AgilityFlix

Communicating the path

This article looks at how the technical skills that you may have developed for other venues, will help you to solve NADAC puzzles as well.

In the previous article, I described a handling approach that works well for NADAC style puzzles – but also translates very well to other venues in which you handle your dog along an ideal path and let the obstacles be presented to the dog because they are in the way.

I also briefly mentioned the idea that each jump you present to the dog is an obstacle discrimination problem in and of itself and your job is not just to tell the dog "that" they should perform the jump, but "how" they should.

Well, managing the path and controlling the variable performance obstacles (jumps, tunnels, running contacts) are where you'll find your technical skills are just as valuable for addressing NADAC puzzles as they are in any venue.

Managing the Path

One way to think about managing the path is "working" the ½ way point on the ideal path between your dog and the next obstacle they are to perform. The following graphic illustrates the basic idea.

In this scenario "Fido" is committed to jump #5 and point "A" represents the half way point on the ideal path between jumps #5 and #6.

Handler A1 is sending the dog ahead to jump #6 (notice handler A1 is not aiming their pressure at the jump #6, but at the ½ way point on the path).

Handler A2 is working laterally at a distance from the dog (notice handler A2 is not pushing their hand out to the side while they rotate their feet and upper body toward jump #7 but rather their hand is complementing the pressure of their entire body).
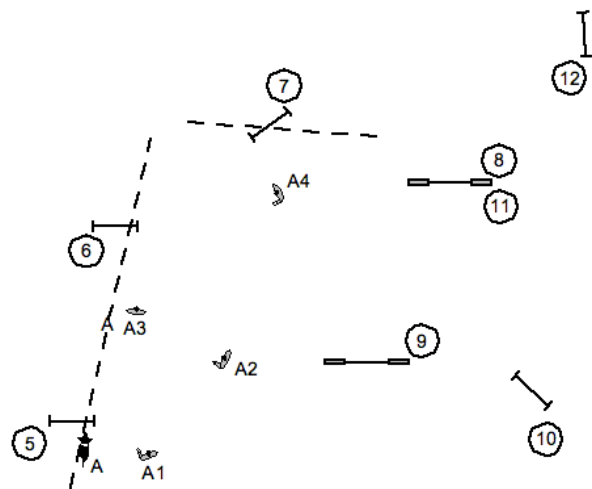
Handler A3 is recalling their dog and pulling on the ½ way point (notice their lead hand is down close to their side, complementing their shoulder rotation and orientation). Handler A4 is working laterally away from the dog, but ahead of her, and still working the same ½ way point.

The goal of managing the path is to get Fido to stride right over point A on the way to jump #6 and once the handler is confident that they have committed their dog to jump #6, they can then begin working the next part of the path.

Check your accuracy

I mentioned in the last article that providing your dog with a choice (notice dummy jump in the graphic below) is a good way to determine if they understand your cues. The next graphic indicates what our handlers are up to now that they were all successful in communicating the path to jump #6. Handler A1 drove forward to B1 and is now decelerating to take pressure off the path (Notice they are still supporting point "B" with feet, shoulders and lead hand). Handler A2 is still working at a distance and has moved to B2 directing pressure at point "B" (Notice there is relatively little change in their position, but the handler is still putting pressure on the point). Handler A3 is driving their dog through the turn to B3 using their shoulder rotation to continue pulling on the path. Handler A4 is pulling on point "B" by moving laterally to position B4.
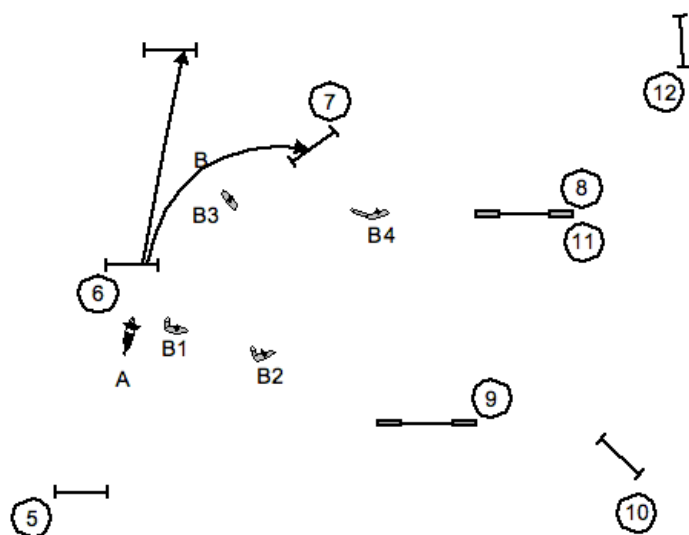
Your ability to see the ideal path and anticipate what your dog needs from you to put them on it are all coming into play regardless of the handling strategy that you choose. In addition, your technical ability to direct pressure accurately, to deliberately accelerate and decelerate, the timing of when and how to put pressure on the path and take it off, and the discipline to ensure that your lead hand and body are giving complementary cues are all just as important in each of these scenarios. In fact, it's a fun exercise to predict what kind of mistake each of

these handlers could make that would undermine their dog's understanding in this specific situation. It's an even more fun exercise to envision, how a handling mistake could work here, but would create issues for solving other kinds of puzzles.

Fun stuff! You are probably also noticing that controlling the shape of jump #6 goes along way toward helping the dog drive over the ideal path to #7 (and if that doesn't intrigue you, the #8 jump will), but before getting to that, it makes sense to think about what kind of path you are trying to create in the first place – another opportunity for your technical handling skills.

Lines and Arcs

Lines

I've found that visualizing the dog's path as lines connected by arcs translates extremely well to all venues. Thinking of the course in this way, as opposed to say a spline, loopy, or scribble path seems to simplify the job of the handler in a way that produces a high degree of consistent handling between venues and lets you use the same technical handling cues to solve all kinds of puzzles. I've found that visualizing NADAC courses as loopy, loose or "flowing" actually can trigger some handling strategies that don't work well in other venues.

The trickiest part of finding the dog's line is often related to jump sequences, but here is a simple approach that seems to work regardless of venue.
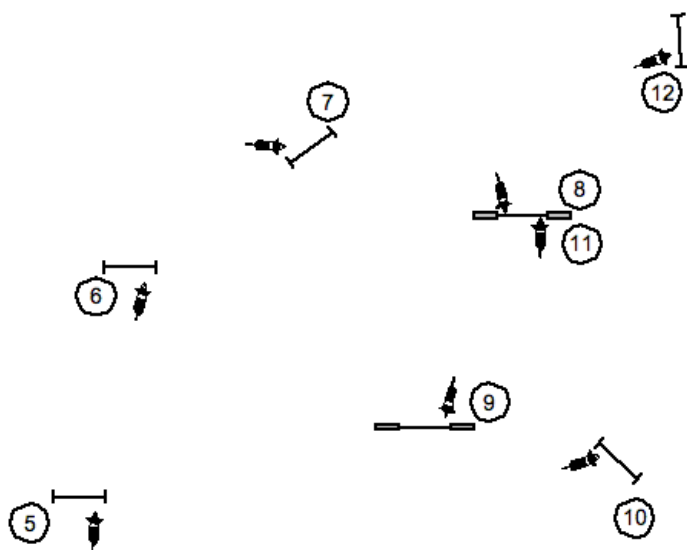
First recognize that a jump is 4 or sometimes 5 feet wide and your dog is maybe 8 inches wide. This means that you will want to decide if it makes more sense for the dog to jump the left-most 8 inches of the bar or the right-most. It is not helpful to draw a general line through the center of the jumps – so be sure to focus on whether the dog hugs the left standard or right. Here is an example course segment showing what I mean.

Once you decide what part of the bar you want the dog to jump – connect as many dots as you can with straight lines. Playing this game, you will notice that there are sometimes alternate solutions to the puzzle and this represents a handling opportunity or strategy. Do I want to create a straight line between

jumps 7 and 8 (in the attached course segment) or do I want to create a line between 8 and 9 (I chose 8-9)

Once you like the lines you are creating on course for your dog, connect them with arcs.

Arcs

Controlling arcs, or changes of direction is to a very large degree, what sets the lines for your dog- and if you set the lines that put the correct obstacles in the dogs way, you can free up your dog to drive ahead with great confidence and speed.

Here are a few examples:

Lets say we pick up this course after I have set the line from #5 to #6. I need to pull on the "X" to bring it in, else my dog shoots off into space around the outside of jump #7. There are plenty of ways to do this but what you need is for the dog to understand your pull, and if so, they will gravitate to the near side of jump #6 and begin to turn inside of the "X". This puts jump #7 in their way on a natural and helpful approach angle and arc – creating a line that is favorable to the next part of the path.

But this same shape of arc would be inefficient at best for connecting the next two lines on the path.

As I see my dog is going to go over point "B" and is committed to jump #7, I now move to put some pressure on point "C". Notice I am not pushing at jump #8 but rather on the half way point on the ideal path to jump #8. This is important because I actually want to pull my dog in a very tight arc over jump #8.
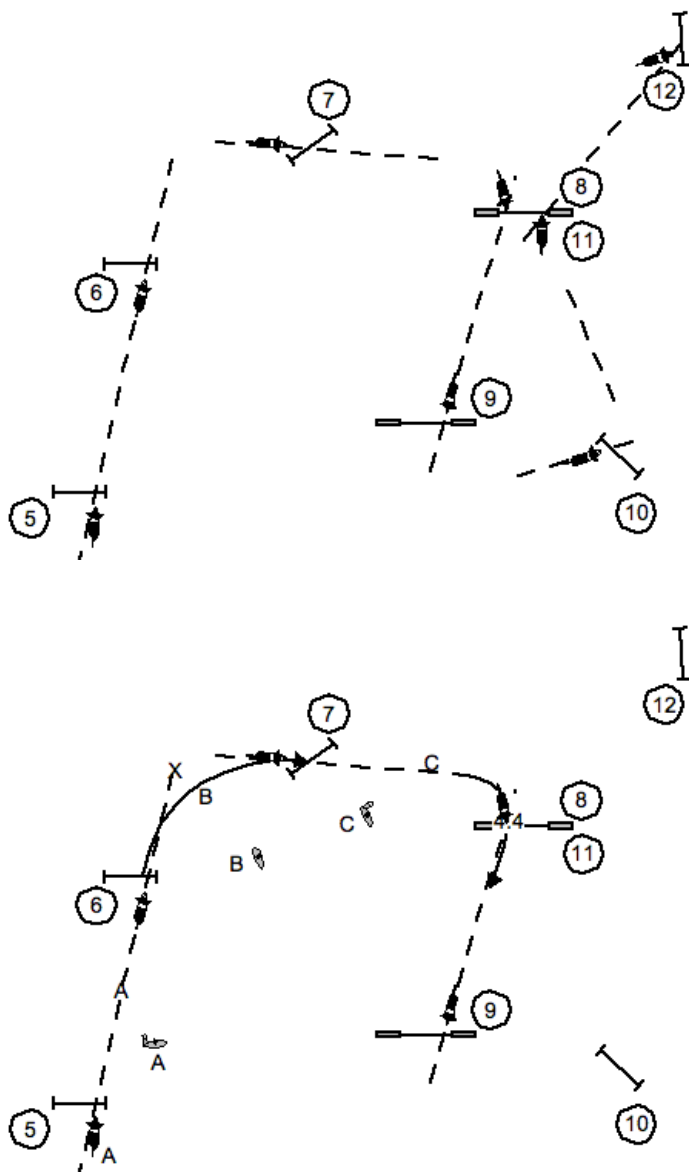
Does it make sense, that if I push at jump #8, I am actually putting pressure on the ½ way point on a path connecting jump #7 to Jump #10 and will get a wider turn over #8 as a result? Does it make sense, that if I push at jump #8, I have to hold that pressure longer because my dog is going to gravitate inside the ideal path from jump #7 and is at risk of pulling off jump #8 entirely? Does it make sense that if I have to support jump #8 longer, then I will probably be late in starting to pull laterally to jump #9 and even if I do manage to communicate the tight turn at the last minute I risk the bar at #8? A triple whammy.

This is a good example why working the path and not the obstacle itself, can work really well as a strategy. As soon as I see my dog committed to going over point "C", I can then begin to pull them over jump #8, creating the sharp change of direction that then sets the line to 9 etc.

If that all makes sense, then visualize how putting a front cross between jumps 8 and 9 would work. Notice how moving along the front cross line connecting jumps 8 and 9 not only pulls the dog over the bar just next to the right standard of jump #8 and presents the left standard of jump # 9 but it also directs the handler's momentum directly at the half way point on the ideal path to the next obstacle as well. If you are not coming out of your front cross in a position to "work" the next piece of the puzzle, then you are putting it in the wrong spot (i.e.: you are not creating the line you want for your dog). In this case, as the handler decelerates at position E, they would then pull on point E to create the turn to jump #10.
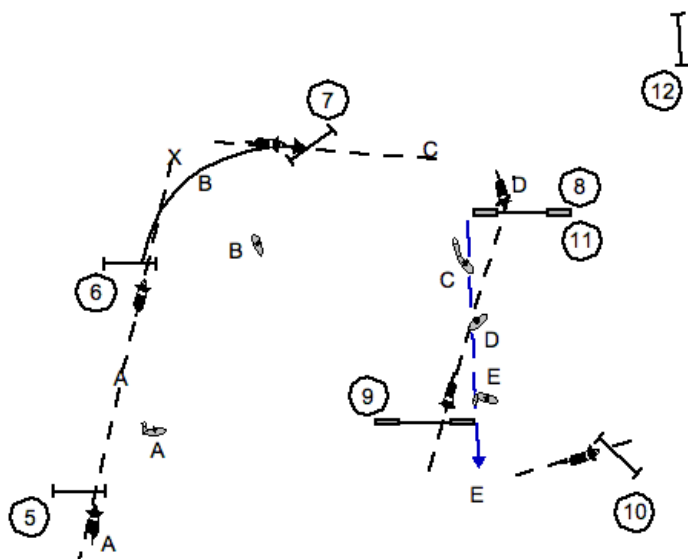

So all of your technical handling skills are now influencing the part of the jump that your dog is using. They are communicating the changes of direction on course for the nicest possible lines.

Well this is all fine and dandy, but not if you have to change your whole handling strategy to solve distance challenges so lets look at that.

Arcs at a distance

Taking the same course segment, now we have a handler restriction (such as a gamble line) or the handler is simply so far behind the dog, that they end up handling this piece from behind the 50 foot marker line as shown on the graphic.
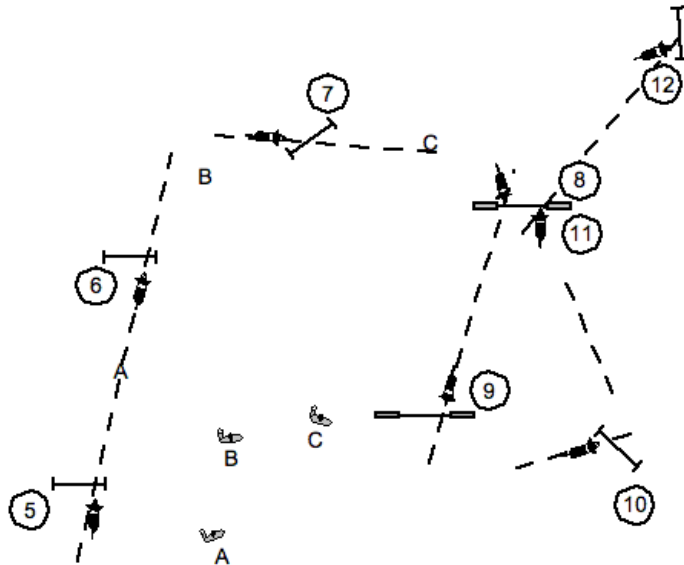
Notice how the handler at position "A" is working point "A" on the path to support the dog as she gets ahead of the handler. This pressure prevents her from caving in and turning off jump #6. Once the handler has committed the dog to jump #6 (i.e.: the dog is happily striding past point "A" on their path, the handler moves forward to push on point "B" creating the arc to jump #7. Once jump #7 is clearly in the dog's way, the handler then rotates and pushes at point "C" and leaves enough room to step in and add additional pressure. And, you guessed it; they would then take pressure off to pull the dog over jump #8 by pulling on the half way point between the dog and jump #9 (using serpentine handling, RFP or however you describe it).

Not just that, but how

Using your technical skills to manage the path by controlling the shape of arcs and setting lines is not the only way that you can translate your skills to solving NADAC puzzles. The other application of your technical handling skills involves going beyond telling your dog "that" they should perform each obstacle to communicating "how" to perform each obstacle whenever there are decisions your dog needs to make with respect to their performance (tunnels, running contacts, jumps or all types).

There have been many great articles describing how to do this so I won't belabor the point, but what I thought might be interesting would be to look at a NADAC style course to show you where you can apply these technical skills.

Technical handling of a nadac-like course

I'm going to claim poetic license here since I am not a judge and I didn't want to burden my friends who are with helping me with this article, but below is a nadac-like jumpers course. Notice how the placement of the jump angles encourages you to see a nice flowy path, something like the spline that is created as the automated dog-path in Clean Run Course Designer.

This is how you might be tempted to look at the course.

NADAC-like course
with dog path
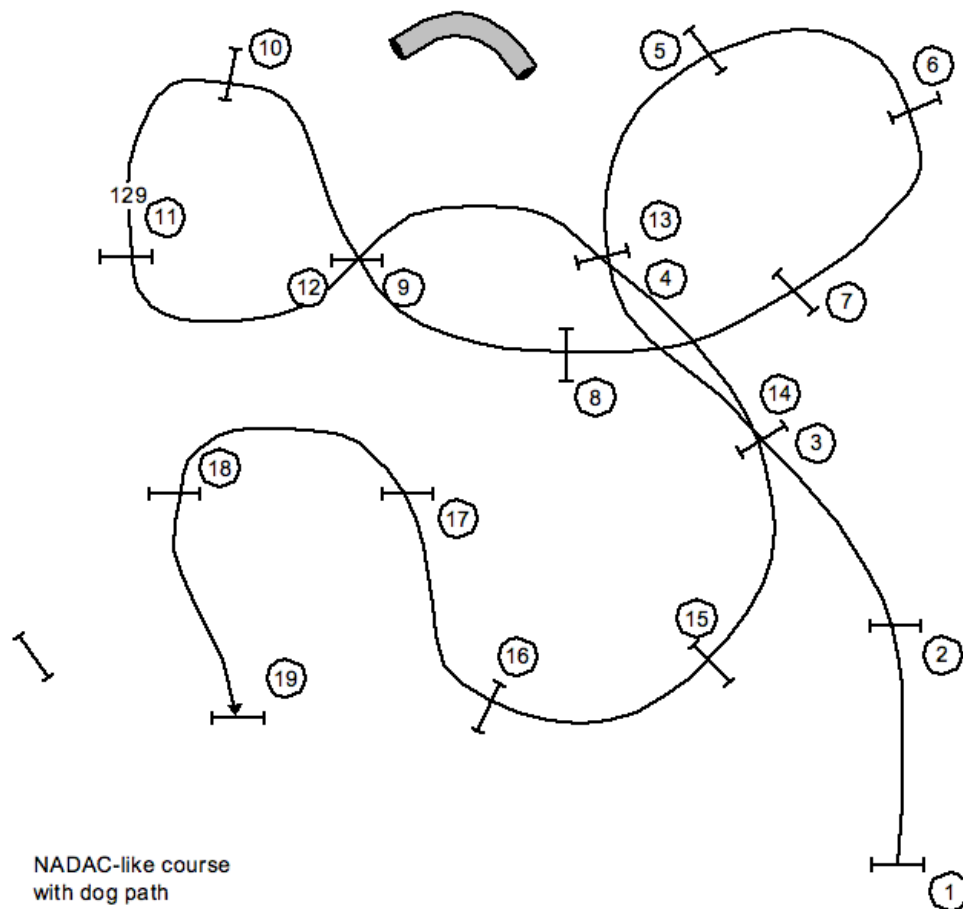
This is how you might look at the course more "technically".

The first thing I'm going to do is think about what part of the bar I want my dog to jump and then I'm going to connect as many of those jumps as I can with lines. Notice how I can connect jumps 2 and 4 and jump 3 is just in the way. Notice how I can plan my strategy; do I want to create a line from 7 to 8 or from 6 to 7? Creating a line from 6-7 presents an off course

jump at 3 so one strategy might be to take that out of the equation altogether by setting a different line.

Once I find my lines, I can now think about how I want my dog to jump. For example, I want my dog to jump #2 to the left and #4 to the right.

NADAC-like course
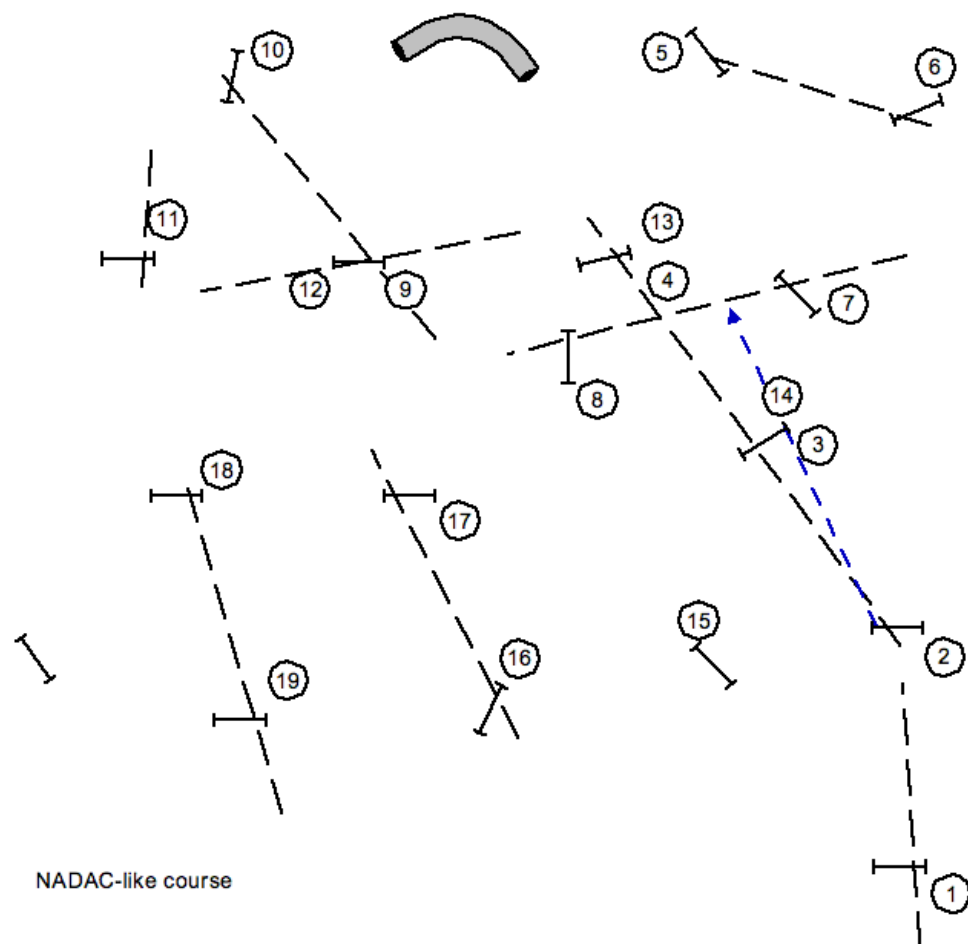
Now I can pick my handling strategy that will communicate the lines and shape of jumps as best I can. For example, I could use a front cross between jumps 2 and 3 (along the blue line shown) to get the effect of turning my dog left over jump #2 but it would not put me in a good position to support the half way point on the ideal path to #4. My dog would tend to come in on the right standard of jump #3 and this even presents the off course at jump #7. So a front cross here would not set the line that I want. Instead, I'll either lead out and put a front cross between jumps 3 and 4 or rear cross in the same spot.

Notice how the gaps between the lines show you the places you need to pull or push on the path to create arcs. Notice how they also point out where you need to help the dog discriminate how to jump so you can plan your deceleration or verbal cues. They even

illustrate the importance of your rear cross lines and the affect the pressure of your moving along those lines will have on the next part of the path.

Wrapping up

To wrap up this article, NADAC style agility puzzles create lots of opportunities to leverage your technical handling skills. One aspect is the ability to look critically at a flowy course and strategize the ideal path for your dog, seeing which lines enable maximum speed, eliminate off course opportunities, and minimize discrimination problems. Another is the ability to communicate those lines by managing changes of direction, using pressure and taking pressure off, using acceleration and deceleration and a variety of physical and verbal cues. The additional skill of being able to communicate how to perform obstacles such as jumps and tunnels so that the dog can turn, accelerate along a new line, change strides or lead legs further enhances the dog's confidence and speed on course and ensures that they can follow the path you design.

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. She would welcome any thoughts you might have on these articles.