

Full-Body Awareness in Agility

Try these agility exercises to heighten your dog's full-body awareness.

Terry Long

Teaching rear-end awareness to agility dogs is nothing new. It is one of a number of foundation skills we teach early in their agility careers. Dogs that have practiced these skills are believed to have better control over their rear ends as they race across the dogwalk, for example, than dogs without this foundation training. What many of our agility dogs are missing are full-body awareness exercises.

Typical rear-end awareness exercises include:

Backing up: The dog learns to move in reverse, preferably in a straight line.

The perch: The dog keeps his rear feet on a round platform while moving his front feet around, rotating his body around the platform without the rear feet coming off the platform.

Ladder work: The dog steps over the individual rungs of an extension ladder laid flat on the ground.

Cavaletti work: The dog steps over poles laid on the ground, which are gradually raised in height and varied in distance.

Here are just a few examples of full-body awareness exercises:

Foot Stomp: The individual placement of specific feet onto a target or other object.

Hip Check: Swiveling a hip outward with the goal of touching that hip to an object or moving the hip a specific distance in space. (Imagine the move that dogs do in play with each other: running alongside one another, and bumping each other with their hips.)

Chin Targeting: Placing the chin on a variety of objects.

Super Stretch: A stretch of the body with additional duration and length (and even direction, i.e., the forward stretch that requires the rear legs to be held straight-out behind the body).

Stop the Wag: The dog grabs his tail and holds on (not chasing the tail).

The Rooky Spin: For those of you who are familiar with Musical Freestyle star 'Rooky' (a Golden Retriever owned and handled by the amazing Carolyn Scott), you will know that this means that the rear end of the dog comes completely off the ground as he completes his spin. Trained correctly, the dog actually learns to power the spin from his rear end.

Field of Tricks: There are an infinite variety of tricks that focus on teaching the dog to move specific parts of his body, either individually or in combinations. Some of these are: Wave (or High 5), Rollover, Dance (on hind legs), Twirl (Dance with a pirouette), and Hut (this is a football move: place one paw over a mini-football, tuck it into the chest while getting into a bowing position, with the other front leg outstretched, place chin on the football, and hold the position).

These are just some of the tricks we can teach our dogs that provide exceptional opportunities for creative learning, are entertaining tricks for our family and friends, and strengthen our dogs' awareness and control of their entire body.

Training any of these full-body-awareness exercises is best done with the use of a clicker because of the precise nature of a mechanical marker. A verbal marker such as "Yes!" can be used, but the clicker can be a half second faster in the hands of a skilled trainer. That half second can be the difference between marking the upswing of a foot (important for training the Wave) and the downswing of a foot (not desired for the Wave).

Similarly, if you are half a second late in marking the beginning stages of a Hip Check, you could end up marking a weight shift in the wrong direction (e.g., back to center, instead of out to the side). However, any of these exercises can be taught without a marker – a marker simply speeds up the learning process for the dog.

As with any training exercise, remember to include the 3 Ds: distance, duration, and distractions. In next month's column, we will describe in detail how to train one of these full-body-awareness exercises, as well as how to apply the 3 Ds. For now, your assignment, should you choose to accept this training challenge, is to prepare your training plan.

Teaching the Foot Stomp

The first step any good trainer takes in training his or her dog is to have a clear vision of what the goal behavior will look like in all its final glory. In this case, your goal behavior description might be:

On a verbal cue (e.g., "right, hit it") the dog will lift his right front foot and place it firmly and squarely onto, and hold it against, any vertical or horizontal object I specify with a physical cue (e.g., a pointing finger) until I release him with a verbal cue (e.g., "done.")

This is why it's important to have a clear vision of all aspects of the goal behavior.

Without envisioning and recording exactly what you want from this behavior, you might have inadvertently trained for only horizontal objects or forgotten about duration (one of the 3 Ds). This could limit your dog's capabilities and potentially how you use this behavior later. This stage is the thinking stage of training. This is the time to be as creative as you want in envisioning what the behavior will look like. Once you have that vision, write it down so that your next stage of training, the planning stage, can account for each aspect of your vision.

Now, develop your training plan. This is where you identify how you are going to get to the goal behavior. Make a list of the individual responses (criterion) you plan on marking and rewarding. Make sure to identify where you are going to deliver the reward.

Placement of the reward is very important. For example, if you were teaching Back Up and marked for your dog taking one step back but fed him close to you, you will diminish his motivation to move away from you! The treat should be taken to him or, preferably, tossed to him or behind him.

Also, identify any props you need and how you will use them (e.g., environmental controls such as barriers to ensure the Back Up is straight, training aids such as targets, and so on). When teaching the Foot Stomp, you may choose to use a target if you think your dog has a predisposition to paw at something. However, if your dog sees a target and has been taught in the past to touch the target with his nose, you will need to decide if you want to teach him that he can now touch that target with a foot or if you will teach him without the target (i.e., shaping). There is a wide variety of ways you can get this behavior started; your role as the trainer is to decide on and plan the one you want to try.

Adopt a couple of these full-body-awareness exercises as your training challenge of the month. Create a training plan for each, and be sure to come back next month to compare notes.

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