

agility GUIDANCE

by Cynthia Buckholt

Agility is a tailor-made sport for our Beagles. Watch a Beagle running through the woods, climbing over things, walking across logs, jumping over obstacles in his path, and pushing through thick brush. If the ground, log or rock moves under their feet, so what! It's all part of the fun. An agility course is simply a domesticated walk in the woods. Trained in a positive manner with lots of rewards (cookies!) and encouragement, balanced with a good sense of humor, agility is the perfect game for our Beagles.

Learning the various obstacles is often fairly easy for our Beagles. All the obstacles, except for weave poles, are similar to actions they perform in everyday life. But, the obstacles are only a small part of an agility course. Getting your Beagle quickly and accurately from obstacle to obstacle is equally important.

Handlers can find it challenging to learn to communicate directions to their dogs in a clear, concise manner without relying on physical manipulation. However, if you show in Breed, you are already using some of the same principals. When you increase your speed as you move around the ring, your Beagle increases his speed in response. Straighten up and slow your pace and your Beagle does the same. On the down and back, your Beagle is reading your body language to change directions and to know when to halt and stack.

If you've done any heel work with your Beagle, you've seen first-hand how he follows your body language during left, right and about turns and halts without any verbal cues. Guiding your dog through an agility course uses this same body language. To signal a left turn from one obstacle to another, turn your body to the left which draws your right shoulder toward the left, thus directing your dog's path to the left.

Before you start introducing your

continued

My first agility lesson

by Debbie Tissot

Surprisingly enough, agility handling requires manual dexterity. Or, at least it requires being ambidextrous! Which, for a person with a history of training for the conformation ring, was an enormous challenge. Changing hands was the hardest part of my very first lesson. And, moving your bait (yes, bait is involved!) from one hand to the other is a key element to teaching your dog to read your body language. Keeping the bait in the leading hand forces your body to lead the dog in the correct direction. Crossing your bait hand over your body totally misdirects the dog, and when you come from the conformation ring,

where the lead is always in the left hand, the bait in the right... Well, hell. I was a mess! Old habits don't just die hard, they live on!

But, Bill and I had a *load* of fun taking a stab at the hardest part of agility with a beagle: keeping the owner of that pesky nose on course as directed, not investigating every interesting scent to be found.

According to my teacher, Cindy Buckholt, obstacles would not ordinarily be a part of the first lesson. Basic guiding is the real key to success. But, because this was a

special occasion and we had the entire course at the National available to us, we did a little jumping to start with. I was carefully schooled in how to direct my dog over the fence. I did it badly, but Bill obligingly hopped over the tiny 4-inch jump. After a couple more sloppy exercises, we jacked the fence up to an "intimidating" eight inches, and Bill began to take an interest. I began to follow instructions more accurately, and in no time at all, we had progressed from calling the dog over the fence, through



In a rare moment of accuracy, I perform my "serpentine pattern" with the bait in the correct (left) hand as I prepare to turn to the left, into my willing little partner, Bill, who had never had a buckle collar on in his life, let alone been turned loose in a half-acre field for a training session. (Rachel Gilliland Photo)



Bill delights me with his utter willingness to trot through the tunnel. The first effort went exactly as hoped with trainer, Cindy Buckholt holding the dog at one end of the shortened tunnel before releasing him to my offering of bait accompanied by happy, chirpy encouragement. He further charmed me by choosing to go through the tunnel on his own several times during the lesson. Cindy reported that most dogs take to the tunnel immediately, so although it turns out that Bill wasn't really doing anything very special, I was tickled pink just the same! (Rachel Gilliland Photo)

standing very near the standard and moving alongside the dog, to simply indicating the fence to be jumped.

We did not attempt weave poles. We did, however, stand *among* the poles and discuss the various approaches to weave pole training. That was plenty for me. I was still bodily confused by the concept of using both my right and left hand to guide my dog *anywhere* let alone all the way around a course of fences, teeter-totters, A-frames, and heaven forbid, weave poles!

AGILITY GUIDANCE

continued from page 22

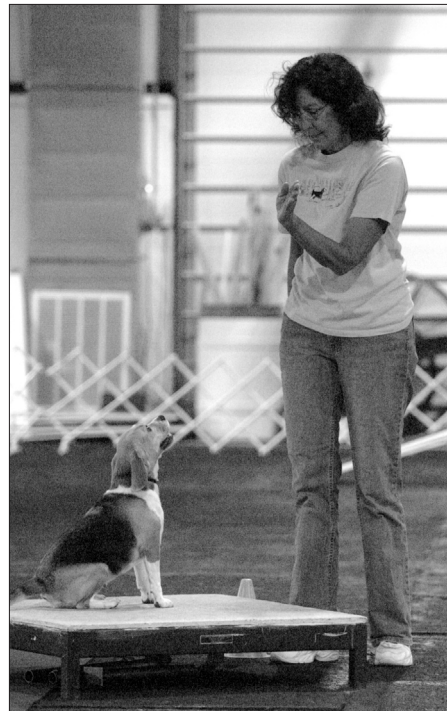
Beagle to the individual obstacles, you both need to begin learning how to work together as a team. I always start students off with a game of Follow the Leader to help them learn just what they need to do to keep their dog focused and moving with them. Most handlers don't appreciate how much effort it can take to stay connected with their dog, and find this exercise enlightening.

The goal of the game is for you and your dog to move all around the training ring in partnership – straight lines, circles, changes of direction, walking, running – without touching your dog or guiding him with his leash. In fact, your leash should remain slack the whole time. You may use your voice, hand clapping, cookies and/or toys but resist the urge to lure with a cookie. From this exercise you will learn that if you truly focus on your Beagle, he will focus on you. It's a rude assumption to think your Beagle should follow along simply because you said so, while you ignore him.

Each instructor will have their own style and method of introducing obstacles. They should, however, explain the final obstacle behavior to you so you know what your ultimate goal is for each obstacle. Each obstacle performance should then be broken into smaller parts for you by your instructor in order to begin training. No obstacle should be introduced at its full size. That would be akin to taking a first-time driver onto the freeway at rush hour for their first lesson. Jump bars should be set low and tunnel lengths scrunched short. Contacts (A-frame, dogwalk, see saw) are introduced as a single plank slightly raised off the ground. As your Beagle becomes comfortable on each obstacle, its height and/or length is increased gradually until it is at its competition size.

Most dogs enjoy jumps and tunnels so these are often the first obstacles taught. The final performance goal for jumps is for your Beagle to clear the hurdle in response to your signal – usually from a position ahead of you or near your side. To break it down, jumps are

introduced with the handler calling their dog over the jump from the landing side. Dogs are masters of body language so be sure to start off using the proper body language in order to get the result you are looking for. Stand facing the direction



your dog will be traveling with your back to the jump, shoulders facing straight forward. Look back at your dog over your shoulder, hand pointing toward the jump, then call him to you. As your dog lifts for the jump, begin running a few strides straight ahead to encourage your Beagle to land and continue running forward. Remember to always reward your Beagle with a cookie (or toy if he prefers) after each successful performance. Make sure your rewards are more than a cookie popped into your dog's mouth. This is a team sport – celebrations should involve both of you. Focus on your dog, tell him how wonderful he is while giving him his cookie. After a couple of successful repetitions of calling your dog over the jump, you should begin moving yourself back towards the take off side of the jump until you are starting alongside your dog, signaling forward to the jump.

Watching a handler who gives clear and timely cues to their Beagle on course will have you swearing that the dog has memorized the course map. It is a flowing, beautiful dance between partners. With this in mind, it is advantageous to

be aware of your body language and what it is conveying to your dog from the very beginning. It is much easier to start off practicing good habits than trying to correct bad ones later. On course, you are the navigator. As such, it's up to you to give your Beagle clear and timely directions about where he is going next.

Consider driving down a major road while your passenger gives directions. Being told a block ahead that you will be turning right at the next corner gives you the opportunity to make sure you are in the correct lane and are slowing down in anticipation of the turn. Contrast that to your passenger screaming at the corner "Turn here!" You may or may not manage the turn. Either way, it wouldn't be a positive experience. As a consequence, you will drive a lot slower and continually asking your navigator where next just in case he shouts out any more last minute directions. Our Beagles are no different. They need timely navigational cues in order to set themselves up to safely and accurately execute our directions. Dogs who are ambushed with late or confusing cues will lose confidence in their partner and either slow down or take matters into their own paws and choose their own course.

As your Beagle's confidence and understanding of each obstacle grows you will start to run short sequences of two or three obstacles. Your Beagle will truly appreciate all the attention you've given to good body language and will gain confidence and trust in your directions. The focus and attention you've given each other will become second nature and your teamwork will continue to improve. That's the beautiful thing about doing agility with your Beagle – the partnership that develops between two team members working as one.

Cindy Buckholt is a longtime agility competitor and is the author of Competing in Agility: Trials and What to Do When You Get There which has been well reviewed and highly touted for its comprehensive presentation of just about every rule, specification and idiosyncrasy of the sport, covering the variations between all the major North American organizations. Contact her for details at between2friends@charter.net.