

3, 2, 1, Contacts in Agility

Target training helps prepare dogs for contact obstacles.

Terry Long

When Kenny Rowland originally trained his mixed-breed dog, Archie, on the A-frame, he decided to have Archie stop at the bottom of the obstacle in the contact zone. The contact zone, found on the A-frame, dogwalk and teeter, are yellow areas on the entry (or take-off) side and the exit (or downside). Some agility organizations do not require that dogs touch the contact zones on the take-off side, but all require that dogs touch it on the downside. This is a safety precaution so dogs don't learn to jump off the top of the obstacle.

Rowland had seen many dogs perform this "two on, two off" (2O2O) behavior in which the dog's two rear feet stay in the yellow zone of the contact and the two front feet are placed in the grass at the bottom of the contact. Rowland doesn't remember exactly how he trained it. "I think I just told him to 'stay' when he got there," he says. "Then I said 'OK' and we went on."

This approach worked well for the first year or so of Archie's agility career. Then, as courses became more difficult and Archie got faster, Rowland found it difficult to stay next to Archie to keep the dog at the bottom of the contact. Yet, Rowland had seen other dogs that had learned to stay on the contact zones, regardless of the handler's location. When Archie was 7, Rowland decided to retrain his contact performance for independent contacts. On the recommendation of his agility instructor, Rowland stopped competing so he could retrain the behavior from scratch.

The following steps can be used to train dogs that have never learned the contacts or are being retrained. Steps 2 and 3 can be trained concurrently; you don't need to complete Step 2 before going on to Step 3.

Step 1: Establish the goal behavior

Be sure to have a clear mental picture of what you want the behavior to look like. For an independent 2O2O performance, the goal behavior includes all of the following:

- Your dog runs with continuous speed up and over the contact obstacle and, in the case of the A-frame, down the center of the board (not off to one side or the other).
- As it exits the obstacle, your dog stops with its rear feet in the contact zone and its two front feet on the grass.
- Once in the 2O2O position, no movement of the front or rear feet occurs.
- Your dog's head is straight forward and held low.
- Your dog touches (or "targets") its nose to the ground between its feet.
- Regardless of your movement and position, your dog does not leave until a verbal release is cued.

Step 2: Shape four feet on a travel plank

Get a piece of plywood that measures 1 foot wide by 3 feet long. Screw or glue two 12-inch-long two-by-fours across the 1-foot width of the bottom of the plywood, one at the end of the board and one in the center. This will create a board that is slightly higher on one end than the other. The lowest end of the board will be referred to as the "downside."

Get your clicker and treats, stand near the plank, and wait for your dog to look at it. When it does, click (or say "Yes!") and award a treat. Continue to mark and reward your dog for any interaction with the plank until your dog gets all four feet on the board. Gradually raise your criterion until you only mark and reward when the dog is on the plank and facing the downside. Do not add a cue; it's a temporary behavior and does not need one.

Step 3: Targeting

Find a 3- to 4-inch-wide plastic target, such as a yogurt lid. With your dog at your side, facing the same direction as you, hold the target in the hand closest to your dog, and follow these steps:

1. Present the target an inch or two in front of your dog's nose, and shape the dog to touch the target with its nose. In the beginning, mark any glance or a sniff at the target with a click or verbal cue, but gradually refine your criterion so the dog learns to touch the target with its nose. Each time you mark the movement, reward from your opposite hand, delivering the treat close to the target, which should remain in front of the dog. You can use a verbal marker (such as "Yes!") in this exercise instead of a click – handling a clicker, target and treats can be challenging.
2. When your dog is touching the target firmly, lower the target to the ground next to you and continue shaping your dog to touch it. Be sure to deliver the treat just above the target – you don't want your dog to have to lift its head up. Wait for repeated nose touches, marking and rewarding each one. After three to four touches, give a verbal-only release (e.g.,

“OK”), then start over again.

3. Add the cue, “touch,” when the dog is firmly touching its nose to the target on the ground.

4. Gradually move your body around your dog, keeping the rate of reinforcement high as you move laterally, forward and back while you cue “touch.” Do not go on to Step 4 (below) until your dog stays in position while you move around. When the dog makes mistakes, don’t mark it. Instead, say, “try again,” and move the dog back into position and start over.

Step 4: Travel plank with target

Place the target a few inches from the downside of the plank, just far enough away from the plank to cause your dog to place its feet in the grass to reach the target. Take your dog to the other end of the plank and cue “touch,” which should cause your dog to get up on the board and take a step or two to move into position to touch the target. Mark and reward each success, and use your verbal-only release before you let the dog off the board.

If your dog steps off the plank, start over again. If the dog repeatedly steps off, go back to Step 2 and create more value for staying on the board by generously rewarding it for stepping onto the plank and staying on it with all four feet. Remember to work both sides and vary your body position relative to the board.

Step 5: A-frame

Lower the A-frame so it’s 3 feet tall at its apex. After shaping your dog to run up and over the A-frame a few times so it’s confident on the obstacle, place your target a few inches from the downside contact zone. Stand alongside the A-frame at the downside contact zone with your dog in between you and the A-frame. Encourage your dog to jump up onto the A-frame, and cue “touch.” Repeat all the instructions from Step 4, still marking and rewarding each success.

Gradually move your dog farther back from the target so it has to move a farther distance to get to the target. Finally, take the dog to the take-off (entrance) side of the A-frame and have it run up and over to the target, which is at the bottom of the downside contact zone. Slowly reduce the size of the target by cutting it with scissors or creating a new, smaller one, and occasionally remove it, and mark and reward your dog for touching its nose to the ground between its front feet.

Now, practice

Continue to build the distance between you and the A-frame while gradually eliminating the target. Most importantly, be sure to make this a fun and rewarding game. Your dog will reward you with fast and reliable independent contacts. Although this process can take several weeks and even months, the payoff is huge. Like Archie, your dog will fly over the contact and stick its 2020, while you move into position for the rest of the course.

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