

Touch-N-Go

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Generally Touch N Go courses are fast and flowing with a natural path presented to the dog for each obstacle. Challenges come from performance of the obstacles themselves, obstacle discrimination, off-course potential, and basic handling. Teams with running contacts may find Touch N Go particularly interesting.

Figure 1 shows a NADAC-like Touch N Go course that I designed for this article, with the caveat that I am not a judge and this is not an approved course design.

You need a dog that is skilled with contact performance for this game, but here are some ideas on particulars you might find the most helpful.

Walking the Course

In a previous article on Weavers strategy (CR August 2010), I described some of the strategies for walking a course and why they are beneficial. All those recommendations hold for Touch N Go courses as well so I will summarize them here without the details.

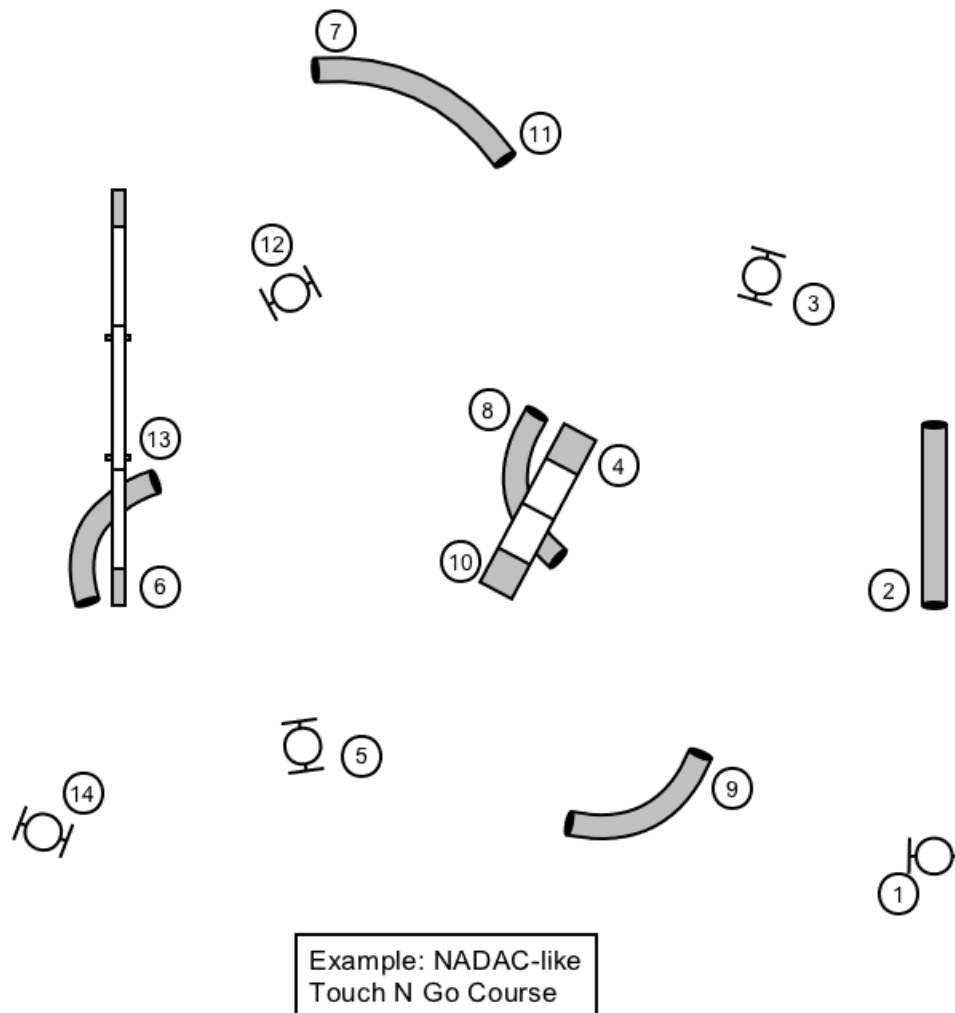
Walk the course first as the dog, and from the dog's perspective, so you can evaluate it without preconceived notions of where it goes.

Check what the dogs can see, when they get far enough through tunnels to be able to see out the end. Look to see if the tunnel is secured in such a way that it might change shape as dogs go through it, thus presenting a different natural path and line of sight as they exit than you might expect.

You also should pay close attention to how visible the hoops are in relation to the more visually weighty contacts and tunnels.

Handling Strategy

I doubt there is anything terribly unique about handling a Touch N Go course that you don't already know but here are some reminders.



Tunnel Tips

How dogs exit a tunnel, whether driving ahead locked onto what they see or turning and looking for the handler, can have a significant effect on successful execution of a Touch N Go course.

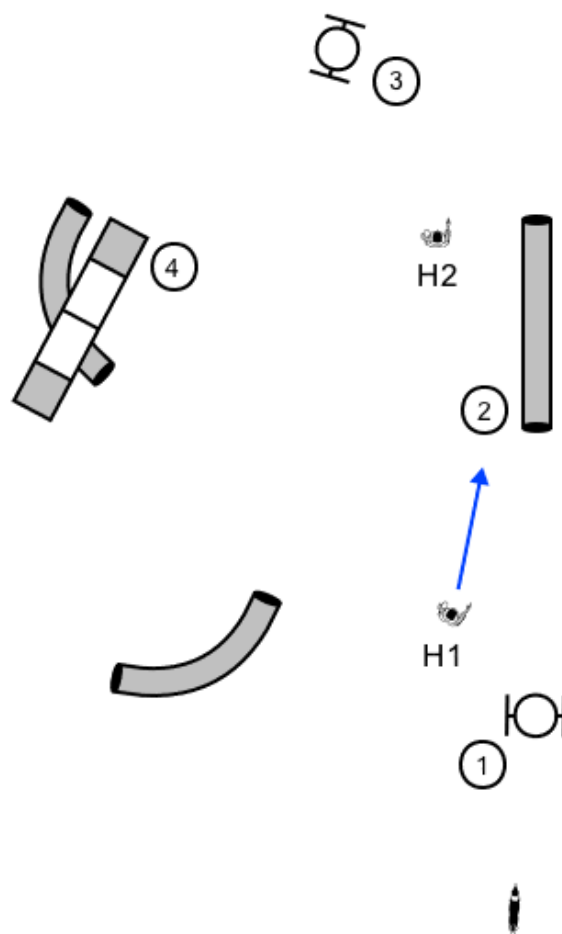
One good tip is to make sure you tell the dogs where to go as soon as they can see out of the end of a tunnel. In other words, don't wait until you can see the dog to give an Out or a dogwalk command. Tell the dogs as soon as you can visualize they are far enough through the tunnel so they can see what is ahead of them. Also keep in mind that as soon as the dogs can see out the end of the tunnel, they are getting information about where they think they are going next; so if you wait until they exit to give them any cues, you might be in the

situation of overriding a decision they have already made. I find that changing the dogs' mind is more difficult (and less efficient) than telling them where to go in the first place. For example, as dogs go into tunnel #11 and approach the exit, they can see the off-course dogwalk. Some dogs immediately get the idea that the dogwalk is where they are headed. Another tip is to remember that the last thing you do as the dogs go into a tunnel, if done deliberately and consistently, can be information the dogs use to determine how they exit. Also, what you teach your dog about exiting tunnels has a significant effect on how you handle any course. Have you taught the dog that what you do as he enters the tunnel predicts where the course goes next? Have you taught him to drive out of the tunnel in extension unless he hears his name or a directional cue? Knowing your dog helps you to pick the handling strategy that works best for your team.

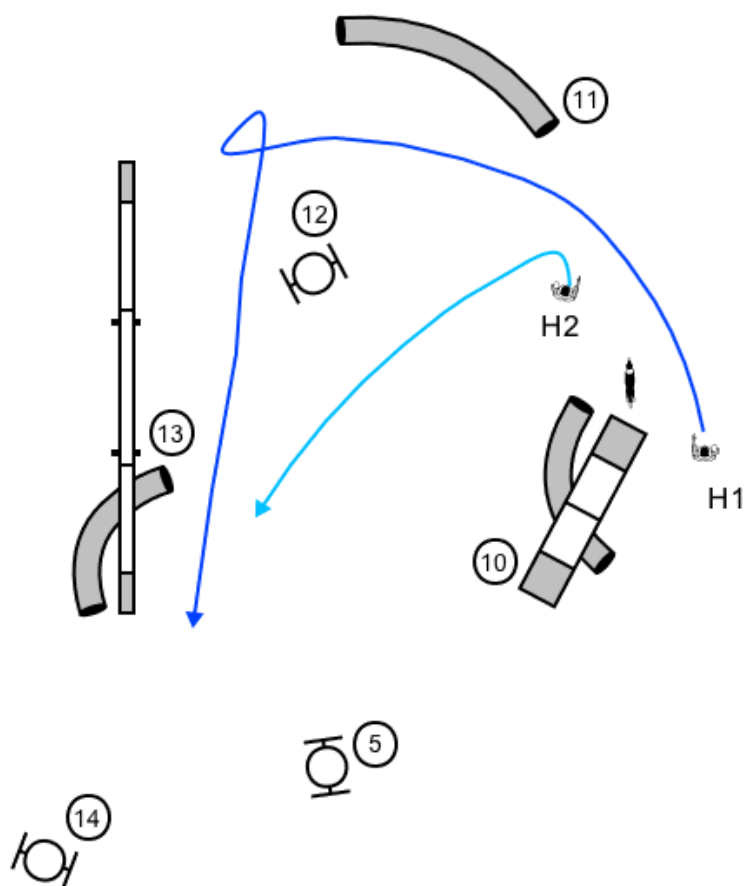
Evaluating Handler Strategies

For Touch N Go courses, different handling strategies can work for a specific course, but might create problematic habits for both handler and dog that won't work well over the long term. When evaluating your handling strategy, think carefully about the long-term implications of your strategy being successful for this particular course.

For example, in Figure 2 handler 1 (H1) plans on taking a short lead-out and have the dog accelerate into the tunnel at #2. I hope the handler has a dog that needs to come shooting out of the tunnel to set the perfect line through hoop #3 to the A-frame. The second handler (H2), is taking a longer lead-out so she can complete her deceleration as the dog goes into the tunnel so the dog comes out of #2 turning into her. Both strategies could be right for the respective handler's dog and both could be wrong. But hopefully, the handlers are selecting the lead-out strategy on purpose because they believe it gives the dog the best information about where he should go next.



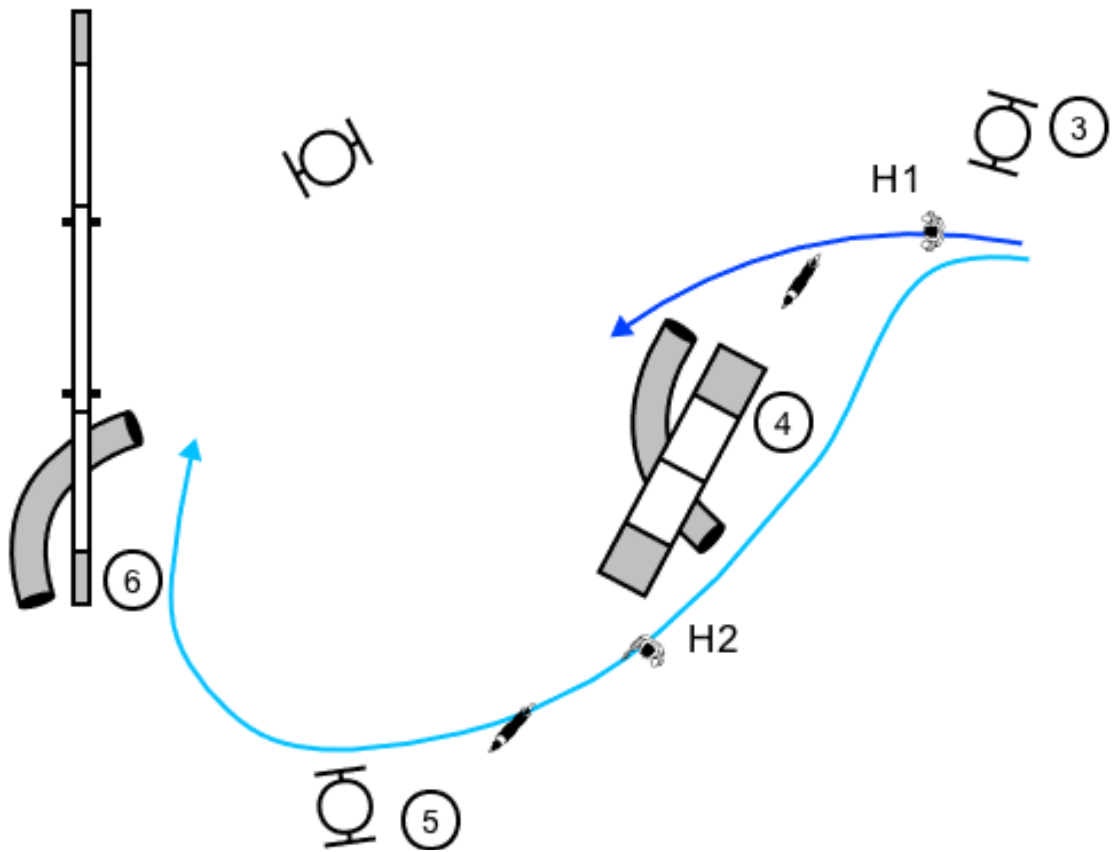
To continue with our evaluation of strategies as shown in Figure 3, handler 1 has the right idea but is an inexperienced handler and is likely to pick some strategies that might work, but also have a price attached. Note the handler doesn't appear to be confident of the dog's contacts so her strategy is to decelerate and stay close to ensure the A-frame contact. She is correct (this actually can work) but it comes at the risk of teaching the dog that abandoning his focus on the end performance of the A-frame in favor of turning into the handler is a good thing to do.



Thinking to send the dog ahead to the #11 tunnel, handler 1 realizes when she accelerates behind the dog as he moves into the tunnel, the dog is likely to shoot out wide, risking the off-course dogwalk. So her strategy is to try to create the turn with a front cross at the end of the tunnel. Then she realizes she might be late getting there so she plans to clap and say Here, Here, Here to get the dog's attention.

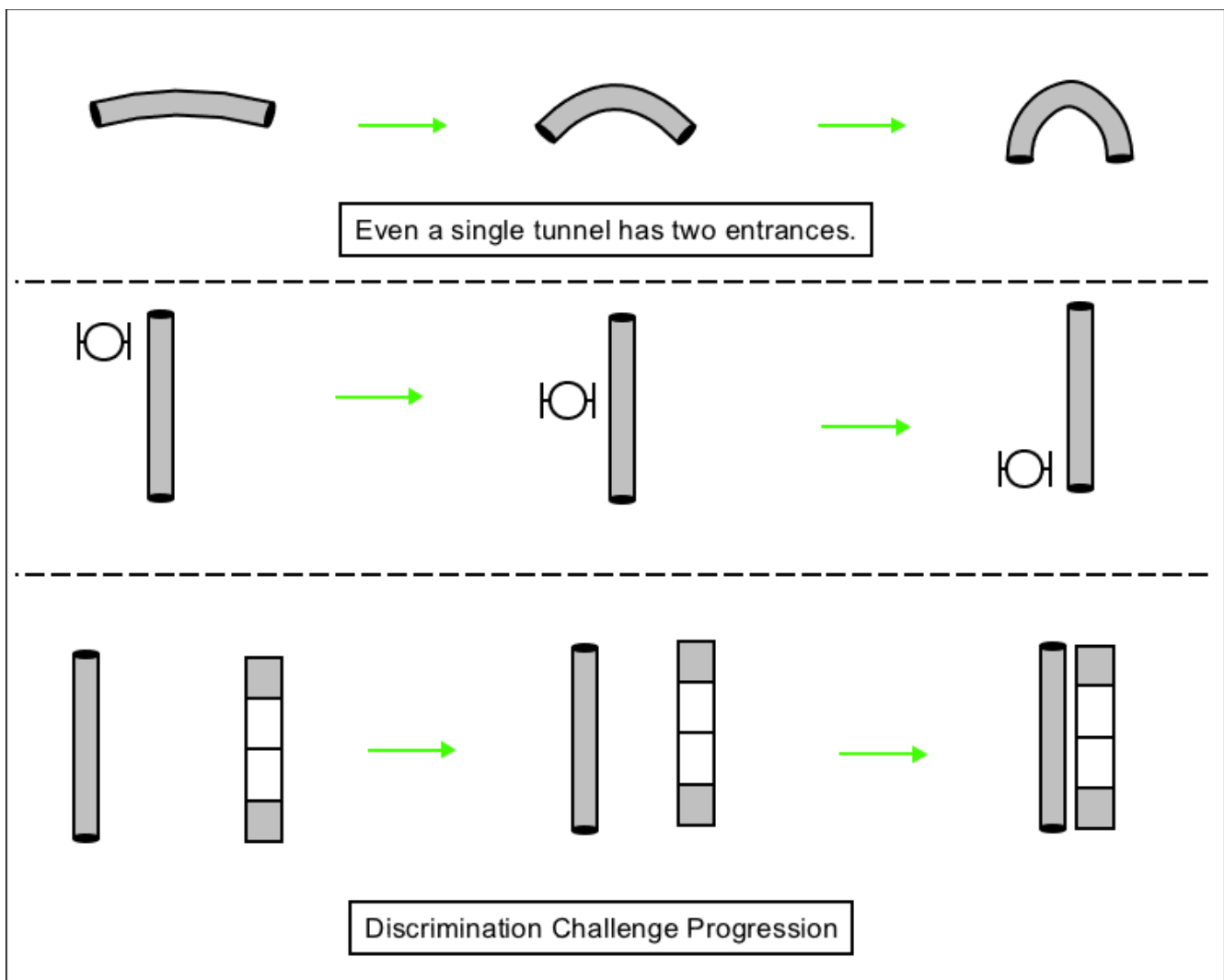
Again, I can't argue with her thinking because each of these statements is likely correct. But the overall effect is first an inconsistent cue into the tunnel, then a late front cross and an inefficient turn. An essentially reactive correction for the dog's responding correctly to both of those cues over time can add up to mistrust, slowing down, or stress behaviors in the dog.

Since handler 1 thinks the dog will go wide into the #12 hoop (correct), she plans to stay on the takeoff side to make sure the dog goes through it. Even though another front cross between the hoop and the tunnel #13 is needed, she doesn't think she can get there. So she plans to do a rear cross after the dog is into #13. Well yes, she is again right on all counts, but the strategy to fix a poor strategy here sets up another poor strategy for the next part of the course, risking more frustration and anxiety for the dog.



Then she plans to yell Out, Hoop while the dog is in the tunnel to get the dog out to #14. Well, this might work, but the combination of stalling out at the tunnel entrance to await the chance to do a rear cross tends to produce a turn out of #13. The line of the handler's movement plus an Out command actually shows a path to the off-course #5 hoop. She could fix this with another rear cross, yelling No, or spinning the dog back onto the correct path. As is often said, "experience" is what you get when you don't get what you want. You can see the handler has the right idea, and she might actually get through the course. But the strategy has some flaws, both in the short term for this course and also in terms of promoting fast, fluid, confident performance for the dog.

Handler 2 has a different strategy. The plan is to treat #11 through #14 as a serpentine. By overshooting the A-frame and committing the dog to the #11 tunnel with a deceleration cue, she pulls away laterally as the dog goes in and gives a serpentine handling cue to show the tight turn to the hoop. Next she essentially recalls the dog through the #12 hoop, showing the turn into the #13 tunnel. This same path enables her to keep moving along the line shown to put pressure on the path for the push to #14. By the way, this strategy can get into trouble as well. Let's say the handler sends the dog into the #11 tunnel but accelerates along the path shown without using the serpentine cue. How would the dog interpret that acceleration cue into the tunnel? (Hint: Accelerate out of the tunnel to the dogwalk.) How would the dog



interpret the recall through the hoop without serpentine handling? (Hint: Instead of coming through #12 and anticipating the turn away to #13, the dog comes through in the direction of #5.)

Strategies for Dogs with Running Contacts

Running contacts work very much like tunnels with respect to communicating the exit direction and energy; thinking of them that way can help to evaluate handling options.

Let's say that handler 1 in Figure 4 plans a rear cross from #3 to the A-frame with the dog. Is this a good strategy? One risk is that the handler must be careful to pull the dog to the left through the hoop #3 and set the line to the A-frame before she crosses behind the dog. Failing to set that line could easily push the dog to the off-course tunnel #8. Another risk is as the handler drives right to get around the tunnel, she might communicate a lateral pull that draws the dog inside of hoop #5 toward the off-course #13 tunnel.

Handler 2 has a different strategy. She plans to do a rear cross between the A-frame and hoop #5. Is this a good strategy? First, her being on the left side of the A-frame enables a clear change of direction through hoop #3 to set the line to the A-frame. The handler doesn't get stuck behind the #8 tunnel and can either do a rear cross at #5 or #6, depending on where she is with respect to the dog. So there are several options for driving the dog through this sequence. This handler can both aggressively run up behind the dog to drive him to #5 and can also decelerate to show the turn to the dogwalk. This path naturally supports the halfway point between #5 and the dogwalk so the handler can help ensure a safe entry. All in all, this looks like a better strategy.

Handling Discrimination Puzzles

One challenge that is prevalent in Touch N Go courses is obstacle discrimination, particularly contact / tunnel discrimination (but also tunnel / tunnel and hoop / tunnel). A discrimination challenge is not a problem with the dog's recognition of a hoop from a tunnel; it is a problem with the dog's recognition of the cue to go to the hoop versus the cue to go to the tunnel. As a result, discrimination training benefits from a methodical and deliberate approach and typically involves "fading in" a choice in obstacles.

First it pays to read the guidelines for course design (available through the NADAC website) so you know which kinds of challenges are legal, encouraged, or required. You also have to decide what to do when you want the dog to take the obstacle closest to you versus the one farther away versus the one farthest away (sometimes discriminations come in groups of three and four, not just two).

It's very important that you don't do what you think you must do to get the dog to go into the tunnel or up the dogwalk. Changing your handling cues makes it very difficult for the dog to recognize them. Instead think about what you do on course; then teach the dog, when I do this, you do that (for example, when I rotate toward you, you turn into me).

Next, set up specific discrimination training exercises where you give your dog a choice between two obstacles (even a single tunnel has two entrances). Figure 5 shows several different ways to start with a relatively simple puzzle and progress to a challenging one using three steps. At each step, it's good to practice various safe approach angles from different handler positions (ahead, behind, to both the dog's left and right).

How you handle discriminations depends on your handling system but here are some tips to consider. When you have a discrimination puzzle in the opening sequence, use your lead-out to communicate as much information as you can about the correct obstacle. You can use your positional cue, the direction you are facing, your lead hand and foot, and the initial

movement you make after you release your dog. You can also use where you are looking and what you say.

A helpful tip is to make sure that you cue the dog consistently whether you are leading out or not and it is also helpful to remember the dog makes a decision based on the first movement and cue(s) he gets from you - so it makes a difference whether you rotate then step, or step then rotate. It also makes a difference whether you step forward, then sideways, or sideways then forward .

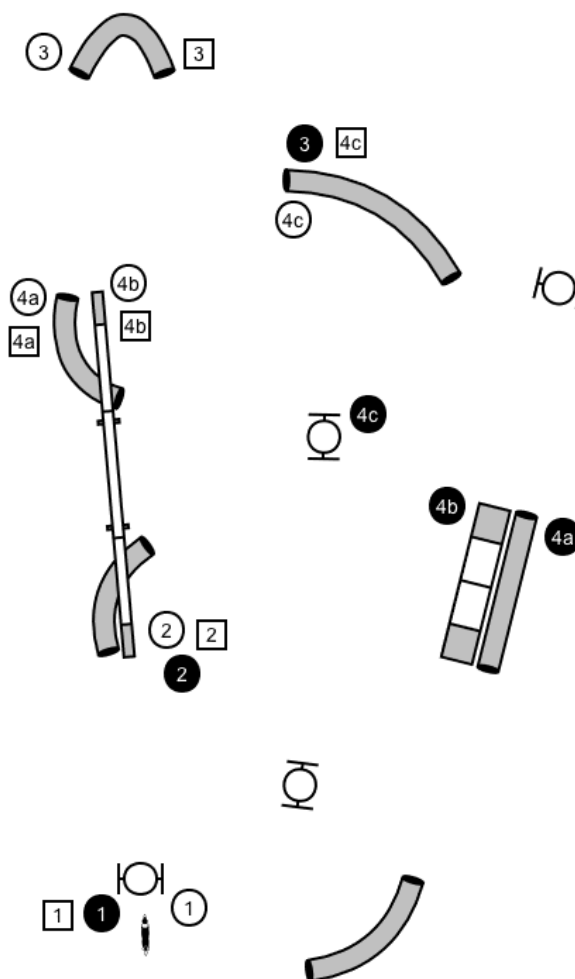
Dogs respond better to these cues if you always handle an obstacle as if the dog has several choices. Getting lazy or sloppy about sending a dog to an A-frame, as an example, when there is no other obstacle nearby can corrupt your dog's expectations and understanding of your handling. So it pays to pretend that your dog has a choice even when the obvious obstacle is the only obstacle in flow.

Finally a training sequence similar to the one shown here enables you to practice most (if not all) of the likely discrimination tests that you will see in Touch N Go. This is just putting the individual training exercises in context and flow. If you don't have all the obstacles or room, simply set up pieces of a course with these kinds of challenges so you can practice at speed and from various handling positions.

1-2-3-4 Game

Having said that, I don't think that running sequences is the best way to practice discriminations although I do think it's helpful to practice them in context and not only in isolated exercises.

Instead of practicing in one long sequence, I recommend playing a game I cleverly call "1-2-3-4." In this game, set up any viable pattern of four obstacles (for example, the white round



numbers in Figure 7. Practice that sequence with every viable handling option.

Then move only the #4 cone to any other obstacle that is a reasonable option after the same three opening obstacles. In the example, the white round numbers 4a, 4b, and 4c could follow #3. Practice this with all viable handling options (lead-out, no lead-out, left, right, rear cross, front cross, and so on).

Then move cone #3 to a different obstacle that goes with the first two cones and place #4 at a viable fourth position. For example, look at the white square sequence. Repeat again, and move 4a, 4b, and 4c until there are no other interesting puzzles or handling options. When you've exhausted all the possibilities related to handling a hoop-shaped /u-shaped tunnel, then just move cone #3 to another viable location (for example, the black round numbers) and repeat.

In this way, you change only one variable for the dog in each exercise so the dog can begin to recognize important communication tools for handling in general, in addition to handling discriminations. Your dog might begin to think, "Aha! Every time the handler is on the left we go left; I think it might mean something when she is on the left. Aha! Every time the handler accelerates toward a tunnel, I get rewarded 'out there.' I think she is doing it on purpose. Aha! Every time the handler stands like that, I go to the outside obstacle and get a cookie. I think I will do that every time I see that picture."

Don't underestimate how complicated it can be for the dog to isolate which cues are important for each situation and choice.

Wrapping Up

NADAC-style Touch N Go courses can present interesting puzzles for the handlers who like things coming at them fast. You'll generally find the courses on the shorter side but memorization can be a challenge with loops on loops of similar obstacles. Discrimination will almost always be a challenge. If you find the technical challenges of the courses too simple for your tastes, it isn't hard to challenge yourself by optimizing the path, efficiency, independent performance, or distance (and sometimes you get an option to earn extra Q-points by handling behind a distance challenge line) to add extra fun. Remember as a novice team, you are running the same course as the elite teams and the courses are relatively more challenging now than they will be when you and your dog are more experienced.

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. Contact her via www.agilityflix.net, where you can check out her training products and services and brags about her own dogs.

Sidebar

As a good mental exercise, do a virtual walk-through of this course via the map. Next try to answer the following questions without referring to the map.

What do the dogs see as they approach hoop #3?

Is there an off-course potential at hoop #5?

Is the tunnel sequence #7-#8-#9 a serpentine?

What do the dogs see as they exit tunnel #9?

If you can't answer these questions easily, then when you walk the course, you might be fast-forwarding and deciding what information you will give the dog before you have taken the time to figure out what information the dog actually needs from you. This is a risky strategy for any type of course, and definitely applies in Touch N Go where one little thing can go awry pretty quickly.

Answers

Off-course tunnel #11

Off-course hoop #14

Yes

Off-course hoop #5