

# The Training Secrets of the Stars!

## RAISING A WICKED AGILITY DOG Part 2

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My last article talked about how I begin by raising my litters of pups. Once all the other pups have gone into their new homes, I can start work on my pup. Hex has been a great dog to work with. She is both food motivated and toy motivated. This makes training so much easier!

### Early Training

I believe that so much learning can take place earlier than most people realize. During this time (8 weeks to 6 months), I try and teach the pup a new behaviour every few days. All behaviours are taught with the clicker. Some behaviours are needed for agility; others are needed for general house manners. Most are just fun party tricks that are taught to keep the pup thinking! Here is a brief list of some of the things I taught Hex up until 6 months.

- Sit, down, stay
- Walk Back or reverse
- Spin left and right
- Shake paw
- Roll over
- "say your prayers"
- Play dead (BANG!)
- Walk/run on my right and left
- "circus elephant trick"
- Target my hand
- Touch a target on the floor
- Weave between my legs
- Sit on my right or left
- Sit between my legs (my start line routine)
- Retrieve to hand
- Put Your Toys away in a box
- Ride the skateboard
- Jump into my arms

The Backing up and the "circus elephant" trick are done to help the puppy realize that it can control its back legs. Teaching the puppy to trot through a ladder on the ground is also used to make the pup aware of its legs.



The Circus Elephant trick is taught by simply getting the pup to put its front two legs on an upside down washing-up bowl (or flower pot). Once it is comfortable doing that and will stay in that position, we work on getting the pup to pirouette around the bowl, keeping its front feet on and learning to move the rear legs. The pups love this game and when the washing up bowl comes out, they can't wait to play on it!

Restrained recalls are done every day to reinforce the all important recall. Basic control is worked into daily life. I want the pup's stays and control work done away from agility at first. Sit stays for their dinner or quick downs before a game of tug are ways to teach a pup control in a fun way. As the pup gets older, sit/down stays are increased in duration and worked with distractions. This is always done in a positive manner and no corrections are used. Once the pup is steady on a sit/stay, we work on the "release". Some people call this the "Ready-Steady-Go" game. Basically, we want the puppy bursting out of its sit/down stay when we release it. Looking forward to the pup's agility career; we want a dog that will sit/stay until we release it, but leave the start line with tremendous speed. Many small dogs or non-Border collies have motivation issues at the start line and this is what we are trying to prevent from the beginning.

Along with teaching these behaviours at home, I also "take it on the road". The pup is brought everywhere with me if possible. At each new place, even if it is just for a few minutes, we explore and then work on her tricks. This teaches the pup that she can perform her behaviours in strange places with distractions. Behaviours become very strong when this is done.

Around this age (12 weeks-6 months) I always try to get the pup into a basic puppy obedience class. It helps to be able to work the puppy around other dogs. Classes geared towards agility are great, but sometimes hard to find. I have been to some great puppy classes with Hex and her half-sister Zen. The instructors were very imaginative and clicker oriented. This makes the world of difference! I avoid puppy-socialization classes, as I feel this can sometimes backfire especially with small dogs. I only go to classes where the instructors have good control. With any dog, but especially for small dogs, a dog attack at this age can be devastating for the dog's confidence.

All the new "tricks" and behaviours the pup is learning are

taught initially with clickers and treats. But, quickly, we try and incorporate rewards with the tuggie. From the beginning of training, I switch back and forth between food and tug. A training session will begin with a game of tug, followed by some click and treat work, followed again by a game of tug. This is done to be able to have a dog that can switch back and forth between food and toys. I like to use food to train contacts and weaves, but prefer toys for jumping work; so a dog that can be rewarded with both in the same training session is helpful.

### Target Training



Touching a target on command is one of the first agility related behaviours I teach a pup. I use targets for contact training, so this is a very important skill for the dog to master. This is all done away from any

equipment and only added to the contact obstacles when I am 100% happy with the behaviour away from the obstacle.

We start with the pup on lead, as this is also how we initially start the pup on contact obstacles. The pup is click/treated first for touching the target clear perspex square) with its nose while I am holding it. We gradually work up to where the target can be placed further and further away and the pup will run to it, lie down and hold its nose to the target. This can take quite awhile and it is worth taking your time and getting it right. This should be a fun game for the pup.



One thing to be aware of is that you want the pup doing its target touches at your side or ahead of you, facing away from you. A bad habit to get into is always having the pup run to the target and then turn to face you. In agility,

the ideal performance is having a dog run to the contact position ahead of you. If the dog is constantly rewarded for turning and facing you, you will run into problems later on the contacts on with a dog either waiting for you, or coming off the side looking for you.

The other thing I work on it having the pup pulling against the lead to the target. This is to increase the desire to get to the end of the contact! You will see in the photos, that Hex's lead is tight behind her and she has to pull to get to the target.

### Early Obstacle Training

Around 5 months old, I start some easy obstacle training.

Basically this is done just to get the pup to associate agility with fun and speed. I clicker train the tunnel and tyre at this time. Clicker training the tyre is fun and easy and doesn't require the pup to jump. This early training involves a round-the-clock approach to the tyre right from the start. This teaches the pup to find the opening from any angle and any distance. The tunnel is taught the same way. Initially clicking and treating and building up distance and angles to the tunnel and then working on speed by using a thrown toy as a reward.

The next sequence I work on is a straight line of Jump-tunnel-jump using a toy as a reward. The "jumps" are just wings, no bars. The toy is placed out at the end and the pup is back chained to eventually run down the line to the toy. I vary my position, initially just standing behind the pup and sending away from me. When I have another person available to hold the pup, I move off to each side to get the pup used to running past me as well. The distance between the obstacles starts small to make the sequence easier. The distances are increased as the pup shows she can handle it. Running ahead does not come easy for shelties, so this sequence is worked on for quite awhile. I prefer having a dog that runs ahead of me, rather than at my side, so I believe this exercise is very important.

When doing beginning jump work, I prefer no bars, even on the ground. Bars on the ground can roll if the pup steps on it. This can either worry the pup or strain a muscle. Once I feel the pup can start jumping (in Hex's case it was 8 months, in Zen's case it was 10 months), I put the bars up to a low height, usually 8". But quickly get up to full height, rather than spend too much time at low jumps.

### What Comes Next?

Somehow time flies when training a puppy. It is my favourite time and I believe the time spent now helps to reinforce that special bond between the two of us. I have made training fun and Hex has learned to trust me. She is a delightful puppy, confident and bold and a bit naughty at times. My favourite combination!

Most of my pup's agility training occurs at home or in a friend's garden. I have seen too many small dogs turned off of agility after being attacked or chased at group agility classes. So most of Hex's basic agility work has been done in a fairly quiet environment. Once her basic obstacle work and sequences are strong, I will bring her to classes to allow her to do agility around distractions. I do not think that will be a problem, as she is quite focused and her agility drive is very strong.

In my next article, I will begin with Hex at 8 months and her first private agility lesson with Leslie Olden. And I will describe how we do more agility focused training. Only 5 months to her agility debut in November!