

Independent Contacts

©2013 AgilityFlix All Rights Reserved Andrea can be reached at www.agilityflix.net

This article is focused on how you can train for independent contact performance specifically.

There are a few challenges that most dogs have to overcome in order to learn and maintain independent contact performance so this article will focus on those things. Having said that, you might encounter other issues, such as concern about a stranger running alongside them, that make independent performance difficult for your dog.

Make it fun

The first typical challenge that I see is that some aspects of their performance may not be inherently self-rewarding for the dog (driving ahead of you, moving away, stopping, orienting to the board instead of the handler, releasing forward when the handler is behind). Yet, it will be easier to get and maintain independent performance if the dog actively wants to perform these behaviors without requiring the handler to use pressure, coercion, bribery, luring, or proximity to make them happen. It is to your advantage to train your dog to want



to perform independently right from the start, in other words, don't build yourself into the performance in the first place by letting the dog offer the basic behaviors.

For independent contacts, the basic list of things that the dog needs to learn to love to do would include wanting to align to the upside of the contact, wanting to run fast over it, wanting to run fast to a specific place, stopping there (if a stopped behavior), wanting to wait until a verbal release (coupled with stop behavior), and releasing or exiting in a direction as indicated by the handler (but not necessarily coming to the handler).

One of the critical foundation skills I think you have to have in order to encourage your dog to love basic contact performance behaviors, is fetch. First, because you have to get the rewards off of you. Second, because you need to be able to get the toy back relatively quickly so you can get more training in. And finally, playing games is a wonderful way to make performing basic contact behaviors fun. If you plan to proceed with primarily food rewards, I'd recommend you try to use them as if they are edible toys to capture as much of the energy and fun of play.

When you evaluate your training, check to see if each piece of the behavior by itself is something the dog offers with speed and enthusiasm before you assemble the behaviors onto the actual obstacle. For example, one of the foundation skills for a stopped contact is called "run as fast as you can and stop on a dime". This is something dogs can learn to do physically (and can learn is fun) by playing games in the living room and backyard (no contact obstacle required).

When you play games that build each of the skills that your dog needs in order to perform their contact, away from equipment, at high-energy – you'll find that transferring those skills to the actual obstacle is fairly simple and quick. In addition, the obstacle will inherit the good associations you've built into the behaviors and if you run into setbacks or have to experiment with techniques to get the behavior you want, you aren't working that out on the obstacle itself. Your dog is not only better prepared to do good work from their very first encounter with the equipment, but they are also pre-disposed to be successful. The effect that you get is a dog that loves to, say, run as fast as they can go over a long, narrow board AND a dog who loves to pounce on a mouse pad and make it skid on the floor and then you put them together and it becomes their new favorite game.

As I mentioned in a previous article, your goal as the trainer is not to make your dog do “X”, it is to make them want to do “X”.



The second common challenge that I see is anticipation. Once the dog begins to experience sequencing, they can begin to actively look to the handler for clues as to what comes next before they finish the job at hand.

If the dog’s attention shifts away from the contact performance and onto reading the handler, independent performance can begin to suffer. For example, if the handler is behind or lateral to the dog, the dog can anticipate the direction of release and exit to the side of the contact or even pause waiting for the handler. If the handler is hustling to get a front cross at the end of the contact, the dog might accelerate or change their striding as they race them. The dog will need to learn to finish their performance “no matter what.”

The key to avoiding this kind of anticipation is exposing your dog to every kind of scenario you can think of, and making it fun for them to ignore every temptation to be distracted from their true purpose – finishing the contact. I find that your attitude towards these games can go along way toward helping your dog.

One way to encourage independent performance is to treat each exercise as if it is a question you are asking the dog “can you run as fast as you can go, when I cross behind

you?” The dog is allowed to answer yes (in which case you reward lavishly) or no (in which case you don’t). You are picking the questions thoughtfully so the dog has a fair chance of answering yes as you progress through your training, but you do not want to cheat by giving them the answer. Also try to avoid having a vested interest in how they answer because that easily becomes telegraphed in your body language (management or stress), or you might start asking only questions you know you will get a yes for (stagnation in your training).

What do you want?

A very different issue, that can look similar to anticipation, is when handler concern about the end performance (“getting the contact”) undermines the dog’s confidence and independence. Dogs who don’t know how to be successful are very unlikely to exhibit the confidence, speed, accuracy, reliability and independence that you might envision. Here are some tips that might help you in this area

By far, the number one dilemma for handlers is the difference between legal



performance and desired performance. Not that you haven’t heard it before, but if you just can’t reinforce consistent expectations – you might be better off deciding that you are going to have kick-butt managed contacts. You know, in your heart, that if you randomly reward your dog for popping out of the weave poles after they have completed between 2 and 10 that you are not going to end up with a dog who confidently and independently drives through 12.

Here's another thought, you might be making it harder for your dog to satisfy your criteria than you need to be. The more criteria that you have for performance, the more you need to train and maintain. Think about choosing only criteria that are straightforward and valuable enough to consistently reinforce.

Here's an example, I personally don't like to incorporate a nose-touch into a stopped contact behavior. The first reason is that I don't see my dog in other circumstances run as fast as she can in order to bonk her nose into the ground (pouncing on something is a different story, hence I like foot-touch better). The second reason is that when I'm moving at speed, and in dirt or grass, I can't see if the dog actually touches the ground with their nose or not. If I build this criterion into my expectations and then reward them for nearly-touching, then what I am doing is teaching them to bob their head after they arrive in their 2o2o. True, I think I could fade this criterion down the road, but I feel like I have set the stage for ambiguous performance, inconsistency and ultimately handler management of the end performance.

In addition, the more criteria you have, the more failure modes your dog has, they might meet 4 of the 5 perfectly, but fail on the 5th, and you will need to respond appropriately. Keep in mind that you can encourage certain behaviors via timing and placement of your rewards without making them a required element of the dog's performance, for example, I encourage open striding into my stopped dogwalk performance, but I do not insist upon it.

Make the end-performance meaningful

Since stopped behaviors seem to trigger many issues for handlers, another way to reinforce the dog for focusing on their end performance is to make that a meaningful job.

I've already mentioned that you can play games in the house to help your dog. One of the favorite games, still, for my young dog is when I give her the job of finding her spot. I leave her in a stay in the kitchen and hide a short piece of shelving (about 18" wide and 3 feet long) somewhere in the house. The harder I make it to get to her 2o2o, the more she seems to value getting there, and sometimes she has to really work (uncovering it, pushing open a door to find it, wiggling behind the couch, or forcing pillows out of the way to make room for her to lie down there).

You can change the frame of reference for your dog on course as well. You could act like nailing their 2o2o is the GO button for the next sequence. You could skip the ubiquitous sit-stay as a lead in to each exercise and start them from their 2o2o instead. You can leave your dog in that spot while you get organized for your practice session, and then magically notice them there (I use this technique a fair bit, where the dog is invisible to me, and then when they make a good choice, they magically de-cloak and get my full attention). You could leave your dog in their spot, go replenish your pocket full of treats and then come back and reward them (cool, going to my spot makes my mom go load up on treats, which I know I will get at some point).

What did you say?

The fourth challenge is specific to stopped behaviors, and that is the release. If the dog becomes confused about what releases them from their contact performance, they can begin to assume, guess or watch the handler for clues. Often this creates issues with anticipation or self-releasing but it can also lead to issues driving into their stop position as well.

I break this out as a separate challenge because I find that many issues with speed, confidence and consistency actually originate as issues with the release. Pausing at the top of the A-frame, for example, is often initially triggered by the spiral of ambiguity, performance issues, and frustration stemming from confusion over the release. I should also mention, that many dogs are not at all confused about the release, its just that they are releasing on a cue the handler has inadvertently taught them, typically movement. So the dog will need to learn what does and does not release them from their contact behavior.

For independent performance, it's helpful to use a verbal release that you can communicate at a distance and from any relative position. It's difficult to deliver a verbal release without coupling it with some change in your physical demeanor such as shifting your weight to your toes.

One solution is to embed the verbal release in movement that has nothing unique happening (no arm raise, no head turn...). Another way to isolate the verbal release is to stand still during the release and then move a heartbeat later. If you opt for this approach, you might find it easier to not-move at the same time as the verbal release if you drive to an ideal position on course where you can handle the next sequence first, and then pause and then release and then move.



Striding

A quick note about running contacts and independent performance of the contact obstacle. Except for confusion about the release, all of the other challenges to independent performance apply and I would make the same recommendations (albeit the games are different) to encourage the dog to perform independently.

Having said that, there is an added complexity in communicating the direction the dog exits the contact. If you wait to cue the direction of egress until the dog is in the contact zone, you will end up with a managed end-performance.

One way to encourage an efficient exit and maintain an independent performance is to cue the exit direction much like you do with a tunnel or jump. This means that on ascent of the contact, you have already identified if it is an exit forward, left or right for the dog using a command equivalent to A-frame-left, for example. Rather than train 3 names for each contact obstacle, another solution is to identify the obstacle by one name to cue a running contact and forward exit, and another that cues a stopped contact. Another solution is to train a forward exit only and then cue a turn on the flat.

Each approach has its challenges and implications so if you are going to want independent performance, it's helpful to envision the contact obstacle located behind a gamble line and all the exit variations your dog will encounter as you think through your expectations.

Independence forever

The last typical challenge is maintenance. The nature of the competitive environment can lead to differences in energy level and focus for the dog, differences in handling and differences in how the handler responds to the dog's choices that can easily and quickly lead to differences in performance.

For example, when a qualifier is on the line, it is very hard for handlers not to decelerate or watch the dogs as they approach the contact zone, and that can become a cue to the dog to tune into the handler. This in turn can become a managed contact where the dog now expects and needs the handler to decelerate in order to perform their end performance (either stopping or adjusting stride to step into the yellow). And, of course, the dog is perfect in class or practice, but they exhibit this weird dependence at trials.

Also, many courses tend to lead to repetitive handler behavior (for example, consistency in the lateral distance off the contact, or the relative position of the handler at release), which then can become part of the picture for the dog.

The best training advice I can give in this area is to keep mixing things up. Even though on most courses you might normally, or mostly, handle in a particular way, make a point of incorporating variables in your handling (run fast, run slow, work close, work far, cross in front, cross behind, throw toys, make noise).

In competition, my best advice is to first realize that any ambiguity or stress in your attitude toward your dog's performance will likely be unhelpful in encouraging them to execute independently. It is helpful to be clear in your mind about how you will react when your dog performs as expected and what you will do when they don't.

It is also helpful to trust your training. In competition, they either will (do "X") or they won't. If you try to influence that in the moment, you risk introducing variation in your energy and body language that is counter productive – and if it actually does influence your dog, then you've just taken the first step towards a managed performance. Therefore, forget practicing lovely and boring work in class, pump it up – this is the time to ask your dog those questions. "can you still stop if I chuck your tennis ball by your head?" Can you maintain your striding if I drop a hamburger as I run past?"

Wrapping up

To wrap up this article, I think these are the concepts that seem to be most important in building and maintaining independent contact performance. There are a lot of challenges, but if you enlist your dog in the process and give them a chance to learn to want to perform the behaviors you are looking for, you might find that the challenges are not as difficult to overcome, as I might have made them seem.

Andrea is a professional trainer, consultant and coach who takes great pleasure in helping her students, both in Seattle and elsewhere, enjoy their dog, training, agility and success, probably in that order. She can be reached at www.agilityflix.net, where you can check out her training products and services and of course brags about her own dogs.