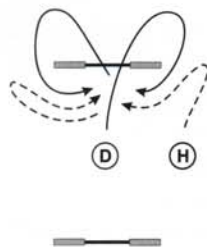
Continue the figure-8 motion, stopping to reward the dog on each turn, for several loops. The second jump in this exercise is not performed.

Figure 8

Step 5

Line up the dog so that he is facing both jumps. The handler sends the dog over the first jump. The handler pivots *away* from the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 9**. The handler extends his *outside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Alternately, as the dog jumps, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction as shown in **Figure 10**. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. If the dog backjumps, withhold the reward and repeat the exercise.

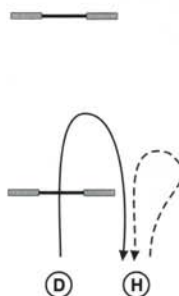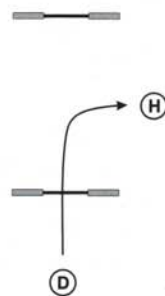If the dog jumps the second jump, withhold the reward. The exercise is *not* repeated. Instead, remove the second jump and repeat Step 1 until the dog comes promptly. Then, replace the second jump, this time at least 10 feet farther away from the first jump. Repeat Step 5. If the dog performs only one jump and comes promptly, the handler gradually moves to a position between the jumps as shown in **Figure 11**. Repeat Step 5 from this position.

Figure 9 *Figure 10* *Figure 11*

Step 6

The handler is positioned between the two jumps and calls the dog over the first jump. As the dog jumps, the handler commands *Come!*, calling the dog in as shown in Figure 11. The handler extends his hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Once the dog is rewarded, command *Go Jump!* and send the dog over the second jump as shown in **Figure 12**. As the dog jumps the second jump, the handler pivots *away* from the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction. The handler extends his *outside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Alternately, as the dog jumps, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. If the dog backjumps, withhold the reward and repeat the exercise.
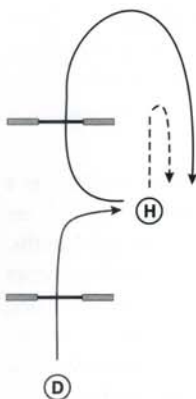
Figure 12

Step 7

Repeat the exercise in Step 6. Upon rewarding the dog after the second jump, command *Go Tunnel!* and send the dog into a tunnel or over another jump as shown in **Figure 13**. As the dog exits the tunnel, the handler pivots *away* from the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction. The handler extends his *outside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. Alternately, as the dog exits the tunnel, the handler pivots *toward* the dog, commanding *Come!*, and moves in the opposite direction. The handler extends his *inside* hand, offering a reward (food treat). When the dog reaches the handler's hand, the dog gets the reward. If the dog re-enters the tunnel, withhold the reward and repeat the exercise.

Add a third jump in the series as shown in **Figure 14**, and repeat Step 7.

If the dog jumps the third jump, withhold the reward. Do not repeat the exercise. Instead, remove the third jump and repeat Step 6 until the dog comes promptly. Then, replace the third jump, this time at least ten feet farther away from the second jump. Repeat Step 7.

Figure 13 *Figure 14*

Step 8

If the dog responds appropriately by coming promptly after the second jump, the handler may now send the dog over the third jump as shown in **Figure 15**. Only do three jumps in a row *once* before proceeding to Step 9.

Figure 15

Step 9

Now its time for the fun part. Mix up all of the exercises and add some new ones so that your dog never knows what you will ask him. Keep him turning as frequently as possible. Do not neglect to reward him for every *Come!* For example, do *Jump!, Come!, Go Tunnel!* as shown in **Figure 16**. Then *Jump!, Come!, Jump!, Come!* as shown in Figure 6, then *Jump!, Come! Go Jump!, Come!, Go Tunnel!* as shown in Figure 14, then back to *Jump!, Come!, Go Tunnel!* as shown in Figure 16. Mix it up. You do not want the dog anticipating the next obstacle. You want him eagerly anticipating a *Come!* command and a reward.

These exercises will help you and your dog learn to work together as a team. How long it takes you to work through the exercises depends on your dog. With some dogs it may be a few days, with others a few months. Keep the jumps at less than competition height. Only work a few exercises a day if your dog is easily fatigued or difficult to motivate. The type of dog that will benefit from these exercises most will likely not have a motivation problem, however. Do not skip steps. The goal of the exercise plan is for the dog to learn that it is rewarding to *Come* to the handler and to listen for the next command, rather than to anticipate. Good luck! ⊠
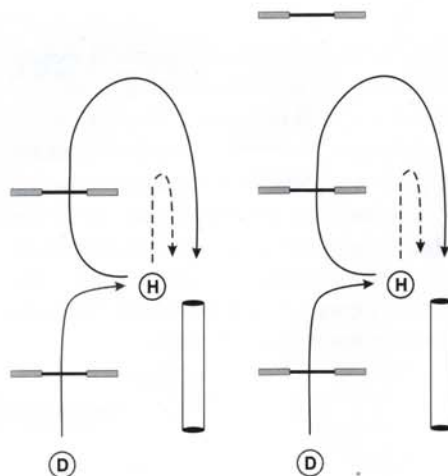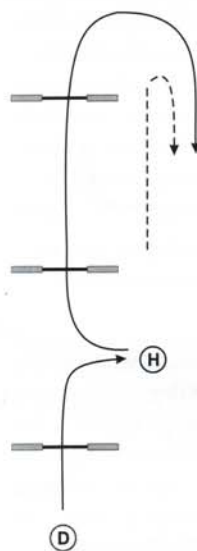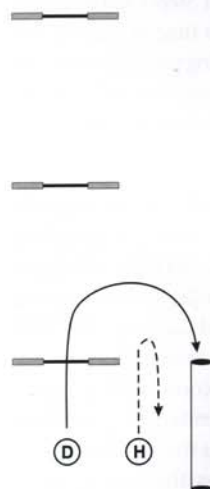

Figure 16