

Twin Cities Obedience Training Club, Inc.

Foundation Agility Skill Training



TWIN CITIES OBEDIENCE TRAINING CLUB, INC (TCOTC) makes no claims or guarantees regarding the information contained in this document. Any person following any technique described herein implicitly agrees to hold harmless TCOTC; its members, directors, officers, agents, committees, employees and all persons connected or associated with said Club, and releases the same from any and all claims which that person may have at any time, from the following: Any loss or injury which may occur to any person or thing, and which may be caused directly or indirectly to any person or thing as a result of any information found herein.

This document outlines the skills that your dog will learn and practice in Foundation Agility. Following each skill is an explanation of why it will make you more successful in training and competition, and suggestions on ways to train at home.

In addition to these notes, you might also like to check out a training video from the TCOTC library. Greg Derrett's Agility Foundation is an excellent resource, and illustrates how to train many of the skills listed.

1. Dog can remain in stay, off leash, with handler standing 10 feet away, with multiple distractions, for 1 minute. (focus, self-control)

The agility environment is very stimulating to most dogs. First, they are in close proximity to other dogs that are running, jumping, barking and playing with toys! As they learn to love agility themselves, often just seeing the equipment can cause them to get revved up. (This enthusiasm is a good thing; it will make your dog more eager to learn, and lead to faster performance.) Even dogs with a rock-solid “stay” can get distracted and break their stay to join in on the fun. Unfortunately, the excitement sometimes leads to unintentional dog-on-dog incidents (in class) or mistakes on the agility course (because you weren't ready for your dog to go). Therefore, it's necessary for your dog to understand that no matter how thrilling the environment, he must use self-control and stay focused on *you* because nothing fun happens without your OK.

To make your dog's stay bulletproof, start small and build up (1) length of stay, (2) distance from you, and (3) level of distraction. This is probably familiar from obedience class. At first, have your dog stay for a short time, with you nearby, in a quiet and familiar environment. When he can do it successfully, *slowly* increase duration, distance and distraction. If he breaks the stay, you know you have increased one of the 3 D's too quickly – go back to the prior level for a day or two, then try the next step again.

Be creative in the distractions department. Have the dog stay while you wave your arms in the air, bounce a ball, or throw treats on the floor in front of him. When he's ready, take him to unfamiliar places (dog park, pet stores, fenced tennis courts – anywhere that dogs are allowed and you can practice safely), play the TV loudly, or recruit the neighbor kids to run and shout nearby.

It's easy to incorporate STAY practice into everyday life. Have your dog sit-stay or down-stay while you set his food bowl on the floor. Make him wait for the release word before he gets to eat. When he wants to go outside, make him sit- or down-stay while you open the door. Wait a few seconds with the door open before releasing him to run outside. Training with such high-value incentives (supper, going outside) will help your dog develop good self-discipline fast!

2. Handler can recall dog from 50 feet. Dog returns directly, passing other dogs and distractions.

(focus, relationship)

Similar to the STAY concept. Your dog must know that *you* are more fun and exciting than other dogs, other people, or anything else he may encounter in the agility ring. The goal is for your dog to instantly abandon whatever he's doing and race to you excitedly when you call. The skill is critical in class, because there will be times when more than one dog is off-leash and someone is tempted to go visit. It's important in agility competition for those times when he's headed for the wrong obstacle and you have only an instant to get his attention before he makes a mistake. And of course it's handy in real life to be able to call your dog before he runs in front of a car!

To improve your recall, again, start easy and work towards difficult. Make sure you have a very tempting reward before you call your dog – his favorite toy or a high-value treat. If you have to call him some time when your hands are empty, make it more rewarding by running away from him (so it becomes a fun game of chase), or reward with lots of affection or wrestling – whatever your dog loves best. Here's another skill you can practice at supertime: have someone else restrain the dog in another room until you call him to come eat. The way he rockets toward his food dish will become his habitual response whenever you call.

Don't try for the orderly, disciplined "front" recall of obedience training, where the dog comes straight into you and sits neatly in front of your knees. In agility, enthusiasm and speed are more important than neat precision. Something else you probably remember from obedience: never, ever punish your dog for coming to you. Even if you've called 20 times and just want to give him a good spanking, show him you're pleased and happy when he finally does come. Unfortunately, one negative experience can wipe out months of careful recall training.

3. Dog will play excitedly with a toy or handler. (focus, drive)

For most dogs, this is a no-brainer! But some dogs are less interested in toys or haven't had the opportunity to "learn" to play. Toys and play are important in agility because they create drive – the enthusiasm to move with speed and purpose. While dogs can learn to do agility without ever playing, they tend to trot around the course as if they were practicing obedience. It's just not as much fun, and in higher levels of competition the dog will be disqualified because he doesn't "make time" – even if he did the course perfectly.

If your dog is already a real toy lover, make sure he's comfortable playing anywhere, anytime by "practicing" play in new places and situations as you did in proofing the STAY and COME behaviors. You'll know you're done when he would grab that tug toy even if surrounded by a herd of chattering squirrels!

If your dog is not a "play boy", don't be discouraged - it is possible to help him become toy-driven. The secret is to make the toy seem interesting but unattainable. It doesn't matter what kind of toy – even sticks or old socks are fine. At first, just let the dog see the toy but not have it. Wave it temptingly out of reach or squeak a squeaky toy behind your back. Use your voice and body language to tease him – "Whaaaat do I have in my haaaand? Whooooo wants to play with this toy?" Do this for just a few seconds, then put it away out of sight until later. Make a game of taking it out the next time – "Ooooh, what's in this cupboard? Can we see what it is? Look! It's the toy! Do youuuu want this toy? Can youuuuu get this toy! This is myyyyy toy! You don't get it!" Get the toy out at times when your dog is excited and energetic anyway, like right before mealtimes or when you get home from work.

If your dog still won't give toys a second look, make it more tempting by adding food. Put moist food or raw meat in an old sock, let the dog smell it, and then see if he doesn't pay attention!

Continue the play teasing/keepaway for a few days. Gradually the dog will become very, very interested in the object, and start perking up whenever you go near that cupboard or shelf or drawer or wherever it's stored. Each time you take it out, make it even more intriguing. Don't thrust it in the dog's face, but shake it near the ground in a path away from him. This makes it seem like prey, which can excite even the most staid dog. Tie it on a little string or rope and drag it behind you while running away. Play "peek-a-boo" with the toy behind a chair or under a blanket.

When he does try to grab the toy, let him have it only for short times at first to keep the interest and excitement high. Experiment with different types of toys – fuzzy, rope, dangly, rubber, leather, plastic, balls. Squeaky is usually highly desirable. Of course, avoid anything that would harm your dog if he swallowed it, such as too-small tennis balls or splintery wood or bones.

Eventually, you can use the toy as a training reward instead of food. Most top agility trainers believe that rewarding with play results in a dog that is more driven, enthusiastic and focused than one trained exclusively with food rewards.

4. Dog can step through a ladder without touching it. (coordination)

It's surprising to realize that most dogs go through life without ever noticing they have hind legs! It's because the hind legs normally just follow whatever the front legs are doing. But in agility, the dog often needs to think about what all **four** legs are doing in order to keep his balance on a narrow surface (the dogwalk and the see-saw) and to efficiently navigate the weave poles.

This is a fun and simple skill to teach, though it may take longer than you'd think for dogs who don't mind crashing through whatever gets in their way (think Labradors, Golden Retrievers and other hunting breeds). Use a short extension ladder (step ladders are too bulky) laid flat on the ground. If you don't have a ladder, you can also use loose branches scattered on the ground. Walk the dog on-leash up to the ladder and let him sniff it thoroughly before asking him to walk through it lengthwise. At first he'll try to go around, or take a few steps and then leap clear. It's important not to force the behavior or punish him for trying to escape. Staying calm and patient, offer praise and treats for each step he takes inside the ladder. You should face forward, not towards the dog, as if you're walking side-by-side on a sidewalk. If possible, lay the ladder alongside a wall so the dog can't step out on the other side.

Once your dog understands the concept, take off the leash and encourage him to walk through the ladder by your side. Keep offering praise and treats for successful steps. Gradually move a little faster and treat less often until he's happy and confident to move quickly through the whole ladder at once.

5. Dog can do a trick in a loose circle of 5 people who are being distracting. (focus, clicker training)

We ask students to teach their dog a new trick using the clicker-training technique for several reasons. First, using the clicker to shape a behavior is a very effective training method. Second, it's handy for your dog to know a trick or two for times when you need to keep his attention on you, such as when you're waiting your turn in class or at an agility trial. Finally, doing a trick while surrounded by other people and their dogs is a good way to demonstrate the dog's ability to focus on you in the midst of other distractions.

If you've never used a clicker before, there are many, many books and videos available to explain the concept. Several are available for loan from the TCOTC library.

It does not matter what trick you choose; the main point is to break the total behavior into its smallest components and use the clicker to mark/reward each step in the right direction. For example, if you wanted to teach your dog to put his front paws on a chair, you would begin by click/treating each time he turned his

head in the direction of the chair. (Staring at the chair yourself can help him get started.) Reinforce the head turn until he offers the behavior repeatedly, then “raise the bar” a tiny bit by waiting until he takes a step toward the chair before clicking. Continue click/treating steps in the right direction, then raise the bar again by withholding the click until he touches the chair with a paw. Continue reinforcing/raising the criteria as the dog offers closer and closer approximations of the desired end behavior until he’s doing just what you want.

The technique will probably remind you of the kids’ game “Hotter, Colder”. Dogs enjoy it just as much! Keep training sessions short (start with 10 treats in your hand and stop when he’s earned all 10) and frequent, maybe 3 or 4 sessions per day. The total time necessary to learn the trick will depend on its complexity. For something like the chair example, 2 weeks is a rough estimate.

6. Handler can send dog to a target 10 – 20 feet away. (distance, clicker training)

A “target” in this situation is nothing more than the lid from a tub of margarine or a can of Pringle’s. Any small, flat, disposable object will suffice. The object is simply to train your dog to move away from you and touch the target with his nose. This basic skill is used in many different agility training situations; at TCOTC we use it to accustom dogs to move *away* from the handler on command, to stop in the “2 on/2 off” position (see #9) and as another opportunity to practice clicker training.

To begin, place the target on the ground a few feet away from the dog. Have your clicker in one hand and treats in the other. To gradually shape the nose-touch, start off by clicking any time the dog turns his head toward the target. But – this is very important – after each click, place the dog’s treat **ON THE TARGET**. The point is to help him associate the reward with the target, rather than coming back to you for it. Keep clicking and rewarding on the target for successively closer behaviors: looking at the target, walking towards the target, lowering his head towards the target. As he catches on (or right at the start if you’re lucky), he’ll sniff the target and touch it with his nose. Bingo! Click and treat. Use several very short training sessions (10 treats each time) per day. Once he’s got the nose touch down, he may begin licking the target or pick it up in his mouth. Don’t reward either of those behaviors and he’ll soon catch on that’s not what you want.

When he’s good at nose-touching, begin using a command to get the behavior. Some examples are “touch” and “target.” When you are using a command, don’t reward any inadvertent nose-touches. It’s hard to resist, but he’ll hook up command=behavior faster if you don’t reward the behavior when you haven’t asked for it.

When he’s clear on the command, start placing the target farther away before giving the command. It means extra steps for you to keep rewarding on the target, but it’s a valuable skill for your dog to grasp that sometimes you want him to go *away* from you (most obedience skills involve coming or staying *near* to you). When he can go a little distance (about 10 feet) and do the nose-touch successfully, bring the target closer in again and begin working on speed and enthusiasm. Restrain the dog lightly with a hand on his chest, get him revved up with your voice and body language, then release and give the command. With practice and increasing confidence, he’ll learn to *race* over and *pounce* on that target!

7. Dog and handler can jog off-leash as a team (relationship, focus, reading body signals)

Running agility is all about jogging together off-leash as a team! The team relationship sometimes escapes people, however, who believe agility is a form of obedience with obstacles thrown in. There is a special magic that happens to agility competitors in which the dog and handler learn to trust one another and communicate without words. Some teams even seem to begin reading each other’s mind!

Learning to jog together off-leash is a way to begin establishing this relationship. All you need is a nice big area – your own backyard may be plenty. To begin with, keep the dog on-leash, because up until now you’ve used leash pressure to transmit most communication in motion. Now you’ll use leash pressure just to get his attention before communicating something with your voice, hands or posture.

The first physical cue to get your dog used to is the shoulder drop. Jog in a nice big circle with the dog on the inside. Hold a treat in your outside hand. Without breaking stride, get the dog’s attention by saying his name or putting light pressure on the leash. When he glances at you, drop the shoulder nearest the dog, turn 180 degrees and jog a few more steps back in the direction you came from. The dog should have read the shoulder drop as a cue to turn towards you, then followed through with his own 180-degree turn so that he is now jogging along beside the hand holding the treat. Give him the treat as his reward for turning with you. (If he did not catch onto the shoulder drop, try it a few times with a treat in each hand. Use the treat nearest the dog as a lure to start the turn after the shoulder drop.) After several repetitions of this game, do the same thing with the dog initially on the outside and the treat in your inside hand. When he’s comfortable reading the shoulder drop, try rewarding with a toy instead of food.

The next move to train is “turn”, in which the dog turns *away* from you. Since you’ll need both hands free, tie your dog’s leash to one of your belt loops. Walk or jog briskly with the dog on-leash at your side. Carry a treat on the side opposite the dog. Say your dog’s name so that he glances up at you, then bring the treat hand swinging around in front of you. Turn your body along with your arm until you’re facing back the way you came. If your dog tracked the treat in your hand, he should have turned away from you and done a 180 so that he is now also headed back the way you came, on your opposite side. Give him the treat, which is now in the hand nearest him.

Along with the shoulder drop and “turn”, make a game of swerving, stopping and changing directions suddenly while jogging with your dog. He’ll love it because it’s like a game of chase. The more you practice, the better your dog will become at keeping his attention focused on you (in case you suddenly dart away unexpectedly) and reading your body language to guess what you’ll do next. Use plenty of treats and play to keep him 100% focused. Finally, begin taking the leash off for short periods and gradually increase the off-leash intervals as you get more confident of holding his attention.

8. Dog can negotiate a triangle of cones placed 10 – 20 feet apart with handler in center. (reading handler’s body signals, working at a distance, beginning of tight “wraps”, “GET OUT”)

When dogs first begin agility, their tendency is to trot near the handler’s side and take obstacles directly in that path. The real art of agility comes into play when the dog learns to watch the handler’s body language – hand signals, hip and shoulder angles, running direction – and translate it into cues to run ahead or move out laterally to take obstacles that are not straight ahead. Training the triangle of cones (the orange rubber cones used in highway construction) is a good way to teach your dog to watch your hands for cues on where to go next. You will build on the dog’s natural herding or hunting instincts to follow the motion of your hand in searching for the next obstacle.

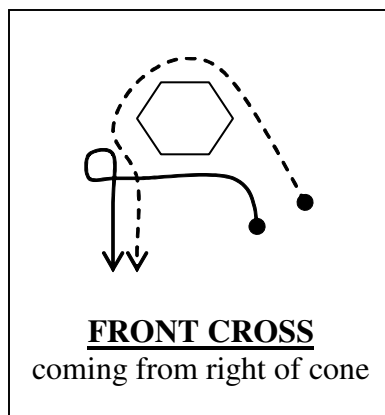
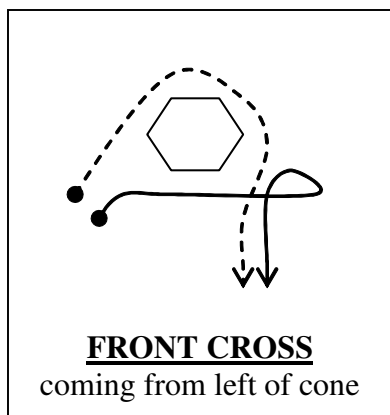
A second benefit of this exercise is getting the dog to see the desired obstacle and then run *away from you* to take it. When you begin to train, you and the dog will be very near to the cones. As he catches on, you will be able to set the cones progressively further away as he becomes comfortable with being “sent”.

Finally, the cone triangle teaches your dog to curl or “wrap” tightly around the cone to take the shortest path back towards you. This is especially handy in agility courses with lengthy jump sequences, where you

save precious seconds with a dog that can jump and turn tightly towards the next jump rather than run wide on a curve.

At first, you'll work with just one cone. Actually, any upright object like a fence post or tree will do. The first maneuver around the cone is called the "front cross", because you will cross the dog's path in front of him. Position yourself with the dog on your left and the cone slightly in front of you on your right. Hold a toy (or treat) in your left hand. Show the dog the toy and lure him forward towards the cone. Have him go out and around the cone (still following the toy) while you step to the right. As he comes back toward you, switch the toy to your right hand and pivot on your right foot so the dog ends up on your right side. (Throughout the whole maneuver you should be able to see your dog; if you turn your back on him you've turned the wrong direction.) Now reward him for running around the cone by tugging with the toy!

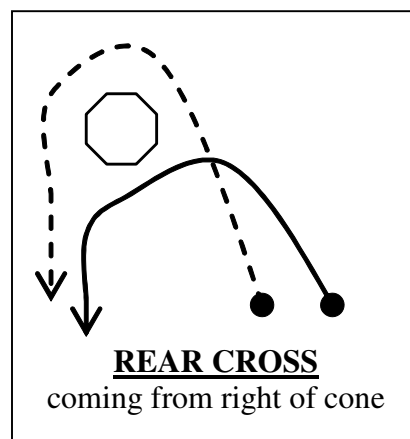
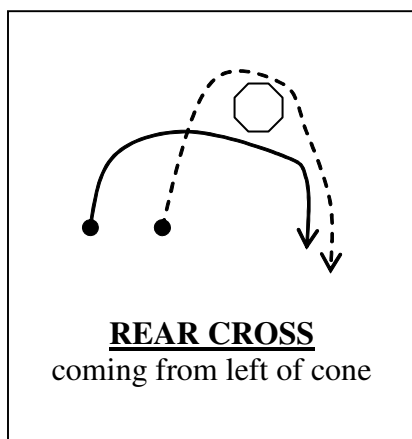
The diagrams below shows the paths you (solid line) and your dog (dashed line) will follow for the front cross in either direction. It helps if you practice this move with the toy by yourself to become familiar with the hand and footwork before trying it with the dog.



As your dog starts to see the connection between your hand motion and going out around the cone, gradually use the toy less in "sending" to the cone. Continue tugging as reward for coming back to you quickly until he knows to drive out, wrap tightly and return. When he'll take the cone automatically, start from slightly further away and work on sending for progressively longer distances.

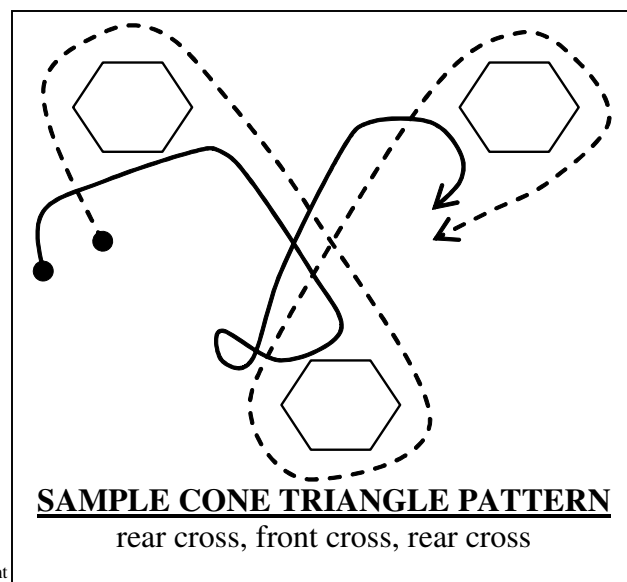
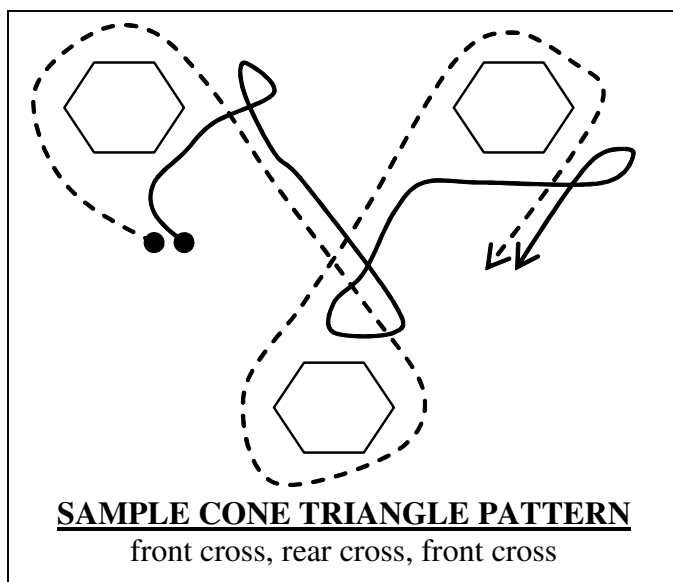
When you're both comfortable with the front cross, you can start training the rear cross. As you'll notice in the diagrams below, it's called a "rear" cross because you cross the dog's path from behind him. The training method is similar, but be sure to practice with an "invisible dog" first so you're familiar with the hand/footwork before trying it with your dog.

In the first diagram (coming from left of cone), start with the dog on your right and the toy in your right hand. Lure him out and around the cone ahead of you – by definition the dog must move ahead of you to allow for the rear cross. As he completes the circuit of the cone, switch the toy to your left hand for the tugging reward. Remember you should be able to see the dog throughout the whole maneuver; your back should never be turned. (Having the dog change sides while your back is turned is called a “blind cross”. Blind crosses are often frowned on and should only be used by experienced handlers who have carefully taught their dog the appropriate cues.)



When you and the dog are comfortable with the rear cross, fade the lure gradually until he's able to read your hand signal to go out and around the cone. Continue with the tugging afterward as reward for circling the cone swiftly. It's important to keep his interest and enthusiasm high so he doesn't begin to circle the cone slowly or lose focus on you during the exercise. Keep building the rear cross skill as you did the front cross, working for greater drive and distance.

When you've both mastered the front and rear crosses, you're ready to tackle the whole triangle exercise. (If you've been practicing with a fence post or tree up until now, you'll have to find more portable obstacles!) Set the cones out in a triangle with about 8 feet between each cone. At first, run along with your dog and practice sending him around the cones with front and rear crosses in a random pattern. When he begins to catch on to the game, try running less and sending him on ahead. It doesn't matter what order you take the cones or what type of cross you use for each turn. The point is that now your dog is watching you for hand signals to move ahead, execute an obstacle tightly and head back to you!



9. Dog can demonstrate “two-on, two-off” (2o/2o) position. (contact performance)

There are 3 “contact” obstacles in agility: the A-frame (2 wide platforms where the dog climbs up one side and runs down the other), the dogwalk (3 narrow planks where the dog runs up, across and down) and the teeter-totter. They’re called *contact obstacles* because when leaving the obstacle the dog must place at least one paw in the *contact zone* - the lower part of the down-ramp painted in a contrasting color (usually yellow). If he “blows the contact”, or doesn’t touch yellow, the dog is disqualified.

Hitting the contact zone is more difficult than it might seem, because as dogs become more confident and enthusiastic they begin to launch from higher up the down-ramp. Many, many teams finish a perfect run and then learn to their disappointment that they “failed” because of contacts.

The most reliable method in use today is training dogs to stop at the bottom of each contact obstacle with their front feet on the ground and their hind feet resting on the obstacle – hence “2 on, 2 off.” The dog learns to hold that position until released to ensure they do touch the contact zone and the judge is clearly able to observe the correct performance.

There is always some controversy surrounding the 2o/2o: handlers of small dogs think they will naturally touch the contact zone because they’re too short to jump over, and handlers of dogs with powerful shoulders worry that stopping fast on a downslant will lead to injuries. However, the 2o/2o remains the most popular technique, and we require it in Foundation level classes because it has held up over time and proven the most reliable approach to solid contact performance.

To train at home, you will need a board approximately 12” wide x 6’ long and strong enough to support your dog’s weight. Raise one end 6 to 10 inches by resting it on any sturdy support. Position your dog alongside the lower end, standing between you and the board. Now lure him with treats or a toy to step up on the board and walk down until he’s standing with his front feet on the ground and rear feet on the board. Reward liberally in this position! As he comes to understand what you want, ask him to STAY in the position while you move away, return to treat, and move away again before releasing.

When he’s familiar with moving into the position, add the target you trained in #6. Place the target on the ground at the end of the board, far enough away so that he can touch the target easily with his nose while standing in the 2o/2o position. When he steps into the position, ask him to touch the target. At first he will probably step off the board to do the nose touch. Without clicking or treating, have him return to 2o/2o and give your target command again. Eventually he will learn to remain in position and just bob his head to touch the target.

When your dog knows how to assume the 2o/2o position and touch the target in that position, start working on enthusiasm. Restrain him gently beside the board or standing a little way up from the bottom, rev him up with your voice (“Where’s that contact!?” “Get ready!”), then release him and reward quickly when he hits the contact. Ask for a few nose-touches to the target (click and treat each successful nose touch in position) while you move around. This will teach him to hold the position until you give the release word. If your dog is enthusiastic about tugging, use tugging in the 2o/2o position as a reward instead of food. When the board isn’t handy, practice the position when going down steps.

Admittedly, teaching the 2o/2o position can be tiresome, but it may be the single most important skill leading to a successful agility career. Just ask the next 10 agility competitors you meet what issue they spend the most time retraining!