

# Plank Confusion

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Many dogs undergo a period of confusion when exposed to unfamiliar teeters and dogwalks when they first enter competition. It is very common for a novice dog to perceive the teeter as a dogwalk, especially if presented to it from a straight approach. The two planks look identical. The dog confidently strides up what he believes is the dogwalk, only to have the plank suddenly drop out from underneath him, resulting in a fly-off. Some handlers erroneously interpret this scenario as confidence on the teeter because the dog was moving rapidly up the plank. However, it really represents a dog that didn't understand the performance required by the plank he was ascending. If the dog experiences an unintentional fly-off, obviously he is then likely to mistrust the teeter and often will display insecurity on the dogwalk as well. Dogs that hesitate two-thirds of the way up the up plank of the dogwalk are demonstrating uncertainty; they are worried that the plank may suddenly drop.

It is important to help the dog differentiate between the planks so that the confusion does not result in a mishap that will potentially set back the dog's confidence. It is not enough to call the dogwalk and teeter by different names. Most novice dogs do not understand the difference between the words *Teeter* and *Dogwalk*, or whatever. In the beginning, most dogs lump all obstacle names as one, and if you call out an obstacle name the dog will attempt whatever obstacle he is pointing at regardless of whether the obstacle name is appropriate.

To help the dog learn to differentiate between the teeter and the dogwalk, I find it most helpful to use an *action* command, rather than an obstacle command. An action command is one that requires the dog to *do* something, rather than just labeling the obstacle. *Easy* or *Wait* commands, assuming the handler has trained the meaning, usually are more helpful cues to the dog that the plank will tip than the obstacle command *Teeter*. The dog quickly learns that he never hears an action command in conjunction with the dogwalk, but *does* hear it with the teeter. The handler can also use *Go go go!* on the up plank of the dogwalk in contrast. Combined with body language—the handler pauses at teeter but *not* at up plank of dogwalk—most dogs become comfortable distinguishing the two obstacles even when on unfamiliar equipment.

The dog should be exposed to as many different teeters and dogwalks as possible. Eventually, the dog will learn to recognize the teeter as the plank that tips because it has visible side supports at the pivot point, whereas the dogwalk does not. The dog will learn to recognize that the plank that ends in mid-air is the one that moves; however, he must approach from an angle to be able to see this. Depending on the pre-

dominate style of equipment used in the immediate geographical region, dogs may learn that planks without slats are the ones that move. This is not always the case, teeters may be slatted or slatless and dogs must learn not to depend on that cue. Be sure to familiarize your dog to both types. Take advantage of obstacle familiarization sessions for novice dogs if they are offered by the trial. Be particularly aware that your dog may be confused on the plank obstacles when participating in these familiarizations and be prepared to spot him.

If you have no access to other equipment, there is still a lot you can do to better prepare your dog for the variety of teeters and dogwalks he will encounter in the agility ring.

- Be sure to change the location of your obstacles. Many dogs will get quite confident on the contacts at home, but the first time they are moved to a new location in the training area, the dog acts as if he has never seen them before.
- Change the height of both the dogwalk and teeter periodically. Use your imagination to make them appear as different visually as possible.
- Even if your dog is not ready for obstacle discrimination training, be sure to get him used to the presence of a tunnel under the dogwalk.
- Change the pivot point of the teeter by attaching a variety of weights on the underside of the up contact.
- Make your teeter plank slatted on one side and slatless on the other to accustom your dog to both types.
- Simulate the teeter being on uneven ground by raising the up plank and base approximately 1" to 2". Often a dog will be disturbed if the teeter is on a downhill slope because the plank doesn't hit the ground as soon as expected, similar to you stepping off the last step in the dark, not expecting another stair step, but there is.
- If your dogwalk is very steady, gently shake the plank as the dog crosses to accustom the dog to a bouncy one.
- Practice in the rain to be sure the dog has experience on wet contacts.
- Vary the surface the teeter plank drops onto by putting a piece of plywood underneath rather than grass. This alters the sound and the feel of the plank, making it much louder and concussive. Some trainers even attach metallic noisemakers to the underside of the teeter.

Be creative, but also be sure to spot the dog anytime you change the equipment! ☐