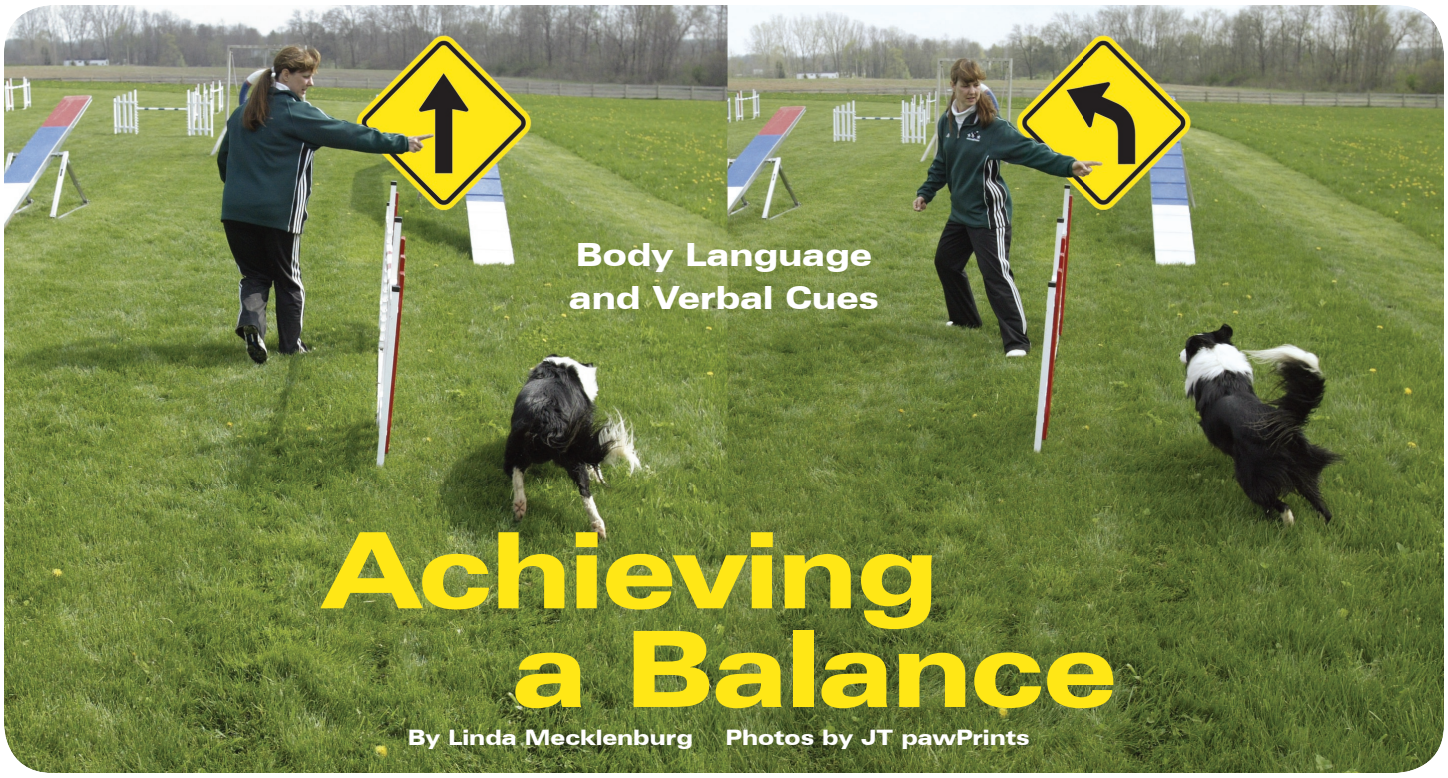


Body Language and Verbal Cues

Achieving a Balance

By Linda Mecklenburg Photos by JT pawPrints

Success in dog agility depends on your ability to effectively communicate with your dog. Your ability to guide your dog depends on your understanding of how to use body language and verbal commands. Your body language is the most important cue you will use in agility. Body language signals such as your motion, body positioning, and physical cues can all be used to direct your dog on course. Motion is your primary body language cue. Physical cues such as the direction your shoulders are facing and your hand signals indicate direction to your dog. Your position on the course, relative to both your dog and to the obstacles, also gives your dog directional information. Verbal commands should complement your body language; you should not rely on them as your primary cues. See **Table 1.**

You should strive to be proactive as a handler. Cue your dog to direction changes on the approach to an obstacle*, before your dog commits. Most handlers are reactive, which means they cue their dogs to direction changes during obstacle performance or after completion. Reactive handling is acceptable for novice, slower, or short-striding dogs, but is less than ideal for experienced, faster, or long-striding dogs that need information about upcoming turns much sooner. As a handler you have many ways to influence your dog's direction. A proactive handling system depends on your understanding of how your dog relates to your body language and verbal commands, and consistent and timely use of your cues. A proactive handling system also depends on your dog's understanding of your cues and ultimately on his ability to prioritize those cues. Your dog gets the most proactive directional information from a *balance* of your body language and verbal cues.

To prioritize cues, your dog must be able to differentiate between forward and turning cues. He needs a solid understanding of the cues to go forward to an obstacle: forward motion, shoulders facing forward, inside hand signal extended toward the obstacle, and a verbal command (usually an obstacle command). Forward cues encourage extension. At the same time he needs a solid understanding of the cues to turn: lateral motion, deceleration, and/or absence of motion, shoulders turning or facing him, outside hand signal (side changes only), and a verbal command (usually a directional). Turning cues encourage collection. Your direction of motion is your primary body language signal. Your physical cues (shoulders and hands), position, and verbal commands are all secondary cues which carry less weight than your motion cues. See **Table 2.**

When starting a beginner dog, he has no idea what your hand signals or verbal commands mean, so he depends on your forward motion or position on the completion side of the obstacle to cue him to go forward over an obstacle. With a beginner dog, your motion cues to go forward are given the highest priority by your dog. In the early stages of your dog's sequence and course work, you should be very consistent and always give your dog four clear forward cues for every obstacle: 1) forward motion, 2) shoulders facing forward, 3) inside hand signal, and 4) obstacle command. With consistent use of all four cues, your dog will learn the meaning of your shoulder direction, hand signals, and verbal commands. As he gains experience, he will learn to give these cues higher priority.

When starting a beginner dog, it is appropriate to perform all changes of direction on the flat between obstacles, so that he can learn to identify your turning cues and those that indicate a change of side. With a beginner dog, your motion cues to turn are given the highest priority by your dog. Once again, you should be very consistent and always give your dog four clear turning cues for every change of direction: 1) lateral motion and/or deceleration, 2) shoulders turning, 3) hand signal, and 4) directional command.

** Note: In this article an "obstacle" refers to a jump or a straight tunnel. Usually it is not necessary to cue a turn on the approach to a contact obstacle or the weave poles because the change of direction is not immediate.*

Table 1

Body Language	Motion	Forward	Acceleration
			Deceleration
		Lateral	
		No motion	
	Physical Cues	Shoulders	Facing forward
			Facing dog/turning
		Hand signal	Inside hand
			Outside hand
	Position	Relative to dog	Ahead
			Behind
		Relative to obstacle	Approach side
			Completion side
Verbal Commands	Obstacle		
	Directional		

Table 2

	Forward Cues	**Turning Cues**
Motion	Forward motion/Acceleration	Lateral motion/Deceleration/No motion
Shoulders	Facing forward	Facing dog/Turning
Hand	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	Outside hand (side change only)
Verbal	Obstacle command	Directional command
Position	Ahead of dog/Completion side of obstacle	Behind dog/Approach side of obstacle

With consistent use of all four cues, your dog will learn the meaning of your shoulder direction, hand signals, and verbal commands. Your dog needs to fully understand the difference between forward cues and turning cues. Most dogs do not turn wide at this stage because they have not yet learned that the object of the game is to go from obstacle to obstacle and they will be running in handler focus. Wide turns that may result from turns on the flat are of no consequence at this level; what is most important is that you are very consistent with your turning cues.

Most dogs respond to positioning cues without much specific training. If you are ahead of your dog, he will naturally move forward. If you are behind your dog, he will naturally turn toward you. If you position yourself on the completion side of an obstacle, your dog will be inclined to drive forward toward your position. If you position yourself on the approach side, your dog is more likely to collect and may in fact be reluctant to go forward to the obstacle at all. You can take advantage of your dog's natural inclination by always being consistent with your positioning, even for your beginner dog. Position yourself ahead of him and/or on the completion side of an obstacle to cue your dog to extend, and behind him and/or on the approach side to cue him to collect for a turn. For the purpose of this article, when I speak of prioritizing forward cues and turning cues, I assume that you and your dog are together when approaching an obstacle so that your position cue will remain constant in the examples described, unless otherwise specified.

It is important to be very consistent with all your cues with a beginner dog. If you want your dog to go forward to an obstacle, use

Know Your Dog

The balance and timing of your cues will always depend on your dog. If your dog is faster and long-striding, and it will be difficult to convince him to collect on the approach to a jump, you may find it best to use a combination of turning cues before your dog commits to the jump. For a 180° wrap around a jump, for example, you may decelerate, turn your shoulders toward your dog, use an outside hand signal, and move laterally on the approach. If your dog is slower or short-striding and you want him to remain extended on the approach to a jump, you should maintain your forward motion using only physical turning cues until after he commits to the jump. For a 180° wrap, for example, you may move forward with your dog toward the jump, turn your shoulders toward him, and use an outside hand. Your forward motion may carry you past the plane of the jump. Once your dog commits, you may decelerate and/or move laterally, and use a verbal turning cue.

forward cues. If you want your dog to turn between obstacles, use turning cues. Make sure your positioning is appropriate for what you are asking your dog to do. With a beginner dog, it is not advisable to use both forward and turning cues at the same time. If you do, your dog will almost always follow your motion cue, which may or may not be what the course calls for. And, the more often you give mixed signals to a beginner dog, the longer it will take for him to learn what your signals mean. Your dog will not learn to trust and understand your cues if you do not consistently give him the appropriate forward cues for each obstacle, and turning cues for each turn.

Once your dog has a solid foundation in the difference between the forward cues and turning cues, he will begin to move independently toward an obstacle based on your inside hand signal and obstacle command. If so, he is demonstrating that he has an understanding of those cues and that he is beginning to give them higher priority. He is becoming less dependent on your motion cues. While your direction of motion will almost always have the highest priority, as your dog gains experience, he will start to treat each type of cue with more equal weight.

At this stage, your dog is probably ready to start to learn to prioritize a combination of cues. To tell your novice dog to move forward to an obstacle, you would normally give him four forward cues. Then, as he completes the obstacle, you would use four turning cues to change direction and turn between obstacles. Until now, the two tasks, the obstacle and the turn, have been two distinct jobs. It is possible to tell a more experienced dog to move forward to an obstacle and then turn all in one action, using a combination of forward and turning cues. If your dog has a solid understanding of the difference between the cues, you can use that understanding to ask him to prioritize. To cue your dog to go to an obstacle and then turn, you will use one or more turning cues on the approach while supporting your dog's forward motion to the obstacle with forward cues. The balance of turning and forward cues and how he prioritizes them will determine what your dog does. Ideally, before you use this system, your dog has learned to treat each of the four types of cues with equal weight. The more experience your dog has, the more he will trust your verbal commands and hand signals. Realistically, however, your direction of motion will always be the cue that is given the highest priority and carries the most weight.

The following sections will describe different ways to balance your body language cues (motion, physical cues, position) and your verbal commands to handle proactively. As you and your dog approach an obstacle together, before he commits to that obstacle, you will cue him to go forward to the obstacle and then turn, using a balance of forward and turning cues. Motion cues carry the most weight, while your shoulder cues, hand signals, and verbal commands are treated more equally. Your job as a handler is to decide which combination of cues to give for each obstacle so that your dog can take that information and prioritize the cues to determine when and where he should turn.

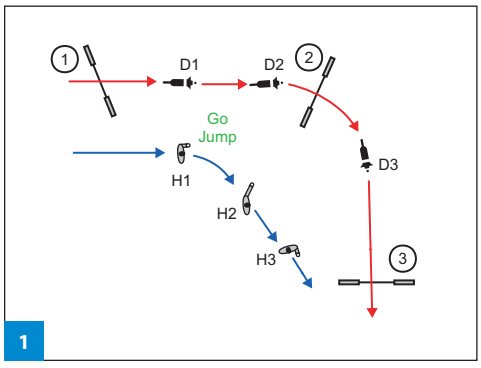
Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Forward motion	Lateral motion
Acceleration	Deceleration
	No motion

Motion is your primary body language cue. Forward motion is a very strong forward cue and, as a result, changes in your forward motion (lateral motion, deceleration, lack of motion) become strong turning cues. The most effective way to signal your dog to perform an obstacle and then turn is to use a change in your forward motion on the approach. Instead of moving forward to the obstacle with your dog, you will move laterally, decelerate, and/or remain stationary on the approach. So that your dog does not turn before the obstacle, you will support your dog's forward motion to the obstacle by facing your shoulders forward in the direction you want your dog to go, extending an inside hand signal toward the obstacle and giving an obstacle command. Although your lack of forward motion is a turning cue, by supporting your dog's forward motion with physical and verbal cues to go forward, your dog will learn to perform the obstacle and then turn.

Lateral Motion

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion		Lateral motion
Shoulders	Facing forward	
Hand	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	
Verbal	Obstacle command	

Lateral motion on the approach to an obstacle is the most effective way to cue your dog to an upcoming turn. As you send your dog to the obstacle, before he commits, start to move laterally in the direction you want your dog to go. For a turn toward you, you will move laterally away from your dog for either a front cross or shoulder pull. For a turn away from you, you will move laterally toward your dog for a rear cross or shoulder push. Lateral motion is a strong turning cue. For your dog to understand that he must go to the obstacle and then turn, you must support his forward motion to the obstacle with forward cues until he commits to the obstacle. If you are using lateral motion to cue your dog to the turn, you must give forward cues to be sure your dog goes to the obstacle: your shoulders should be facing forward, you must use an inside hand signal extended toward the obstacle, and you must use an obstacle command. **Figures 1 through 16** illustrate this.



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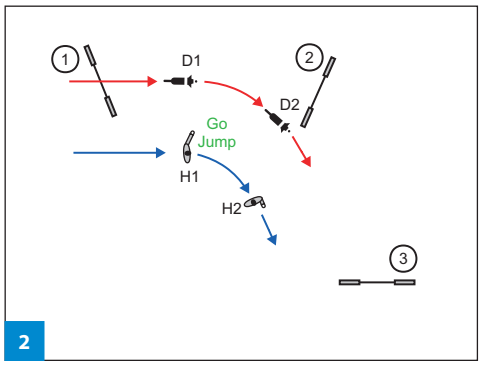
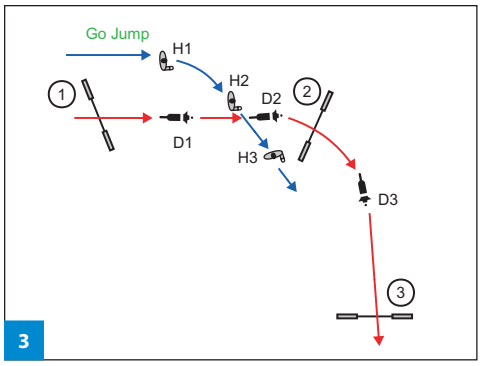


2

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #2 with forward cues as shown in Figure 1. My shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command (H1). Before my dog commits to #2, I move laterally away from him for a shoulder pull (H2). In Figure 2 I did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle (H2). If I do not support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will follow my lateral motion and earn a refusal.



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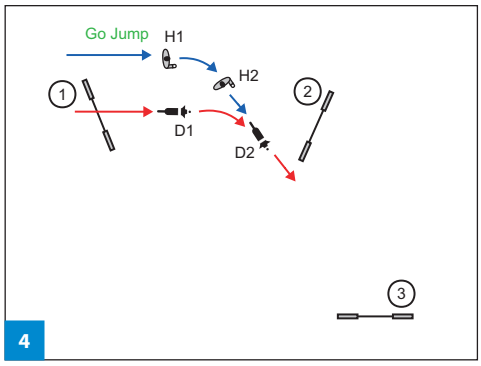
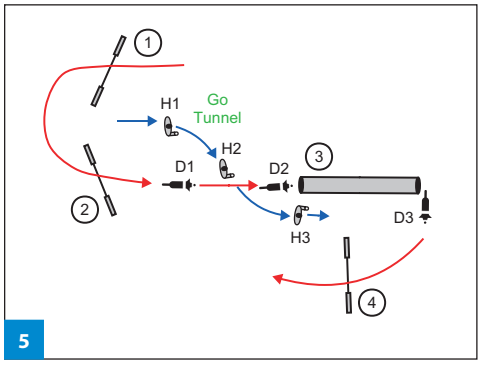


4

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #2 with forward cues. In Figure 3 my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command (H1 and H2). Before my dog commits to #2, I move laterally toward him to perform a rear cross (H2). In Figure 4, I did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle (H2). If I do not support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will follow my lateral motion and earn a refusal. Figure 4 is also an example of inappropriate use of an outside arm signal. An outside arm turns my shoulders and so results in two turning cues if used. If combined with lateral motion, all but the most seasoned dogs will give priority to the turning cues and will turn before the obstacle.



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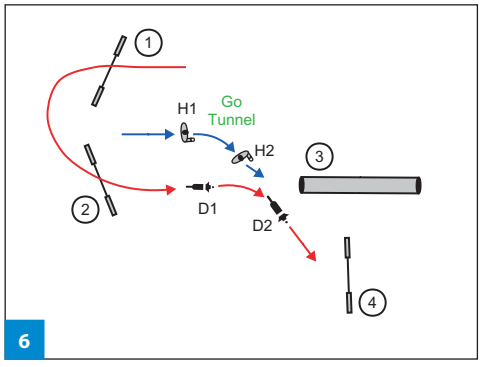
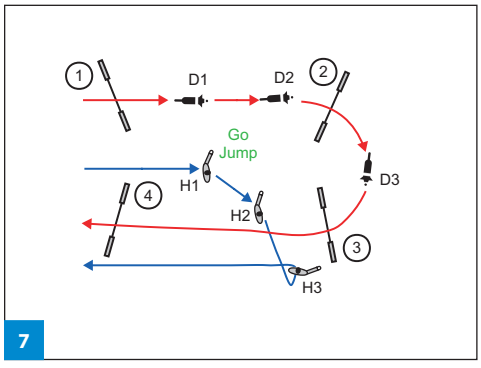


6

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #3 with forward cues. In Figure 5 my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Tunnel command (H1 and H2). Before my dog commits to #3, I will move laterally toward him to do a rear cross (H2). In Figure 6 I did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my inside hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle (H2). If I do not support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will follow my lateral motion and earn a refusal. Figure 6 is also an example of inappropriate use of an outside arm signal. An outside arm turns my shoulders and so results in two turning cues if used. If combined with lateral motion, all but the most seasoned dogs will give priority to the turning cues and will turn before the obstacle.



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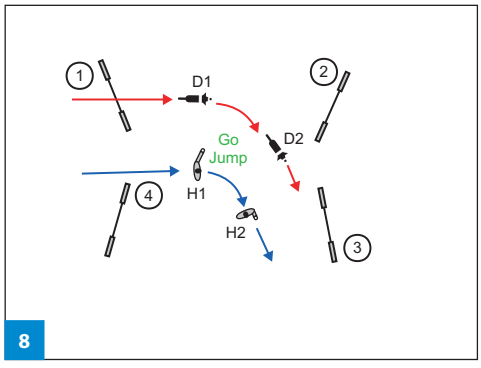
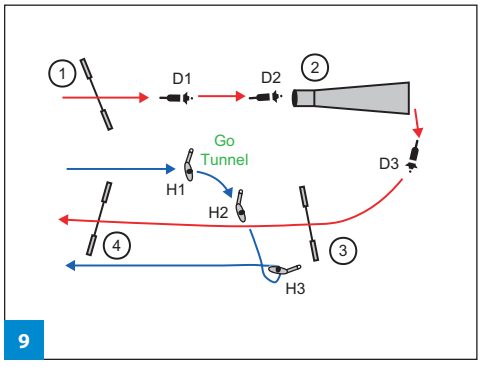


8

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #2 with forward cues. In Figure 7 my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends laterally toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command (H1). Before my dog commits to #2 I will move laterally away from him for a front cross (H2). In Figure 8 I did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my inside hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle (H2). If I do not support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will follow my lateral motion and earn a refusal.



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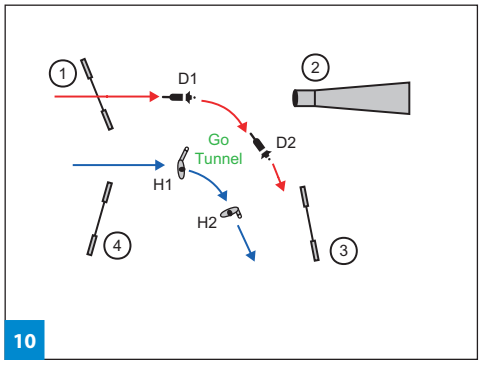


10

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #2 with forward cues. In Figure 9 my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends laterally toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Tunnel command (H1). Before my dog commits to #2, I will move laterally away from him for a front cross (H2). In Figure 10 I did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my inside hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle (H2). If I do not support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will follow my lateral motion and earn a refusal.

11

12

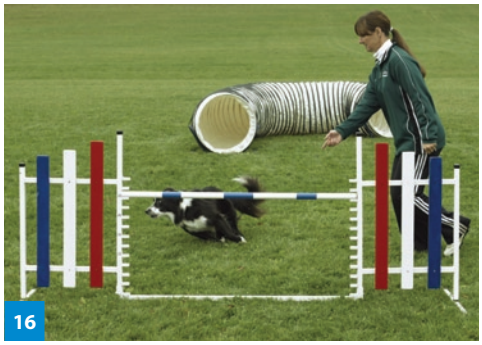
In Figure 11 I will support my experienced dog's forward motion to the jump with forward cues. I have begun moving laterally before my dog has committed to the jump, but my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal is extended toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command. With a novice dog I should continue forward motion until my dog commits to the jump. In Figure 12 I'm not adequately supporting my dog's forward motion to the jump with forward cues. I've appropriately begun moving laterally before my dog has committed, but my shoulders have turned and my hand signal is weak. My dog is getting more turning cues than forward cues, and he turns before the jump.

13

14

In Figure 13 I will support my experienced dog's forward motion to the tunnel with forward cues. I have begun moving laterally before my dog has committed, but my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal is extended toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Tunnel command. With a novice dog I should continue forward motion until my dog commits to the tunnel. In Figure 14 I'm not adequately supporting my dog's forward motion to the tunnel with forward cues. I've appropriately begun moving laterally before my dog has committed, but my shoulders have turned and my hand signal is weak. My dog is getting more turning cues than forward cues, and he turns before the tunnel.

15


16

In Figure 15 I will support my experienced dog's forward motion to the jump with forward cues. I have begun moving laterally toward my dog before he has committed, but my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal is extended toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command. With a novice dog I should continue forward motion until my dog commits to the jump. In Figure 16 I'm not adequately supporting my dog's forward motion to the jump with forward cues. I've appropriately begun moving laterally toward my dog before he has committed, but my shoulders have turned and my hand signal is weak. My dog is getting more turning cues than forward cues, and he turns before the jump.

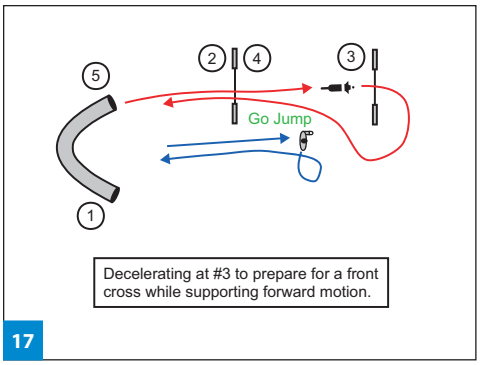
Deceleration

Deceleration on the approach to an obstacle is another way to use motion to cue your dog to an upcoming turn. As you send your dog to the obstacle, before he commits, start to decelerate. Deceleration is a turning cue. For your dog to understand that he must go to the obstacle and then turn, you must support his forward motion to the obstacle with forward cues until he commits to the obstacle.

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion		Deceleration
Shoulders	Facing forward	
Hand	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	
Verbal	Obstacle command	

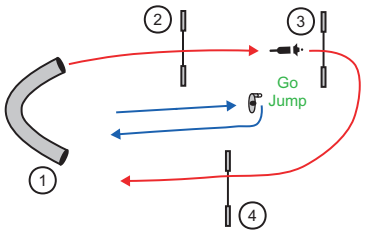
If you are using deceleration to cue your dog to the turn, you must give forward cues to be sure your dog goes to the obstacle: your shoulders should be facing forward, you must use an inside hand signal extended toward the obstacle, and you must use an obstacle command.

When combined with lateral motion and/or a position very close to a plane that bisects the obstacle, either on the approach or on the completion side, deceleration can be used as a turning cue for a rear cross. When combined with lateral motion and/or lateral distance from a plane that bisects the obstacle, either on the approach or on the completion side, deceleration can be used as a turning cue for a front cross or a shoulder pull (both require your dog to turn toward you). **Figures 17 through 24** illustrate this.



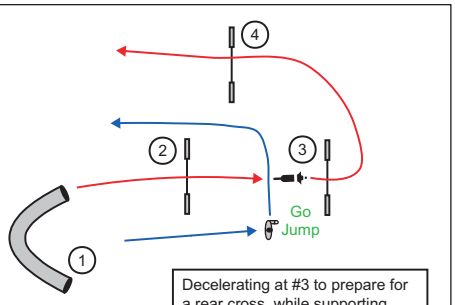
Decelerating at #3 to prepare for a front cross while supporting forward motion.

17



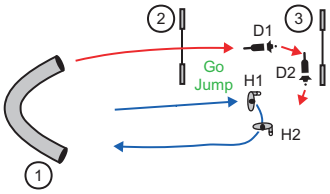
Decelerating at #3 to prepare for a shoulder pull while supporting forward motion.

18



Decelerating at #3 to prepare for a rear cross, while supporting forward motion.

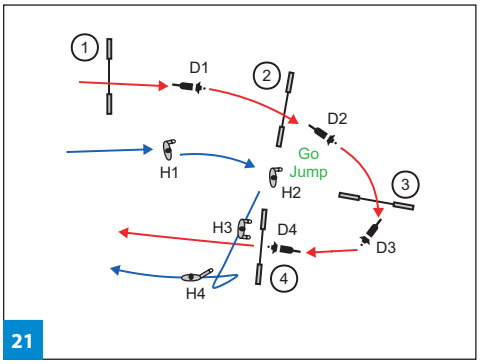
19



Giving turning cues without supporting forward motion causes a refusal.

20

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #3 with forward cues. In Figures 17, 18, and 19 my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends forward toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command. Before my dog commits to #3, I will decelerate. If I don't support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will read my deceleration as a cue to turn before the jump. In Figure 17 I decelerate to prepare for a front cross. In Figure 18 I decelerate to prepare for a shoulder pull. In Figure 19 I decelerate to prepare for a rear cross. In Figure 20 I decelerate but did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle. Also, I moved laterally. I gave my dog turning cues without supporting his forward motion and he turns before the jump, earning a refusal (H2, D2).



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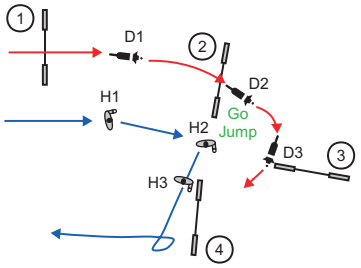


22

With an experienced dog, I will support my dog's forward motion to #3 with forward cues. In Figure 21 my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal extends forward toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command. Before my dog commits to #3, I will decelerate (H2, D2). If I don't support forward motion or if my dog is too inexperienced to trust my secondary cues, my dog will read my deceleration as a cue to turn before #3. In Figure 22 I did not keep my shoulders facing forward nor did I keep my inside hand signal extended toward the intended obstacle (H2, D2). Also, I moved laterally. I gave my dog turning cues without supporting his forward motion and he turns before the jump, earning a refusal (H3, D3).

23

24

In Figure 23 I will support my experienced dog's forward motion to the jump with forward cues. I have decelerated and stopped moving forward before my dog has committed, but my shoulders are facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, my inside hand signal is extended toward the intended obstacle, and I use a verbal Go Jump command. With a novice dog I should continue my forward motion until my dog commits to the obstacle. In Figure 24 I am not adequately supporting my dog's forward motion to the jump with forward cues. I have decelerated before my dog has committed. My shoulders have turned and I am moving laterally somewhat as well. My dog is getting more turning cues than forward cues, and he turns before the jump.

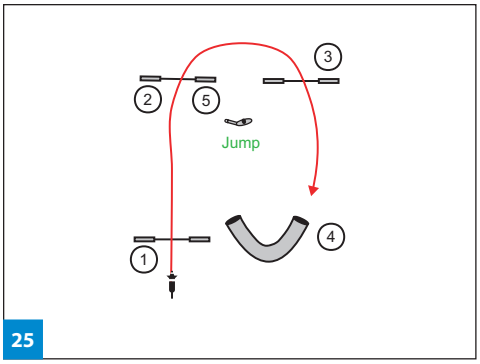
No Motion

Lack of motion on the approach to an obstacle is another way to cue your dog to an upcoming turn. As you recall your dog to the obstacle, before he commits, remain stationary. Lack of motion is a turning cue. For your dog to understand that he must come to the obstacle and then turn, you must support his forward motion to the obstacle with forward cues until he commits to the obstacle.

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion		No motion
Shoulders	Facing forward	
Hand	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	
Verbal	Obstacle command	

If you are using lack of motion to cue your dog to the turn, you must give forward cues to be sure your dog goes to the obstacle: your shoulders should be facing forward, you must use an inside hand signal extended toward the obstacle, and you must use an obstacle command.

When combined with a position very close to a plane that bisects the obstacle, either on the approach or completion side, lack of motion can be used as a turning cue for a rear cross. When combined with lateral distance from a plane that bisects the obstacle, either on the approach or on the completion side, lack of motion can be used as a turning cue for a front cross or a shoulder pull (both require your dog to turn toward you). When combined with your shoulders facing your dog, lack of motion is a strong turning cue for a front cross or a shoulder push. Refer to **Figures 25 through 27.**



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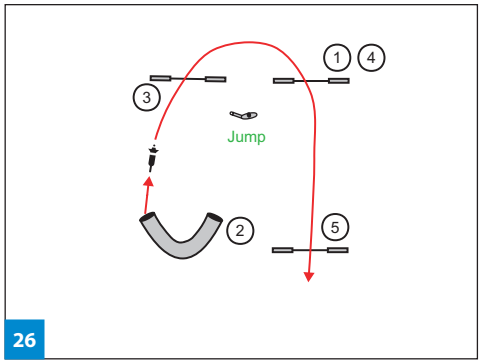
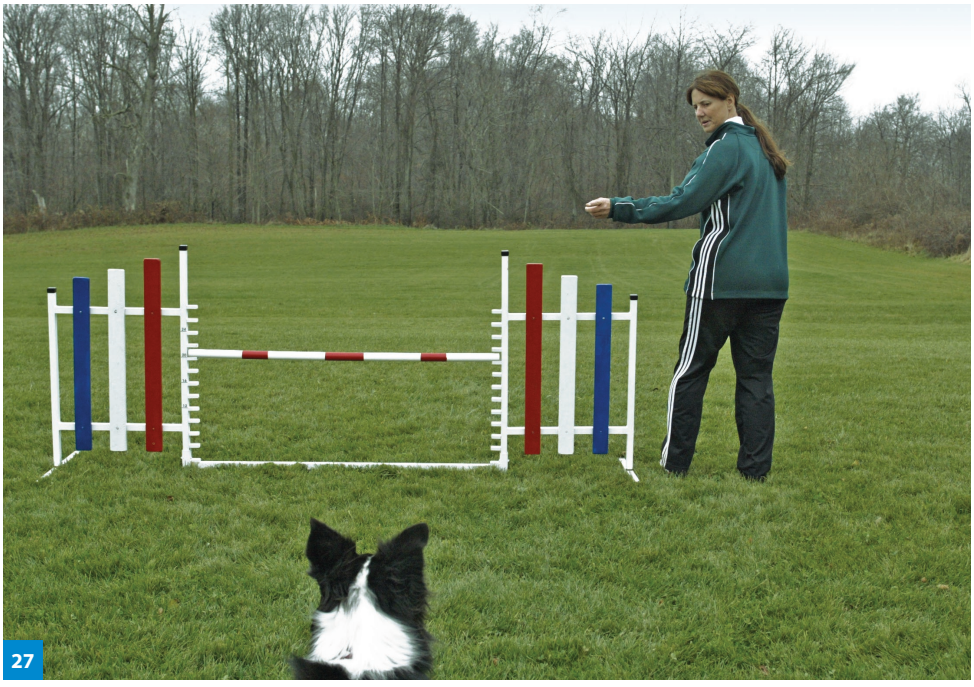


26

In Figure 25 I adopt a stationary position, which is a turning cue. I support my dog's forward motion to jump #2 with my shoulders facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, an inside hand signal, and a verbal Jump command. It is not always possible to adopt a stationary position mid-course, but there will be situations where I can send my dog to perform an obstacle while I strategically position myself downstream on the course, or the course design allows me to get into position as in Figure 26.


27

In Figure 27 I am motionless next to the jump, which is a turning cue. I support my dog's forward motion to the jump with my shoulders facing forward in the direction I want my dog to go, an inside hand signal, and a verbal Jump command. My position is fairly neutral, neither on the takeoff side or the landing side. If I stood 3' to my left, closer to the plane that bisects the jump, my position would help my dog know to turn away from me for a rear cross. If I stood 3' feet to my right, farther from the plane that bisects the jump, my lateral distance would help my dog know to turn toward me for a front cross or shoulder pull.

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Shoulders	Facing forward	Facing dog Turning shoulders
Hand Signal	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	Outside hand (side change only)

There will be situations where you must maintain forward motion on the approach to an obstacle, or be positioned on the completion side, both of which are strong forward cues. If you must continue moving forward past the plane of that obstacle, or must be positioned on the completion side, you can signal your dog to perform an obstacle and then turn by using physical cues on the approach.

Physical cues include the direction your shoulders are facing and your hand signals. Physical cues are much weaker turning cues than motion but in some situations you have no other option. You will give your dog your physical cues on the approach, before he commits to the obstacle. You will support your dog's forward motion to the obstacle with your forward motion (or completion side position) and an obstacle command. Although your physical cues will be cueing your dog to turn, by supporting your dog's forward motion with motion and verbal cues to go forward, your dog will learn to go to the obstacle and then turn. Because forward motion is such a strong forward cue, often a combination of physical cues is required to achieve the desired balance of forward and turning cues. Although each of the four basic turns (front cross, rear cross, shoulder pull, and shoulder push) is ideally cued with lateral motion, physical cues such as your shoulders and/or your hand signals can be used to cue your dog when you are moving forward or positioned on the completion side of an obstacle.

Shoulders

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Shoulders	Facing forward	Turning shoulders Facing dog

To cue your dog to perform an obstacle and then turn, the most effective physical cue is to turn your shoulders and face your dog as he approaches the obstacle. Where possible, facing your dog is a very strong turning cue. However, if you and your dog are on the approach to an obstacle, usually you will be unable to turn and actually face him while still moving forward. But, you can still use a physical cue by simply turning your shoulders in the appropriate direction as you move forward. Your shoulders, when turned or facing your dog, are a turning cue. For your dog to understand that he must go to the obstacle and then turn, you must support his forward motion to the obstacle with forward cues until he commits to the obstacle. If you are on the approach side, your forward motion, hand signal, and obstacle command are forward cues that support motion to the obstacle. If you are on the completion side, your position, hand signal and obstacle command are forward cues that support motion to the obstacle.

Turning Shoulders Relative to Dog

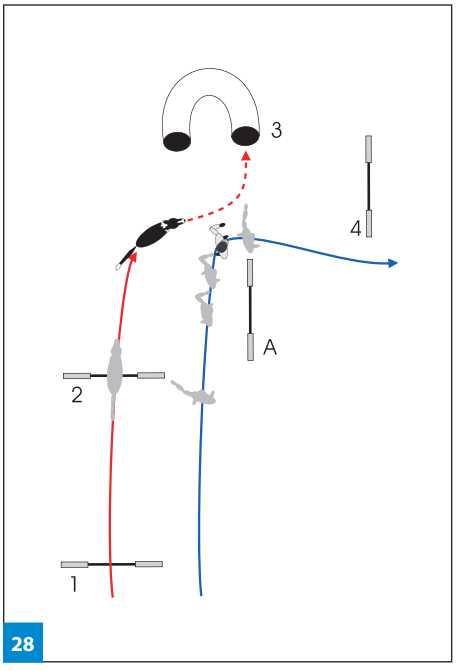
Turning your shoulders away from or toward your dog is a turning cue. Lateral motion is the *preferred* cue for the basic turns, but turned shoulders and/or hand signals can be used to cue your dog when you are moving forward on the approach to an obstacle such as in the following cases.

- **Shoulder Pull**

When you cannot move laterally or decelerate on the approach to an obstacle, the most effective way to cue your dog to a shoulder pull is to use your shoulders, combined with an inside hand signal. If you and your dog are approaching a jump and you must move forward past the plane of the jump to perform a shoulder pull, turn your shoulders away from your dog as you move forward. You may use your inside hand across your chest, while you both continue on the current line to the obstacle ahead. Your shoulders are a turning cue that signals the shoulder pull, while your forward motion and obstacle command are forward cues that continue to indicate the obstacle that precedes the turn. Because forward motion is a strong forward cue, you may choose to use a directional command instead of an obstacle command, to add one more turning cue. As soon as you can move laterally, do so. Refer to **Figures 28 through 30.**

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion	Forward motion	
Shoulders		Turning
Hand	Inside hand	
Verbal	Obstacle command	

For slower or short-striding dogs, for which collection may not be appropriate for every turn, purposely maintaining forward motion with your dog past the plane of an obstacle may be very appropriate. You can still alert your dog to the upcoming change of direction and shoulder pull with your physical cues as described.



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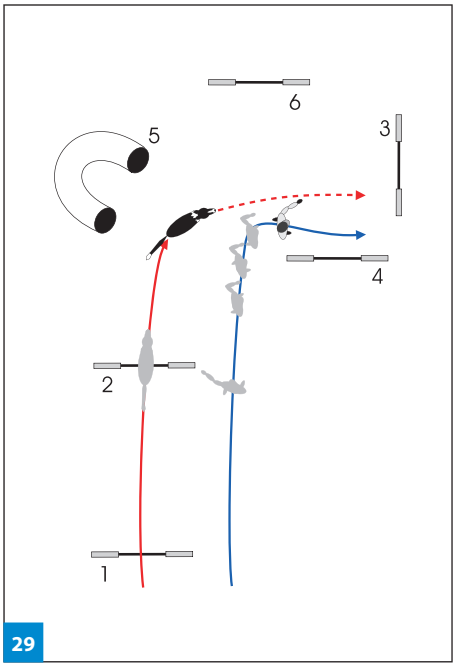


29

In Figure 28 I cannot cue my dog to turn right with lateral motion because jump A is forcing me to move forward. I will turn my shoulders to the right and use a verbal command here, either Right or my dog's name.

In Figure 29 I cannot cue my dog to turn right with lateral motion because jump #4 is forcing me to move forward. I will turn my shoulders to the right and use a verbal command here, either Right or my dog's name.

30

In Figure 30 I cannot cue my dog to the left turn with lateral motion because the jump to my left is forcing me to run forward. I will turn my shoulders to the left. He reads the cue and does not even look at the tunnel looming ahead.

- **Front Cross**

When you cannot move laterally or decelerate on the approach to an obstacle, the most effective way to cue your dog to a front cross is to use your shoulders, usually combined with an outside hand signal because there will be a side change.

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion	Forward motion/Acceleration	
Shoulders		Turning
Hand		Outside hand
Verbal	Obstacle command	

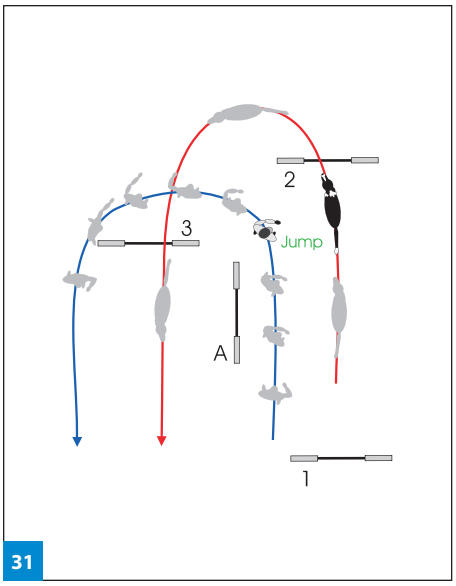
If you and your dog are approaching a jump and you must move forward past the plane of the jump to complete your front cross, turn your shoulders toward your dog as you move forward. You may use your outside hand across your chest, while you both continue on the current line to the obstacle ahead. Your shoulders and outside hand signal are turning cues that signal the front cross, while your forward motion and obstacle command are forward cues that continue to indicate the obstacle that precedes the turn. Because forward motion is a strong forward cue, you may choose to use a directional command instead of an obstacle command, to add one more turning cue. As soon as you can move laterally and complete your rotation, do so. See **Figures 31, 32, and 34.**

If it is possible to be ahead of your dog as you pass the plane of the obstacle and turn to face him before he commits to the obstacle, then do so. Your stationary position, combined with your shoulders facing your dog, will cue your dog to the turn. However, if you cannot complete your front cross before your dog commits, you should avoid accelerating in an attempt to do so. Your acceleration is a very strong forward cue and it will be given highest priority, even over two physical cues. See **Figures 33 and 35.**

For slower or short-striding dogs, for which collection may not be appropriate for every turn, purposely maintaining forward motion with your dog past the plane of an obstacle may be very appropriate. You can still alert your dog to the upcoming change of direction and front cross with your physical cues as described.

Use as Many Cues as Possible

The more cues you can give your dog, the more likely he will be able to prioritize those cues and make the right choices. You may choose not to use verbal commands and/or hand signals. If so, you are limiting your ability to use this system effectively. It is much easier for your dog to understand that he should go forward to an obstacle and then turn (although you may be moving laterally) if he is given an obstacle command and hand signal to do so and if the action is supported by the direction your shoulders are facing. Your dog is getting three forward cues and one turning cue in that case. Assuming each cue carries equal weight (which is not quite true since motion will almost always be given highest priority), the ratio of cues is 3:1, which favors your dog choosing to go forward to the obstacle. If you do not use an obstacle command and/or hand signal but continue to face forward as you move laterally away from your dog, this time your dog is getting one forward cue and one turning cue. With a ratio of cues at 1:1, it is more difficult for your dog to make a choice but most likely he will turn before the obstacle, following the motion cue. With fewer cues, it is more difficult for your dog to prioritize. To be proactive, use a system that uses as many cues as possible to communicate with your dog.



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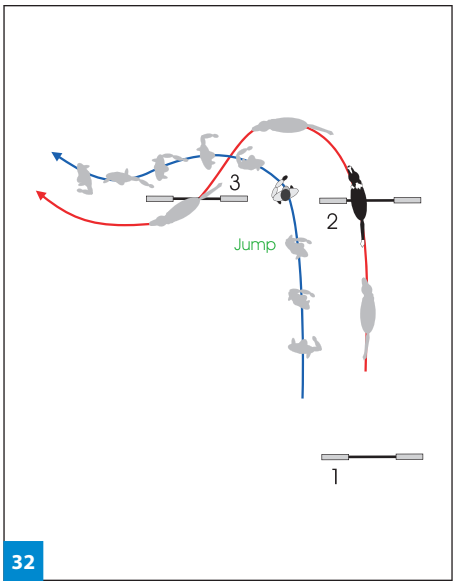

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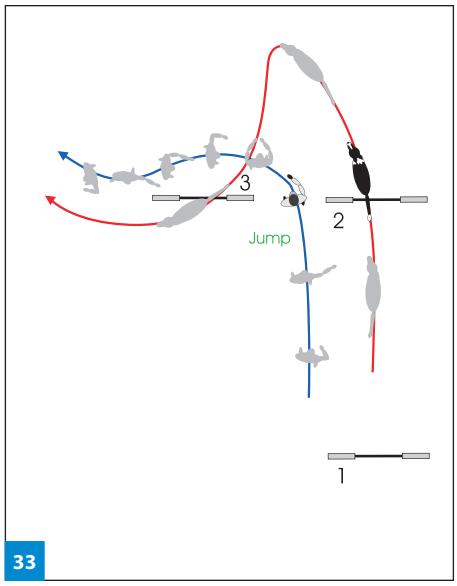
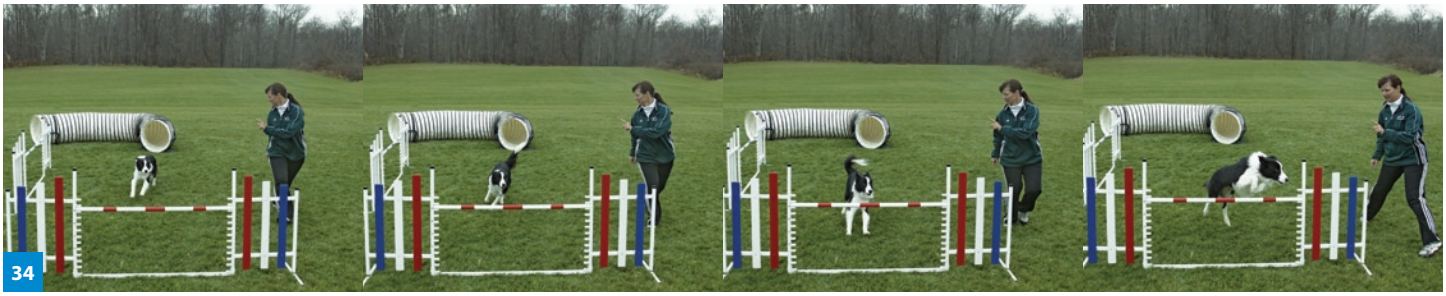
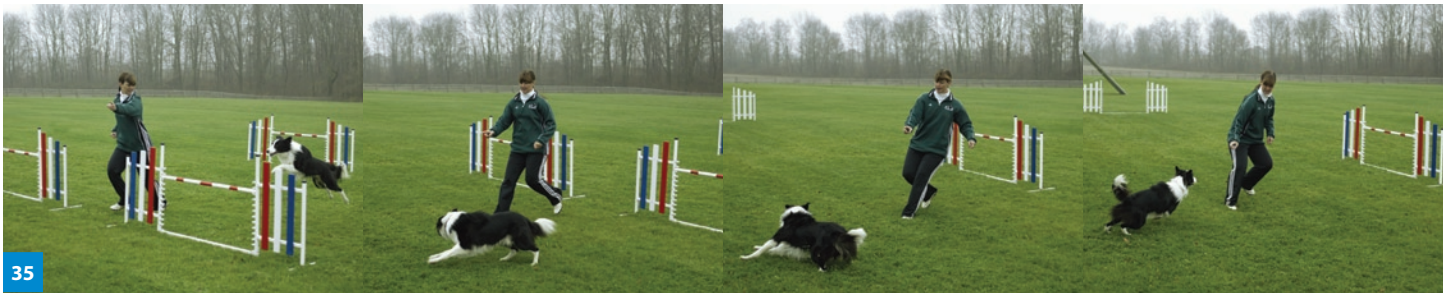


33

In Figure 31 I am moving forward with my dog to #2. The placement of jump A prevents me from cueing the left turn with deceleration or lateral motion away from my dog. I am forced to move forward. To cue my dog to the front cross, I turn my shoulders toward him on the approach and use an outside arm signal across my chest. In Figure 32 I am moving forward with my dog past the plane of #2. To cue my dog to the front cross I turn my shoulders toward him on the approach and use an outside arm signal across my chest. In both Figures 31 and 32 I may choose to use a directional command instead of an obstacle command to add one more turning cue. I could also withhold any verbal command. In Figure 33 I do not use any physical cues to alert my dog to the turn, and my forward cues drive my dog forward on the landing side of #2 before I can cross in front, creating a wide, loopy path. In this example I could have used lateral motion to cue the turn by performing my front cross on the landing side of #3.


34

In Figure 34 I am moving forward with my shoulders turned and my outside arm across my chest to alert my dog to the upcoming front cross.


35

In Figure 35 I have accelerated past the plane of the jump without using any physical cues to alert my dog to the upcoming front cross. He lands extended and turns wide.

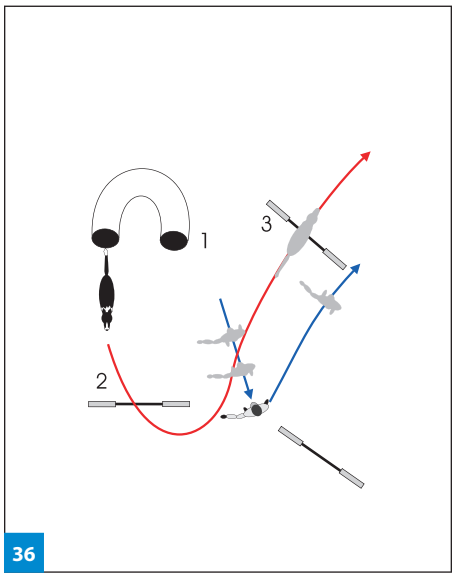
Facing Dog with Shoulders

Facing your shoulders toward your dog as he approaches an obstacle is a turning cue. Lateral motion is the *preferred* cue for the basic turns, but facing your dog can be used to cue him when you are moving forward or particularly when you are positioned on the completion side of an obstacle.

- **Reverse Front Cross**

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion	Forward motion	
Shoulders		Facing dog
Hand	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	
Verbal	Obstacle command	

In isolated situations, such as a 180° wrap, where you are on the takeoff side of a jump and do not need to move forward past the plane of the jump to cross in front, you may choose to perform a reverse front cross (affectionately known as the "backy-up move"). Facing your dog as he approaches an obstacle is a turning cue. By supporting your dog's forward motion with an inside hand signal and an obstacle command, your dog will learn to perform the obstacle and then turn. Because facing your dog is a strong cue to turn, combined with your approach-side position, it may be necessary to support the jump with "forward" motion. Here you support your dog's forward motion by moving backward toward the jump, so that you remain facing him. See **Figures 36 through 38.**



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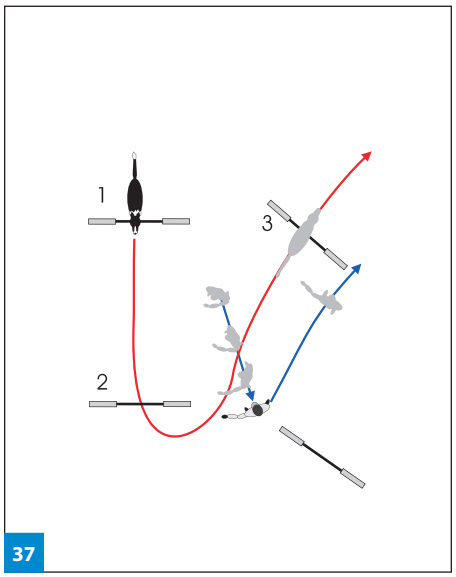
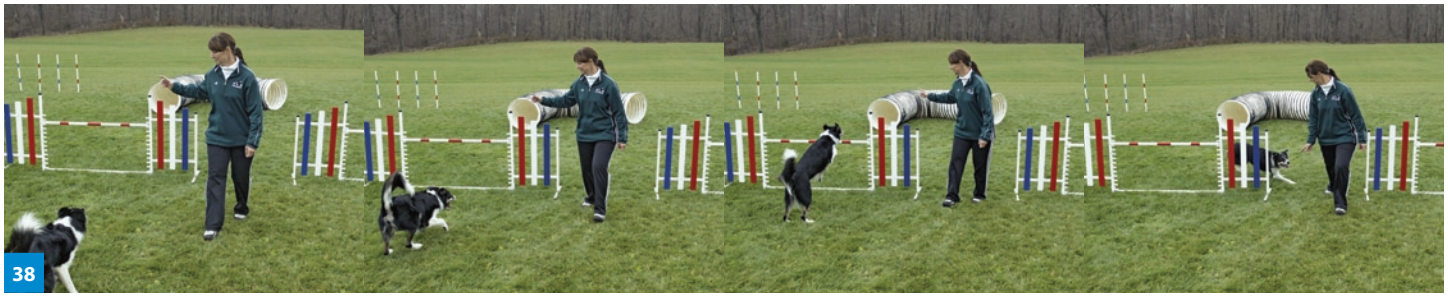


37

In Figure 36 I send my dog to the tunnel and when he exits I cue jump #2 from the approach side, while facing my dog. I support my dog's forward motion to the jump with an inside hand signal and a Jump command, both of which are forward cues. Because my position on the takeoff side of the jump and facing my dog are strong turning cues, it may be necessary to support the jump with "forward" motion. In this case, I would move backward toward the jump so that I remain facing him. Note that I use the same hand to signal regardless of whether I am facing my dog or facing forward, because in each case I want my dog to recall to my left side. If the distance is too great to move backward, I move forward with turned shoulders as in Figure 37. The result is the same.

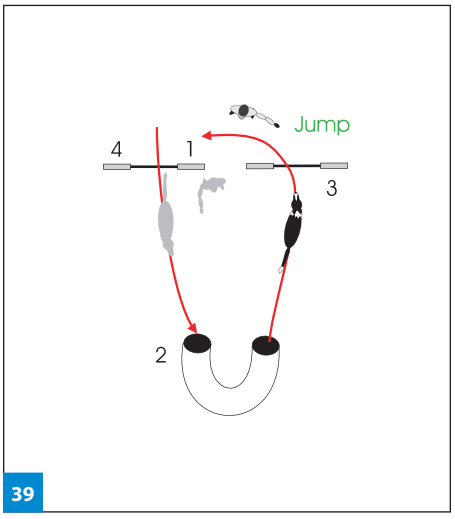

38

In Figure 38 I cue the jump from the approach side, while facing my dog. I support my dog's forward motion to the jump with an inside hand signal and a Jump command, both of which are forward cues. Because my position on the takeoff side of the jump and facing my dog are strong turning cues, it may be necessary to support the jump with "forward" motion. In this case, I would move backward toward the jump, so that I remain facing her.

• Completion-Side Front Cross/ Shoulder Push

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion		No motion
Shoulders		Facing dog
Hand	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	
Verbal	Obstacle command	

When combined with a stationary position, your shoulders can be an effective cue to a turn when you are on the completion side of an obstacle. A completion-side position is a strong forward cue. When you perform a front cross or shoulder push on the completion side of an obstacle, you will turn your shoulders to face your dog and hold your position as he approaches. By supporting your dog's forward motion with an inside hand signal and obstacle command, your dog will learn to perform the obstacle and then turn. Your shoulders and position are the same for a landing-side front cross or shoulder push, so the cues are the same. A shoulder push is slightly more difficult for your dog because there is usually a lead change required. If you are on the completion side, *moving* across your dog's line of travel only for a side change, your dog should not expect a turn. See **Figures 39 through 45.**



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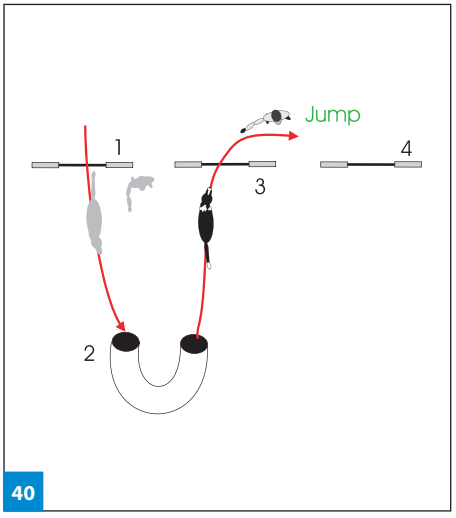

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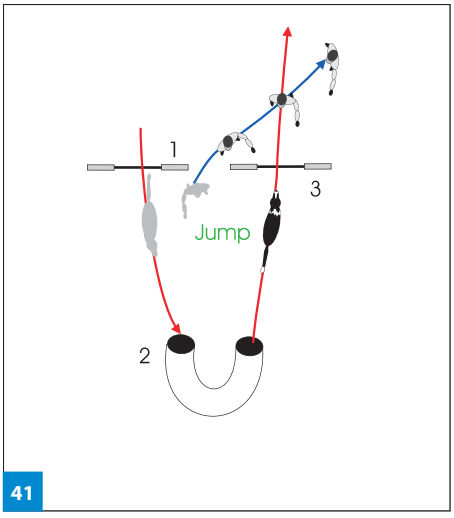


41

In Figure 39 I sent my dog to the #2 tunnel so that I could position myself on the landing side of #3 facing my dog for a front cross. Facing my shoulders toward my dog is a turning cue. Also, I am stationary. My position, inside hand signal, and verbal command to Jump are forward cues that support my dog coming forward to the obstacle and then turning. In Figure 40 I sent my dog to the #2 tunnel so that I could position myself on the landing side of #3 facing my dog for a shoulder push. Facing my shoulders toward my dog is a turning cue. Also, I am stationary. My position, inside hand signal, and verbal command to Jump are forward cues that support my dog coming forward to the obstacle and then turning. In Figure 41 I am moving across my dog's line of travel only for a side change (landing-side front cross), so my dog should not expect a turn.

42

43

In Figure 42 I am stationary and facing my dog, both of which are turning cues. I support my dog's forward motion to the jump with my position, an inside hand signal, and a Jump command, all of which are forward cues. My dog should perform the jump and then turn. In Figure 43 I am stationary and facing my dog, both of which are turning cues. I support my dog's forward motion to the tunnel with my position, an inside hand signal, and a Tunnel command, all of which are forward cues. My dog should perform the tunnel and then turn.

In Figure 44 I am doing a landing-side front cross for a side change only: I am moving across my dog's line of travel and only momentarily face my dog. My completion-side position, shoulders facing forward, inside hand signal, and Jump command are forward cues.

In Figure 45 I am doing a landing-side front cross to cue a turn. Although my position is on the completion side, my shoulders are facing my dog and I am stationary. Compare to the landing-side front cross for side change only in Figure 44. Also compare to to Figure 35 where I accelerate past the plane of the jump to do the front cross, rather than face my dog in a stationary postiion on the landing side.

Hand Signals

Hand signals are physical cues that can be used as turning cues. Although an outside hand signal alone is a very weak turning cue, it can be used in situations requiring a side change (thus lead change) where it is impossible to use motion cues or shoulder cues. It can also be combined with other turning cues when appropriate. Following are examples of hand signals used as turning cues in situations when lateral motion and/or deceleration cannot be used to cue the cross.

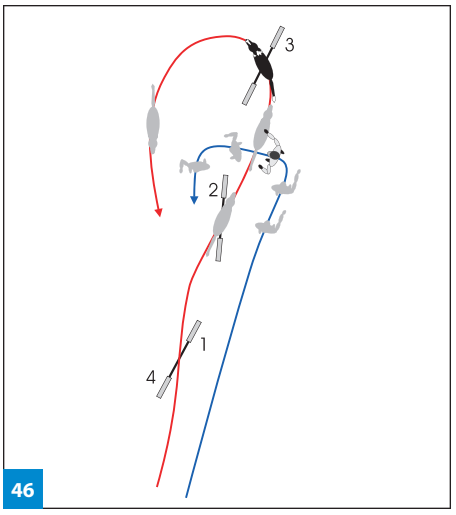
- **Front Cross**

When you cannot move laterally or decelerate on the approach to an obstacle, the most effective way to alert your dog to a front cross is to use a combination of turned shoulders and an outside hand signal. This was previously discussed in the "Shoulders" section.

- **Rear Cross**

When you cannot move laterally or decelerate on the approach to an obstacle, the most effective way to alert your dog to a rear cross and lead change is to use an outside hand signal. When you cannot move laterally on the approach to an obstacle to start a rear cross, keep your shoulders facing forward. You may use your outside hand extended forward, while you both continue on the current line to the obstacle ahead. Your outside hand signal is a turning cue that alerts your dog to the turn away from you, while your forward motion, shoulders, and obstacle command continue to indicate the obstacle that precedes the turn. As you rotate toward your dog, your outside arm signal will open away from your shoulder. As the side change occurs, your outside hand will become your inside hand. See **Figures 46 through 50.**

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Motion	Forward motion/Acceleration	
Shoulders	Facing forward	
Hand		Outside hand
Verbal	Obstacle command	



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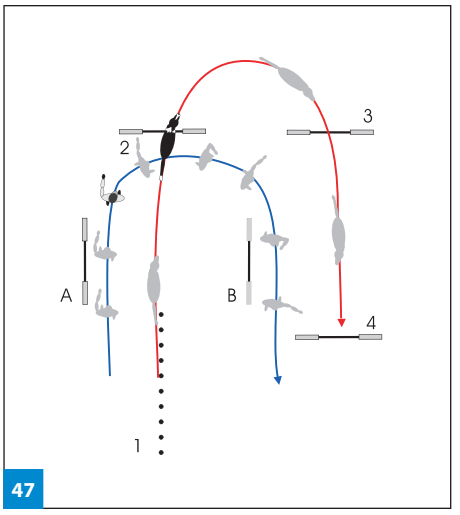


47

In Figure 46 I cannot move laterally toward my dog on the approach to #3 so I alert my dog to the impending rear cross with my shoulders facing forward and my outside hand extended forward. If I turn my shoulders toward my dog before he commits, he may push through the gap.

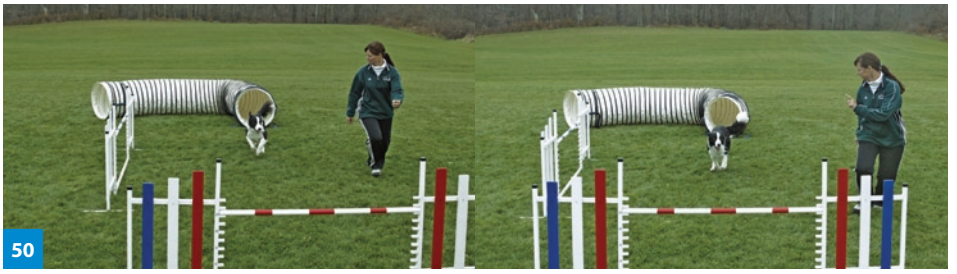
In Figure 47 the position of jump A prevents me from being far enough away from my dog to use lateral motion toward him to signal a rear cross—if I am right next to my dog, he will not read the motion toward him as well as if I am 10' away from him laterally and start moving toward him. Therefore, I alert my dog to the impending rear cross with my shoulders facing forward and my outside hand extended forward. If I turn my shoulders toward my dog, he may turn before #2 and/or go off course over jump B.

48

In Figure 48 I am running forward with my shoulders straight ahead while cueing the rear cross with my outside arm extended forward. If I were to turn my shoulders right, I would expect my dog to turn and jump the jump to his right. Once I know my dog is committed to the jump, I can turn my shoulders or begin moving laterally.

49

In Figure 49 I am running forward with my shoulders straight ahead while cueing the rear cross with my outside arm extended forward. If I were to turn my shoulders left, I would expect my dog would turn left before entering the tunnel. Only a very experienced dog, willing to commit to the obstacle with only a verbal command would continue forward.


50

In Figure 50 compare my outside hand signal in these two examples. The first is a rear cross and the second is a front cross. These hand signals only apply if I cannot use lateral motion and/or deceleration to cue the cross..

Ostrich Tendons

Beef Knee Caps

Ostrich Half Leg Bones

Be Chewsey

Beef Natural Center Bones

Beef Tendons

Jones Natural Bones & Chews
Dogs Know the Difference

Naturally Baked

No chemicals or preservatives

Made in the USA

Made with USDA-inspected human-grade raw ingredients

Clean Run®
www.cleanrun.com

	Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Relative to dog	Ahead	Behind
Relative to obstacle	Completion side	Approach side

Your position on the course gives your dog directional information. It is impossible to isolate positioning cues from physical cues, such as the direction your shoulders are facing, but generally, being behind your dog on the approach to an obstacle is a turning cue and being ahead of your dog on the completion side is a forward cue.

Relative to Dog

- Behind dog—In the absence of other cues, to cue your dog to a turn following an obstacle, position yourself behind him as he performs the obstacle.
- Ahead of dog—To cue him to drive forward after the obstacle, position yourself ahead of your dog and maintain that position.

Relative to Obstacle

- Approach side—In the absence of other cues, to cue your dog to a turn following an obstacle, position yourself on the approach side of the obstacle.
- Completion side—To cue him to drive forward after the obstacle, position yourself on the completion side of the obstacle.

Forward Cues	Turning Cues
Obstacle	Directional

Verbal commands should complement your body language; you should not rely on them as your primary cues.

Directional Commands

Obstacle commands are forward cues. Directional commands can be used as turning cues. Although a directional command alone is a very weak turning cue, it can be used in situations where it is impossible to use body language cues or used in combination with them. An absolute directional command such as **Right** or **Left** can effectively cue your dog to go to an obstacle and then turn in the appropriate direction. Using an absolute directional command on the approach to a jump or straight tunnel can be a turning cue when the course does not allow you to cue with motion. To be effective, the directional command must also serve as an obstacle command and be given before your dog commits to the obstacle. The directional command must be trained to mean "perform the obstacle and then turn in the designated direction." A directional command given in addition to an obstacle command (such as **Jump-Right**) has probably been given too late to have the desired effect. The command is ideally given before your dog commits to the obstacle.

In situations where you cannot use motion as a turning cue and must move forward past the plane of the obstacle, such as in a front cross or shoulder pull, it may be useful to use a directional command that is a turning cue. Forward motion is a strong forward cue and adding another turning cue in addition to your shoulders and hand signal helps to achieve the desired balance of forward and turning cues.

Evolution of Priorities Over Time

A beginner dog will not go forward to an obstacle unless you are moving forward toward it or are positioned on the completion side recalling him. Ideally, all cues are forward cues at this stage. Even in the presence of appropriate physical and verbal cues, without forward motion, a beginner dog is unlikely to perform an obstacle. That is, when you are moving forward together on the approach to an obstacle, if you move laterally or decelerate and stop moving, your dog will give highest priority to your motion cue and will turn before the obstacle, despite your other forward cues.

An experienced dog will learn to give more equal weight to appropriate physical and verbal cues. That is, if you are moving forward together on the approach to an obstacle and you move laterally or decelerate and stop moving, your dog will give highest priority to the combination of forward cues and will perform the obstacle and then turn. If you give two turning cues and two forward cues at this stage, it is difficult to predict what choice your dog will be forced to make.

With time, a very seasoned dog will learn to trust your obstacle command as his only forward cue. That is, when you are moving forward together on the approach to an obstacle and you give an obstacle command, then move laterally or decelerate and turn your shoulders while using an outside hand signal, your dog will give highest priority to your obstacle command and will perform the obstacle and then turn, despite your turning cues.

Level	Beginner dog	Experienced dog	Seasoned dog
Cues	Forward motion/Acceleration	Lateral motion/Deceleration/ No motion	Lateral motion/Deceleration/ No motion
	Facing forward	Facing forward	Facing dog/Turning
	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	Inside hand extended toward obstacle	Outside hand (side change only)
	Obstacle command	Obstacle command	Obstacle command

Conclusion

Body language signals, such as your motion, body position, and physical cues, can all be used to direct your dog on course. Verbal commands complement your body language. You should strive to be proactive as a handler. Ideally, you will learn to use a combination of forward and turning cues to signal your dog to direction changes at least one obstacle ahead of time. A proactive handling system depends on your dog's ability to identify and prioritize your cues. Your dog gets the most proactive directional information from a balance of your body language and verbal cues.

Linda Mecklenburg, as one of agility's leading handlers and instructors, has represented the U.S. in international competition on nine different occasions with four different dogs. Linda and her BC, Awesome, have competed at the FCI World Championships three times and now have 10 clean runs out of 12, two top ten placements in Individual, and one World Championship Team gold medal to their credit. In addition, Awesome was the AKC Top MACH Dog of the Year in 2002 and 2003. Linda teaches agility full-time at her Awesome Paws Agility Center in Ohio, and in 2004, four of her students were members of the USA/AKC World Team. Linda can be reached by email at awesomepaws@aol.com.