

## Stop! In the name of control

### In agility, do running contacts hurt or harm your dog's chances of winning?

*Terry Long*

It's the 2006 USDAA Cynosport World Games Agility Championship in Scottsdale, Ariz., and the competition is fierce, as handlers vie for coveted positions as finalists. Every nanosecond counts. One little bobble can cost dearly in the quest for a place on the podium. The crowd holds its collective breath as finalists push themselves and their dogs to the limit. You notice screaming-fast contacts; dogs charge up and slide down, with barely a perceptible pause at the bottom, risking faults for a missed contact. How are they getting such awesome contacts?

For a few years now, training a "running contact" has been all the rage. According to many top handlers, the benefits of a running contact (in which the dog scales the contact obstacle and hits the downside contact zone without stopping) are faster course times and less pounding on a dog's shoulders than can result from a stop at the bottom. It would seem that with these potential benefits, a running contact would be the best choice.

Then why do the majority of handlers – many of whom have taken their dogs to top levels of competition – still teach the 2020 (the "2-on 2-off" position where two rear feet are on the bottom of the obstacle and two front feet are on the ground)?

According to Stacy Winkler, owner of Pawsitive Action Training ([www.pawsitiveactiontraining.com](http://www.pawsitiveactiontraining.com)), there are several factors to consider before deciding which option is best for you and your dog. Winkler, who teaches group and private agility lessons in Vista, Calif., and is a popular presenter of seminars and workshops, has been in the USDAA World Championship Finals multiple times with multiple dogs. Many of her students compete at the highest levels in agility, and some have the top dogs in the country in their respective breeds. And yet, she rarely recommends training running contacts.

"Number one," says Winkler, "there is no empirical evidence that a running contact results in fewer injuries. In fact, it may be that the shoulder and neck injuries we are seeing in the sport have more to do with charging the A-frame and hitting the upside with so much force and all the pounding dogs take when landing after jumps.

"To train a running contact, you need to do many, many repetitions so that the dog learns how to adjust his stride and get, for a lack of a better term, muscle memory. And it takes a lot more to maintain a running contact so the dog must do more repetitions over its lifetime and at full height. That can actually be harder on a dog than training a stop. With a stop, you can often practice just the end behavior, and if consistency is maintained, it requires very little maintenance once trained."

There are a variety of methods being tested to try and find the best way to train a running contact. Many of them involve barriers or props of some kind to guide the dog to the bottom of the contact. Some people use "hoops," flexible tubing staked in the ground which form an arc under which the dog must dip as he goes up and down the A-frame and dogwalk. Others use a Hit It Board, a pad that emits a beep when the dog runs over the top of it. After the dog has been trained to hit it reliably, it is then placed at the bottom of the contact, and the dog is rewarded for hitting it on the way off the contact. Still, even with props and high-tech gadgetry, running contacts are notoriously hard to train and, most importantly, have not proven to increase handlers' Q rates and placements. That's probably the case because it's not just a contact-training issue.

"There is less control with a running contact," says Winkler. "Not many handlers can run as fast as their dogs, and if you get behind a dog who has a running contact, you have to train for a variety of situations that occur after the dog leaves the contact. You need good directionals such as left, right, go, switch, turn, whatever, to try and control where the dog goes next. And still, there will be situations you can't train for. For example, you cue "Right, jump," but there are two jumps on the same plane off to the right. How can the dog know which one?"

"Running contacts can also be difficult for judges to call so you are at a much higher risk for incorrect missed-contact calls. While flyoffs on the teeter can be more obvious, it can be especially difficult for the judge to see if a dog with a running contact has hit the yellow on the A-frame or dogwalk. This heightens a judge's vigilance of those obstacles, during which he has to make a split-second decision."

So, you rightfully ask, why would one choose to train a running contact? It has a lot to do with personal goals, motivations, and your dog, according to Winkler. "If a person's goal is to be on the world team, you should consider a running A-frame in order to be competitive. But you need to be realistic about your goals. Is gaining an extra second or so more important than having a completely consistent contact behavior? Will the extra second or two make a difference in attaining your personal goals? Are you willing to put in the extra time and effort to train it, as well as all the other behaviors you need to support it, and are you willing to risk the judges' calls? I might train a running contact with very small dogs like a small Papillon or a dog who is so small that it just naturally strides through the bottom, but otherwise, I'd think long and hard about teaching a running contact versus the much more reliable 2O2O."

Many people start training the 2O2O as a foundation behavior at a very young age, building a strong targeting behavior that can later be transferred to "contact trainers" before it is transferred to the actual equipment. Speed is developed as a separate skill and then the two behaviors, 2O2O and drive, are combined.

"The 2O2O is easier and faster to train and maintain," says Winkler, "because the criterion is very clear to the dog, to the handler, and to judges. While it's next to impossible to accurately mark (with a clicker or other behavioral marker) a running contact, it is very easy to mark the 2O2O. That makes it very easy to reproduce, and it requires less drilling to maintain.

"And taught correctly, the 2O2O can be very, very fast when the dog really understands its job and when the behavior was built with drive. You can also get very tight turns at the bottom because of the 2O2O's finite position, and if you have trained the dog to stay there regardless of where you are, you will have incredible flexibility in handling.

"The 2O2O taught correctly, with a weight shift back, hedges your bets against shoulder injuries, as well, which you can't control with a running contact that puts the weight on the front end as they descend."

So unless you are a trainer who truly, truly likes a training challenge and you have World Cup aspirations, the 2O2O might be the ticket to Q for you!

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