

## Agility Weave-Pole Wisdom

**Make this difficult obstacle easier for you and your dog.**

*Terry Long*

Any dinner-party host knows it's best to avoid discussions about religion and politics if you want to maintain a congenial atmosphere. That same host, sitting around the table with a group of agility trainers, would wisely add weave-pole training to the list of sensitive topics. There's nothing like opining about the best way to train for this devilishly difficult obstacle to guarantee a lively conversation.

If one trainer says he always has success with the Weave-A-Matics, the next will swear by channel and guide wires. Not to be outdone, the 2-by-2 junky gloats that her dog never, ever misses entries. Another trainer likes to grab the dog's collar and just show him what she wants. Forget all that fancy equipment, says the trainer across the table. Just grab some inexpensive, stick-in-the-ground poles and lure the dog through a few times.

Let's take a step back and figure out how to decide which method is best for an individual agility team. The time-tested planning model of "think-plan-do" can help.

### Step 1: Think

Have a clear vision of what the final behavior looks like. If your vision has you, the handler, next to your dog as he slaloms through the weave poles, you're likely to incorporate that vision into your training plan by being a constant presence in all phases of your dog's training. If your vision has you several feet away as your dog completes the weaves independently, your training plan should take this into account. When you have a clear picture in your mind, write everything down.

Anything that isn't part of your vision must be avoided in the training plan. For example, if your vision includes your dog weaving with his head low and close to the poles, your training plan should not include rewarding in a manner that causes your dog to lift his head in order to get the reward.

### Step 2: Plan

Once you have a vision of the ideal weave-pole performance, research the variety of techniques and equipment available to you. Consider the following:

Your budget. How much are you willing to spend? Most instructors agree that you need to buy a set of at least six weave poles. Your dog will learn faster if you train several times a week. Training only once weekly in class will extend the amount of time it takes your dog to learn this obstacle. You can spend as little as \$20 building stick-in-the-ground poles, or \$200 or more on poles with solid bases and other features.

Your instructor's preference and experience. If you train with an instructor, what methods does she use? If she isn't comfortable teaching a variety of methods, go along with her preference. If your instructor knows several methods, your individual considerations may direct your choice. Additionally, your instructor's personal basic-training techniques will influence her preference.

An instructor's ability to break down steps into bite-sized pieces will also influence her choice of methodology and equipment. Some methods break steps down from the beginning (e.g., the 2-by-2 method). Other methods start the dog running through a full set of weaves (Weave-A-Matics and channel methods), then go back later to address the finer points of the behavior.

Your dog's personality and size. Some methods work well for some dogs, but not others. For example, guiding a dog through the poles by his collar can work well with outgoing dogs that aren't touch-sensitive. Stick-in-the-ground poles or poles on flexible pegs can work well for small dogs, but large dogs often learn to push them out of the way, resulting in a pole-banging style of weaving.

Your training skills and physical capabilities. Training weave poles takes time, patience, and a keen eye to train exactly what you want while avoiding what you don't want. If you're most comfortable physically prompting your dog to get behaviors, your choice might be influenced by that. However, your training plan should identify how you will fade those prompts if you envision independent performance. Consider also your physical status. If you have a bad back and a small dog, you might not want to even consider the hand-on-the-collar method.

Equipment transportability. An important part of training is the "generalization" stage, during which you practice skills in different locations with a variety of distractions. If you have a small car, consider choosing poles that can be broken down into small components.

Make your decision and sketch your plan. When you write down your plans, including the problems you want to avoid,

you'll have more success than if you wing it. Address:

Rewarding. Most methods that produce speed and independent performance use a food or toy reward you can throw.

Throwing the reward in front of the dog reinforces forward, head-down momentum.

Training duration. Start training when you can commit to two or three two-minute training sessions a day for several weeks.

Working both sides. A common pitfall in training weaves is failing to ensure your dog can weave from both sides of your body. To address this, your plan can remind you to practice five repetitions from your left side and five from your right side during every training session.

Working entries. Another difficulty is succumbing to the thrill of watching your dog weave a full set of poles at the cost of never teaching him to find difficult entries. Prevent the frustration of dealing with this issue by addressing entries early on.

#### Step 3: Do

Set up your poles, grab your dog, set your timer and implement that plan! Take into consideration your training skills, your physical abilities, and most of all, your vision. Remember: What works best for you might differ from what works best for the fellow trainer at that dinner party.

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