

Training Secrets of The Stars

This is Bernadette's penultimate article. I'm sure you'll join with me in thanking her for what has been a most informative and interesting series. She has promised to send me a report of Hex' first agility show in November, so that's something to look forward to!

Training A Wicked Agility Dog: Part 5

Hex is now 17 months old. It is hard to believe that if we were still back in the USA she probably could have already been competing for 2 months. In American Kennel Club dogs can compete in agility at 15 months old. I am not overly keen on this, but it is up to the individual to decide what is best for their own dog. I personally think this is way too early.

Yet as I have discussed previously, I do train my puppies when they are quite young. While the training does not involve agility equipment, it is still training. I like how young dogs are little "sponges" that love to interact and

learn. With training based on positive reinforcement and clicker work, I think that the early groundwork makes the actual later agility training much more fun.

I must confess that the last 4 weeks involved very little training on my part. Family weddings, holidays, bitches in season and breedings have taken over. While I tend to put a lot of effort into training my young dogs, I do not worry about giving them breaks away from training. As a bonus, we found out that Hex is a great little traveller and she enjoyed her week's holiday in Ireland. I like having well-behaved dogs that can come with us anywhere!

The only actual new training we have done this month was to teach Hex a new trick. She now can put her paw on her nose and look sad. I am sure this trick will come in handy one day but I cannot figure out when that will be? Hopefully not at her first show!



HEX IS SHAMED

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Obstacle Training - Weave Poles

I was reminded at an agility show recently that I did not elaborate on my weave pole training. So I would like to explain how I approached weave pole training with Hex. I think it is best to wait on training weaves until the pup is physically mature. I do not think there is anything to gain by sending young pups thru open channels of weaves. When I start weave pole training I like to get the weaves closer (if using channels) or more upright (if using slanted poles) in a very short period of time, so there is no point in starting younger than when they are actually physically able to weave upright. I originally started Hex around 9 months old as she is a very physically mature pup and I thought that she was ready. But as she progressed very rapidly and the poles were getting more upright, I decided to hold off anymore weave training. We started again when she was almost 12 months.

To teach weave poles as I do, the dog needs to be comfortable pulling ahead on lead to a toy or food pot. I usually use both slanted poles (also known as weave-a-matics) and channel poles, but with Hex I have just used slanted poles. Once weave pole training is started I do think that working on them everyday for short periods is very helpful. Once a week training at a club is not the best way to teach weave poles. If you are training a young dog I would suggest that if you can have only one obstacle in your back garden, make it a set of training weaves.



WEAVE TRAINING ON LEAD WITH THE POLES OPEN.

As I explained in a previous article, I initially work on sending the dog on lead thru the opened poles to a toy or treat pot. The dog is basically dragging me along to get to the reward. As the poles are open quite wide, the dog is really running thru. I think this initial work is great to imprint on the dog to keep the head down and run independently of me.

Quickly I bring the poles up so that the dog realizes it is not just a series of poles on the floor.



WEAVE TRAINING ON LEAD STAGE 2

By having the reward about 1 foot from the end, the dog just learns to run the straight line. Any initial difficulty with the dog popping out is usually solved with a helper either tapping the treat pot or banging the toy on the ground. It is important at each change of pole tilt to keep working on angled entrances. With the poles still tilted, you can work on the angled entrances and keep the dog successful at each level. It is much easier to work on those difficult entrances early on than to wait until the dog is already doing full upright weaves. I think that by making weaves a fun game right from the start you can avoid a lot of stress-related problems later on. With Shelties, I have found that they need to "own" the weave poles and learn to attack them with joy. The worst thing for them is to feel that they are "wrong" as this will cause them to shut down and go slowly thru the poles.

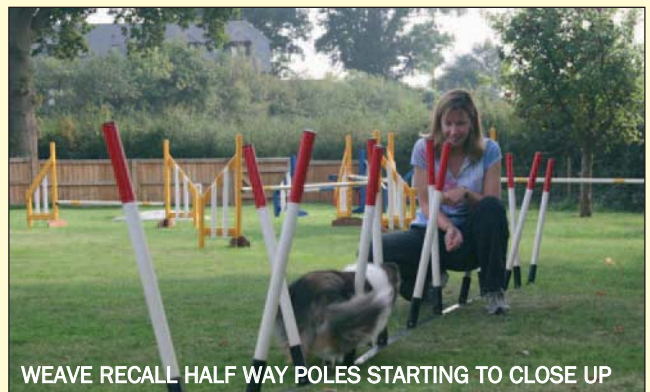
The initial problem that we ran into with Hex was only related to my choice of reward. Since she is very food motivated, I thought that a food pot would be the best choice for her. It actually confused her and she would start to slow down around midway thru the weaves. We

realized that she actually was slowing down to target the pot, confusing it with her contact position. Once we switched to using her toy as the reward, she sped up nicely. As I actually prefer to work with a toy, this was a bonus!

In addition to sending her on lead to her reward, we also worked on recalling her thru the tilted poles. This requires a helper so that we could have her running at the poles with speed. At each training session, we would recall her thru half way and if that was successful, move back until she could be recalled the entire length. At each change of pole tilt we do recalls thru in addition to sending to her reward. Recalling her thru was a method I had read about a few years back. It helps encourage the dog to keep its head level if you squat down (not very graceful) and hold the reward at or below their eye level. A picture tells a thousand words, so see the photos for a better description!



WEAVE RECALL HALF WAY WITH POLES OPEN



WEAVE RECALL HALF WAY POLES STARTING TO CLOSE UP



WEAVE RECALL POLES STARTING TO CLOSE UP

During her weave pole training at each level we have encouraged her to weave ahead of me on both sides as well as weave towards me. The angled entrances are made more difficult at each step. Hopefully this will create a dog that can weave independently from me so that I can concentrate on getting to where I need to be rather than worrying about her in the weaves.

The most difficult step I find is that last tiny bit of straightening up the poles. As usual, the dogs usually tell me when they are ready. We were out putting some jumps down for Hex when she ran over to a straight set of poles and completed them on her own! When she finished the set of poles, I calmly praised her and then asked her to do it again on my command. She did it with such speed and enthusiasm and I was so thrilled! But who is training who here? She is such a great character.

Even though Hex showed me she could do straight poles, I still put the reward out at the end but move it further and further away from the end of the poles. Now I can work on difficult exits where she stays in the poles to the end no matter what I do. I want her to be able to stay in the poles looking ahead even if I run in another direction.

As she progressed, we worked on obstacles before and after the weaves, each time rewarding her ahead of me to encourage that same independence. As Hex would prefer to keep her eyes on me, I have to always find ways of encouraging her to look ahead. As her weaves

became faster, I started to throw the toy ahead while she was almost done instead of having it out visible. This accomplished two things: first she got used to weaving without the reward visible and second she got used to the distraction of the toy moving while she was still weaving.

The final step in her weave pole training includes distractions. When available I have people stand nearby the weaves, talking or clapping, to get her to understand to keep weaving no matter what happens. She likes this game and actually works harder and faster with more distractions. As always, the reward and praise is huge when she does this!

What Comes Next?

Up to now we have mainly worked on individual obstacles and short sequences, so the next step was to work on longer but simple flowing courses. As I have done some judging recently, Hex gets to try out all my courses. When I saw that she could do an entire course with enthusiasm it helped to build my confidence as well as hers!

This month I will try to combine some difficult short sequences with a longer course to see if she will be ready to compete in November. We will continue to work on independent obstacle performance on the contacts and the weaves. And most importantly we will enjoy every second of our training together.