

## Hex

Owned and trained by  
Bernadette Bay

### Raising A Wicked Agility Dog Part 4



My training with Hex continues to be great fun. Her personality is delightful and she is always eager to work with me. She loves to sit at the door to the back garden and stare at the agility field. As soon as she thinks we may be

training she launches herself at the door in anticipation.

### Speeding Up the See Saw

In my last article I discussed an incident Hex had with the see-saw in her early training. While she regained her confidence quickly, I noticed that she was now hesitating ever so slightly at the pivot point. This hesitation would not bother many handlers, but it really bothered me! Hex is a small dog with little legs and she needs all the advantages she can get. Speed on the contact equipment is so important when it comes to the difference of tenths of a second between placements at the top levels.

I attended a training day given by the Agility Club about 4 years ago. The presenter was Sylvia Trkman and she explained one way she taught the see saw. I thought it was a great method to help speed up the dog and encourage the dog to run to the end of the see saw.

Leaving your dog in a stay, you walk to the end of the see-saw and face the dog. Holding the end up, you recall your dog to you. You can encourage the dog with a toy, treat or the soft cheese on the end of the plank. Keep the end up in the air, allowing your dog to eat the treat or tug the toy while you slowly lower the plank down. As the dog increases in confidence the end can be lowered faster and faster. Eventually you can hold the end up and as they get to you reward and then let the end drop. I use the clicker to click as the plank hits the ground and praise and treat generously. The dog learns to accept the bang on the ground and learns to hold on thru the recoil.



My vision of a perfect execution of the see-saw for Hex is to have her run to the end of the plank, ride it down and stay until released. I will not require a 2

on/2 off as I think that is very difficult for a small dog and just adds an extra step for large dogs.

I will continue to work on see saw speed with Hex and my next step is to get her onto a bigger variety of see-saws. She needs to learn to perform see-saws with slightly different weights and tips, as not all see-saws are exactly the same.

### Training the Dog Walk

When Hex was about 11 months I decided to begin the training dog walk. I was confident that her target training (discussed in the second article) was solid and that she was coordinated and mature enough to run the planks. Hex could run to her target and assume her target position while along side of me, ahead of me and with me running past her. Now I felt secure in using the target to teach the dog walk.

Introducing the dog walk at 11 months might be a bit young for a bigger or slower maturing breed. Some dogs do not have good coordination until they are older. It is worth waiting until you are sure they understand the target fully and that they are physically mature. Mistakes made in training at this age can cause problems for the rest of their career.

I began the dog walk training on lead; placed Hex just above the contact on the down ramp and got her excited to run to her target. My goal was to entice Hex to pull against her lead to get to her target position. Once she was doing this, she was placed further and further up the down ramp until I couldn't lift her any higher. (Note: a lower dog walk makes life much easier!). If needed a helper can stand on the other side to keep the dog from coming off the side. Her target is placed about two inches from the end of the dog walk on the ground. There is just enough room for her to put her front two feet on the ground and touch the target with her nose

We worked on perfecting the bottom ramp for about a week. Once I felt Hex was running as fast as she could to the

target and able to hold her position, I would randomly click and treat for holding the position and also sometimes do a quick release to a toy. Once we were unable to lift her any higher, it was time to take the chance of sending her over the complete dog walk. This is always the scary time for me, but the dogs seem to transition to it very well. Initially when doing the entire dog walk, Hex decided she would stop halfway along the down ramp and do her target position there! It was as if she thought "This ramp is way too long and it must be time to stop"! But, having a helper point out the target reminded her to run to the bottom. I use a helper to point out the target, as I do not want her looking to me but rather looking ahead.

It is important at the early stages to work both on having the dog run past you to the target as well as having the dog stay in position while you run past them. Hex's weakest area is running past me, as she would rather run next to me. So far, we have no issues with my

running past her. More repetitions are obviously needed to encourage her to run past me or ahead of me. My vision of a perfect dog walk for Hex is to have her run over the dog walk at full speed and stop in a two on/two off position in a crouch with her head down.

### **Training the A-Frame**

When Hex was 1 year old we began A-frame training. Because she is so small I thought that maybe a running A-frame might be the way to go. So, working on a low A-frame, I had Hex running to a small ball placed at the ground just off the bottom. We did this, raising the height slowly, for about 2 months. It seemed to be working and she would run smoothly thru the contact to pick up her ball and continue to the next obstacle. We did this regularly and I varied my position in relation to the A-frame.

At some point around 2 months into this training, I tried taking the ball away once or twice. I was horrified to see Hex launch herself horizontally off the

A-frame! You could just see the words "Yahoo!" in a bubble over her head. I had thought that the repetition and muscle memory of running the A-frame to the bottom would have held up, but for Hex it did not. Different options such as hoops and jumps at the bottom of the contacts were suggested. But I was hesitant to try these methods for yet another 2 months only to have her revert back to leaping after the props were removed.

After discussing this with our trainer, Lesley Olden, we decided to go back to 2 on/2 off with the target. I have been delighted to see that Hex accepted the stop very easily.



I think that all the positive repetitions on the dog walk with the target helped in this transition. We started her on the lowered A-frame and on lead exactly as we started the dog walk. We were able to progress very quickly to completing the entire lowered A-frame, on lead with a stop at the target. Soon we were able to do the lowered A-frame off lead in small sequences.

I did worry that Hex would have trouble stopping on the full height A-frame, but she seems to have no issues and enjoys doing the A-frame at full speed with a stop at the bottom. Maybe the early repetition of running the A-frame imprinted the speed?

**Sequences**

There are certain sequences that are often seen on agility courses. I think it is a good idea to teach those sequences to the dog so that they can almost perform them without you. Such sequences include pin-wheels (aka stars), serpentine (aka snakes) and pull-thrus/flick flacks. I think positive repetition is essential. I use both the clicker and thrown treats (cubed white cheese works great!) and tuggy toys to keep up the speed and enthusiasm while she is learning new behaviours.

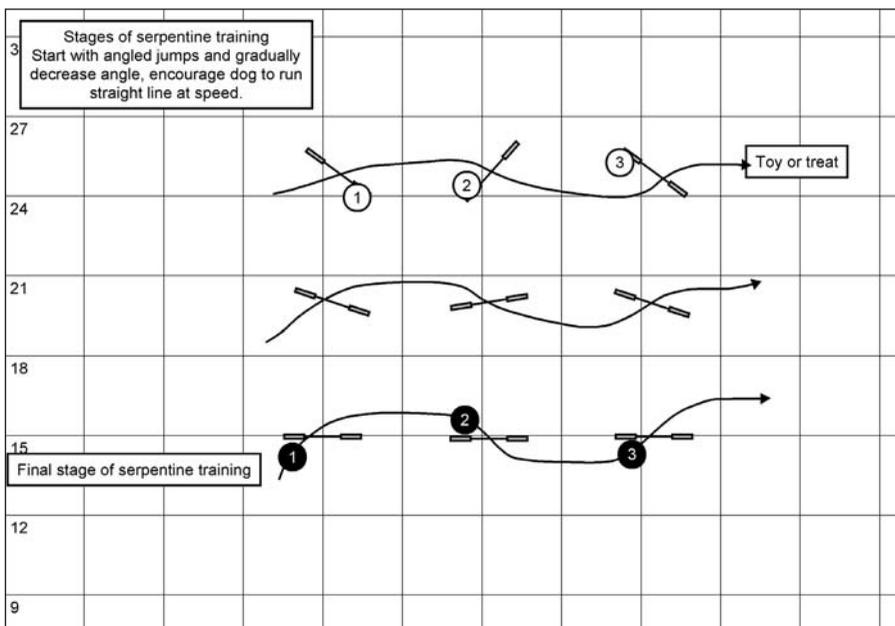
*(see pic top right)*

At around 1 year old, I started working with Hex on these sequences. The serpentine is fun to teach and using this angled jump method helps keep the dog tight. By starting with the jumps angled, the dog is taught from the beginning to run the serpentine as nearly a straight line.

Once Hex was good on serpentine, we began work on pull thrus and flick-flacks. These are the hardest for her and many repetitions are still needed. Luckily the early work on her rights and lefts are very helpful for this.

*(see pic bottom right)*

One drill that I like to do involves three jumps in a line. Going one way, we do a serpentine. Going back the other way, we do pull thrus/flick flacks. By doing this, Hex begins to learn the different body language and verbal commands for



each sequence. Although the straight line looks the same, the performance for the dog is different.

**Flyball**

At 13 months old, Hex attended her first flyball class at Billingshurst DTC. This class is perfect for her. Not only did it help to teach her a new behaviour (the flyball box), but it encourages her speed down a straight line of jumps. In addition, it gives us a full hour of time alone to train around other dogs. Since she does not yet attend a regular agility class, this is great for us. I do not know if we will continue flyball in any competitive way, but is great fun for us both.

**What is next?**

Hex is now 15 months old. Her breed showing is on hold after a few nice placements in the puppy classes because she has lost all her coat. My lovely puppy is now a gangly teenager. She has been officially measured into the Small class and I have sent in an entry for her first agility show in November. It is an unaffiliated show and I hope it will be a good way to give her some positive reinforcement in the ring. I am hoping her first KC show will also be in November if I think she is ready. We still have a lot of training to do before then!

