

The Training Secrets of the Stars!

RAISING A WICKED AGILITY DOG PART 3



My wicked Hex continues to mature. She is a fun Sheltie to train and I am enjoying her immensely. Each time we train, I learn so much from her and I am starting to see what I believe will be her strengths and her weakness. Hopefully my training will keep those strengths and weaknesses in mind.

Training on the Flat

In my years of training both in the US and in the UK, it has always been drilled into me that you need to perfect many of your handling moves away from the obstacles. This is called "Flat Work" or "Training on the Flat". I cannot name which instructor "invented" this term, but I like the way that Greg Derrett illustrates it in his foundation video. (I highly recommend it!)

So, even before Hex started sequencing we worked on the following moves on the flat.

Rights and lefts, both in front of me and at my side. These are taught with clicker and I want them solid on verbal commands before I start using them in agility.

·Circle work, running with dog on either side of me in large circles. This sounds easy but can be very hard for herding dogs who want to bark and cut in front of you. This was especially hard for Hex, who is small and likes to bounce up at me and bark! This is something we are still trying to perfect!

While running at my side, we work on turning away from me (to develop rear crosses) and turning towards me (to develop front crosses)

One and Two Jump Training

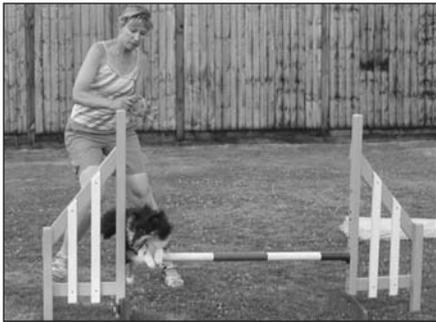
While we continue to work on sendaways over straight lines, I am now starting to add some one and two jump exercises.

The first exercise was to teach Hex the basics of a rear cross. I do this first because many Shelties will spin on rear crosses. I use a toy to motivate Hex to continue forward even while I am crossing. This exercise is done with two jumps. I use the word "back" to indicate that I want her to turn away from me.



CROSS BEHIND TRAINING WITH TWO JUMPS

The next exercise I taught Hex was a wrap (left and right) on command with one jump. We do this with both rear and front crosses. I teach my dogs that right and left means to wrap the wing, so this is easiest to teach with one jump. Down the line it becomes helpful with pull-thrus, especially when you are far behind your dog.



WRAPPING THE WING

The third exercise we work on is to teach Hex what my body language is for a front cross. Front crosses are MY weakest cross, so I have to work harder on these. These front crosses often involve sending the dog to one obstacle while I front cross at another obstacle, so the dog needs to be comfortable sending away. This exercise is done with two or three jumps.

Sequence Training

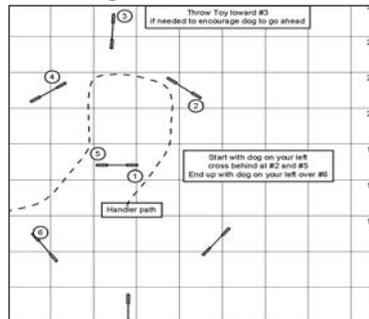
Now that Hex has some good basics down (sendaways, front and rear crosses) and has good motivation from our ground work, I feel ready to go for our first official lesson with Lesley Olden. Hex has gone along with me before when

I had my lessons with Zen, but this is our first lesson to concentrate on Hex alone.

Much of my ground work with Hex was taken not only from my past 10 years of agility training with many different instructors, but from work with Lesley over the past 4 years. Lesley emphasizes motivation and solid basic training first. I always enjoy my lessons with her and she always gives me something to work on and think about.

The following exercise is the first one that Lesley started us on. I was surprised that Hex could do it! It is a great exercise to work on sending the dog ahead and crossing behind. On the first try, Hex did spin after jump #2. So we broke the exercise down, using the toy to encourage her to turn away from me and take jump #3. Once she got that idea, the exercise just flowed and it gave us a great feeling of accomplishment!

I have included a diagram of this sequence. The sequence can obviously be reversed and can be spread out or brought in depending on what the dog needs to be successful. Keep it positive and increase difficulty only when you think the dog can handle it.



CROSS BEHIND SEQUENCE WITH HANDLER PATH

Obstacle Training -Weaves

At around 9 months old I introduced Hex to the tilted weave poles. Hex began weave training on lead running thru the open poles to a treat pot or to a toy. She seemed to go faster to a toy so we continued with the toy rather than the food pot. I want to feel her pulling me thru the poles before I start bringing the poles more upright. During this training I discovered was that Hex thought she should target the food pot and was slowing down to do this! She is too cute.

At each change of angle of pole tilt, difficult entrances to the weaves are

worked on. It is best to work on these angled entrances now while the poles are still tilted. This will ensure that the dog is successful and they will learn difficult entrances right from the start. Teaching the angles from the beginning makes things so much easier down the line. I also work on recalling Hex thru the poles to me. For this I needed a helper, as I do not want to slow her down by starting her from a sit stay. Everything I do while teaching the weave poles is aimed at having a dog that can weave independently of me.

I do not like to do a lot of weave pole training too early and usually keep the poles open for quite a while. But I found that Hex caught on so quickly that the poles were able to be closed up sooner than I thought. So rather than continue, I stopped further weave training until she was around 11 months old.

Obstacle Training-See Saw

At 9 months I also began Hex's see-saw training. The method I used on previous dogs involved an adjustable see saw. In the USA this is how most clubs start the pups on the see-saw. But as an adjustable see-saw is not common in the UK, I used a different method for Hex.

The method I used for Hex involved two pause tables, one under each end of the see-saw.

Hex was taught to run from one end to the other. At the end of the plank I squeeze a big blob of Primula cheese and plop a treat into this "glue". I found that because the dogs have to lick the cheese, it lets them pause at the bottom and relax. They are very keen to get to that spot! This was taught to me by my very first agility instructor over 10 years ago. In the US we used "Squeeze Cheese" which is cheese in a can! Squeeze cheese is very portable, doesn't need to be refrigerated and I hate to think what it is made of!

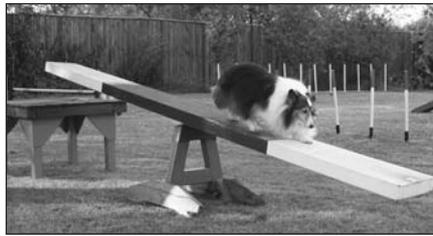


SEESAW TRAINING STEP ONE

I use a very hands-off method for most of my training including the see-saw. I want the dog to be able to control the see-saw on their own from the very beginning. While it might take a bit longer to train at the start, they are less likely to have fear issues later on as the see-saw tip increases. Usually the tip is first increased by changing the tables from two large tables at each end to one large table and one small table. Unfortunately, I did not have two large tables, so I began with a large table at one end and a small table at the other. Eventually, you can just use the large table at one end and the other on the ground. And then finally you use the small table at one end and the other on the ground. The tip and incline is increased slowly by doing it this way, allowing the dog to increase their confidence at each step. I have included some photos to help illustrate this method.



SEE SAW TRAINING STEP TWO



SEE SAW TRAINING STEP THREE



SEE SAW TRAINING STEP FOUR

I will share a problem that I had during this initial training with Hex. Hopefully it will help someone else avoid the same situation. Her training was going so well and in no time she was doing a full height see-saw with speed and confidence. One morning I took her out to work on the see-saw and did not realize the see-saw was quite wet from the morning dew. In addition, as the see-saw had been outside for a year, some

algae had formed along it. The combination made the see-saw quite slippery and Hex had a major fall off the side.

Although she got right back on the second try, it obviously bothered her. The next training session, she refused the see-saw. I wanted to cry! But I trusted my training, put the small table back and worked on click/treat for every step on the see-saw. Within two days she was running back on the full height see-saw. The only difference I see is that she no longer slams the see saw and slides into the contact. I will explain in the next article how we are working on increasing her speed in the bottom of the contact.

What Comes Next?

My next article will pick up on Hex's training at 10 months old. In it, I will explain how I started Hex on the dog walk and what issues we encountered along the way. I am not yet sure how I will start her on the A-frame, so I am holding off on training it until I have a method set in my own head! Running contact or two-on-two off? Lots to think about!