

Chapter 1 Click! Let's Get Started

If I had the opportunity to live my life as a dog, I'd be a Border Collie. Working and learning are addictive to me. I thrive on gaining understanding and passing that understanding on to others. This book is the result from my passion for learning, my desire to understand how people communicate with their dogs and my wish to share what I've learned about how to clicker train agility.

Agility is a sport that requires both precision and speed from the dog. Clicker training enables a trainer to communicate precisely which behaviors are wanted and how they are to be performed. Agility and clicker training is a match made in heaven! When I began training my dogs to do agility, my Jack Russell Terrier Moose enjoyed the sport, but mostly he loved playing to the crowd. Getting a reaction from a group of people was highly reinforcing (rewarding and fun) to Moose. At one trial, Moose was running beautifully, completely clean, and I was already half celebrating our imminent qualifying run. (Qualifying means a passing score that earns the dog one "leg" toward a title that requires three passing scores.) A few obstacles before the finish, right in front of a small group of people, Moose kicked up his rear leg as if slipping on a banana peel and dramatically threw himself on his back, tongue dangling out of his mouth. The crowd burst into laughter and Moose's "exhausted dog act" had just been trained. In behavior terms, this is called one-trial learning. It took only one instance for Moose to learn this "act" was going to get him tons of attention. The next thing I knew, simple walks around the neighborhood had turned into one-dog-comedy-shows.

This was the beginning of my journey into the science of how animals, including humans, learn. Traditional training methods did not work on my Jack Russells, so I concluded there had to be a better way. There was. I read Karen

Pryor's classic, *Don't Shoot the Dog!* This was the beginning of my love for clicker training.

How to Use This Book

With each flip of the page, you will find fun training ideas, which I hope will become a useful and exciting part of your dog's agility journey.

This is a clicker training book. If you are not familiar with the basics of clicker training, run, don't walk, to get a copy of Karen Pryor's *Don't Shoot the Dog!* Other useful books on clicker training for beginners include: Kay Laurence's *Foundation, Novice* and *Intermediate* clicker training books.

Terminology

As you read this book, you will periodically see a scientific term. Don't panic; breathe deeply, all scientific terms are defined in the glossary at the end of this book. If you are new to agility, relax, common agility terms are also defined in the glossary. The first time a scientific or agility term appears, it will be defined in the text. Think of scientific terms as a form of secret code. While the code may be unfamiliar, your reinforcement will come from learning and understanding the code. Understanding scientific terms will empower you to think critically and logically. Empowering you to analyze training suggestions.

Throughout the book when the term reinforcement is used, positive reinforcement is meant. Reinforcement is anything that increases behavior. Positive reinforcement refers to adding something to the dog's environment that increases the frequency of the behavior the dog was just engaging in. Food, attention and toys are all positive reinforcers.

Agility Photos

We tried to show a variety of breeds. Agility is for all dogs. However, some pictures took many attempts so the dogs

that were most consistently available were the most photographed.

My own dogs are mentioned and pictured throughout, so I will introduce them here.



Photo by Angelica Steinker

Moose, my first agility dog, was a male neutered Jack Russell Terrier. Moose had numerous physical problems, such as microcellular shunting of the liver, causing him to have seizures, because of the toxins building up in his body. He had luxating patellas and as he matured he developed canine cognitive dysfunction. Despite all of these health problems and his addiction to beer, he was my best teacher. (Of course I am joking about the beer. Alcohol is dangerous to dogs.)

Junior, also a Jack Russell, was haunted by fears his entire life. Every change in environment frightened or stressed him. He had very poor bounce back; unable to recover from events that scared him.

Photo by Tien Tran



One time a screen door accidentally closed on him and he spent the rest of his life afraid of screen doors. His fears were resistant to counter conditioning and desensitization, the behavior modification techniques used to help dogs adjust. Doing agility with him was a struggle. He was plagued by teeter fears and never consistently performed.

We joked that Junior was always concerned about the men in black trench coats and the helicopters following him. He achieved his AX title in AKC before I retired him. I am grateful for everything I learned from him. Despite the struggles, I miss him.



Photo by Angelica Steinker

Nicki is my first Border Collie and first girl. What an adjustment it was, and again she has been a fabulous teacher. Today Nicki is 6 years and the biggest joy to work with. Nicki is extremely soft and has taught me the best ways to encourage learning for sensitive dogs. She had to retire from agility because of injuries she received in a

roll over car accident. I had her in a soft crate and my luggage fell on her. Her left hind calf muscle was completely torn off the back of her knee. There is currently no surgery to repair this type of damage in dogs. Make sure your dogs ride in hard crates, and try to avoid being rear ended by drunk drivers while on a highway in an SUV, apparently this causes you to become a motorized projectile and roll three times. Nicki competes in Rally Obedience, and is planning to enter competition obedience.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

Stevie is another Border Collie, male and a total blast. Stevie is four years old and competes in AKC, NADAC and USDAA. Of all my dogs Stevie has been the easiest to train and I don't think it is was just my skills that were improving. Stevie does everything quickly, saving months of training. In a sport where speed is desirable he gave me from the start what you have to train other dogs to do. He also competes in Rally.



Turbo our Miniature Pinscher is also four years old and another boy. For two weeks my husband and I fought about keeping this foster dog. Turbo

Photo by Suzanne Rider

growls and bites if the wind blows or you do anything that is not precisely to his liking. Turbo is agility trained but blind in one eye interfering with his depth perception. He sporadically runs in agility but has not developed the same passion for the sport that my other dogs have. Breed differences do matter!



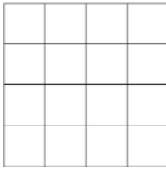
Zoomie is another Border Collie, another male, do I sense a pattern? Zoomie is an absolute joy. He is my most affectionate dog, always willing to work or cuddle. Zoomie will begin competing in agility some time after he turns two.

Photo by Angelica Steinker

He is also preparing for Rally Obedience and Musical Freestyle competition and competes in Disc Dog.

Agility Diagrams

Use the key below to familiarize yourself with what each of the symbols means. In general, the obstacle numbers are placed on the side of the obstacle that the dog will be approaching from.



One square in the diagram at left represents 10-feet by 10-feet.



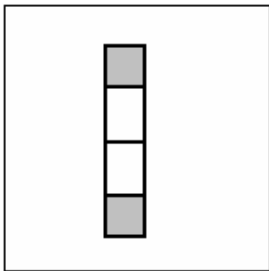
In the diagrams, the handler's path is represented by a dashed line and the dog's path is represented by a solid line.



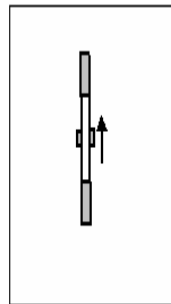
A dog, okay probably a border collie, but I didn't write the software program.



A person representing the handler, with his right arm forward signaling the dog's path.



A-frame - the tallest contact obstacle.



Teeter - arrow indicates direction the dog travels. It is the only obstacle that moves and one of three contact obstacles.

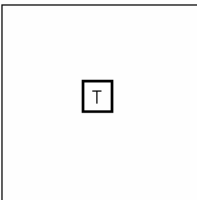
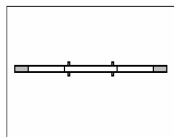
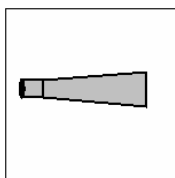


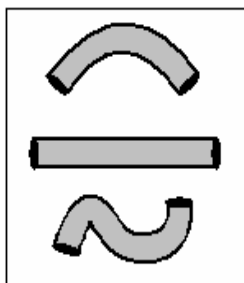
Table - dogs perform a sit or down and hold position for 5 seconds.



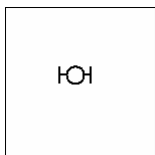
Dog walk - the longest of all the contact obstacles.



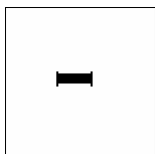
Chute – This obstacle is a solid barrel with a fabric tube attached.



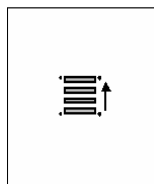
Tunnel - This diagram depicts three tunnels to show that they can be of a variety of shapes - curved, straight or even S shaped.



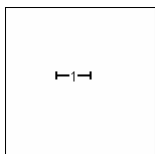
Tire – The tire is a suspended hoop that the dog is required to jump through.



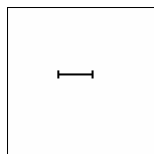
Panel jump – This jump is made of solid panels that obstruct the dog's vision.



Broad jump - The arrow indicates the direction the dog will take when going over this horizontal jump.



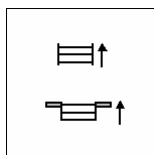
One bar jump – This obstacle only has one bar making it a little



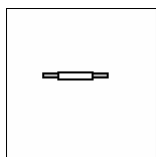
Single bar jump – This jump has two bars. One is set at

more challenging for the dog to see.

the dog's jump height and one is at ground level attaching the two uprights, making it easier to see.



Two triple bar jumps – The dog will need to jump high and long. The arrow indicates the direction the dog will travel. The top triple is wingless and bottom triple is winged.



Double jump – The double jump has two bars requiring the dog jump both high and long. The double in this diagram also has wings, which are attachments of wood or PVC connected to the uprights, making the obstacle more visible to the dog.

Why Click?

Clicker training offers the agility enthusiast a fun and effective method of teaching behaviors. Dogs that enjoy their training sessions can learn more and perform better. Oh no, the horror, you and your dog will have fun!

How does clicker training work? If the dog does what you want, you click at the moment the behavior occurs and immediately reinforce the dog with a treat or something else such as a toy or game of tug. Examples of wanted behaviors are sitting, lying-down, being quiet or performing an agility behavior. If the dog doesn't do what you want, you don't click and don't reinforce. The click functions as a clear signal to your dog of the behavior that you want. A critical part of the learning process for the dog is that one behavior gets the dog a click and reinforcement and other behaviors don't. This is why force and correction have no place in clicker training. Clicker training is "safe" -- it's playing a game with your dog.

When clicker training, there are three ways for you to get behaviors: shaping, prompting or capturing.

Shaping refers to gradually building the behavior one tiny piece at a time, like a sculptor creating a work of art.

Prompting means you use a piece of food, a target or other prop to help the dog perform the behavior that you want.

Capturing is the easiest of the three methods, since all it requires is clicking and reinforcing the dog for a behavior that she naturally offers. It is easy to capture a sit or a

down since they are behaviors that all dogs naturally perform.

All three methods of encouraging behaviors will be explained in detail throughout this book enabling you to successfully communicate with your dog.

Trainers can get into verbal fisticuffs over which method is the best. The bottom line is it depends on the behavior you are trying to teach, the dog and the creativity and skill of the trainer.

Clicker trainers don't view intimidation, or the use of physical punishment as a useful method for altering a dog's behavior. This means that clicker trainers don't rely on coercive tools, such as choke chains, prong collars, shake cans, or spray bottles. Clicker training is based on training a dog to *volunteer* behaviors. The dog is not pushed, pulled or otherwise coerced into performing the wanted behavior. Clicker training is not compatible with force. Another reason to avoid punishment is that our dogs are emotionally connected to us in part by our reinforcement history with them. Reinforcement history is roughly comparable to your bond with your dog. Every time you do something your dog likes, that 'something' is associated with you, via classical conditioning. Every belly rub, every game, every piece of food is a deposit into the bonding bank account. When using training methods that are coercive, we damage that reinforcement history. A damaged reinforcement history can dampen your dog's motivation, desire to play with you or may even cause aggression or other behavior problems. Part of what prevents dogs from biting people is reinforcement history — how much a dog likes you based on how reinforcing you have been.

Click and Play

Most trainers use clickers in combination with food. Click and then treat. You can also click and play. Any game

that your dog finds fun can be used as reinforcement. Ask the best agility trainers in the world if they play with their dogs and you will hear a list of their favorite games. It seems there is a strong connection between play and success in agility. At its core, agility is a game and to be successful you have to *play* it.

The Proofing Game

Proofing is a dog trainer term for generalization training. Generalization has happened when a cued behavior becomes more probable in the presence of one stimulus or situation as a result of having been reinforced in the presence of another stimulus or situation (Pamela Reid, PhD). This means proofing helps your dog learn to perform cues in different situations and contexts. An agility trial is a very different context compared to an agility group class or your back yard, so proofing all of your agility behaviors is of critical importance.

Think of proofing as a way of asking your dog questions. Can you perform a sit and hold that sit position while I drop food on the floor next to you? If the dog says “no”, you made the question too hard. Pick up the food and try again, but make it much easier by moving the food further away. Proofing is a game and you always try to play it at a level that sets the dog up for success. If the dog answers your proofing question with “yes, I can do that,” you click and reinforce the dog. The more challenging the question you ask the dog, the more “money” you pay your dog for getting it right. Money to a dog is anything that the dog finds reinforcing.

Proofing is at least 50% of the training. Once you have a behavior on cue, it is only half trained until you have proofed. Only when you have proofed and proofed and proofed some more, can you actually say that the behavior is learned.

Stress

Stress is at odds with learning and certainly it is at odds with fun. A stressed animal is going to have memory and perception problems. This is why using what is scientifically called positive punishment (yelling, hitting, spraying or throwing things at the dog) and negative reinforcement (yanking on a dog's leash until the dog does what you want) usually slows or even stops learning. Skilled clicker training makes use of a high rate of reinforcement with lots of cookies/play in a short period of time. If you are training a brand new behavior and you are not clicking and reinforcing every few seconds, your rate of reinforcement is probably too low.

Clicker training, when done properly, minimizes stress. "Yes, but...," I hear you say you have seen dogs being clicker trained that were barking and clearly frustrated. Some mild frustration is part of learning, learning is like solving a puzzle and frustration is a part of that process. However, a dog barking out of frustration while you are training is usually a sign that something is wrong. The art of training is reading the dog and knowing how to minimize learning frustration. The Kay Laurence videos that accompany her clicker training books, demonstrate lovely clicker training sessions that show dogs learning happily. Wouldn't it be cool if all dogs had fun while learning?

Stages of Learning

Learning occurs in two stages. 1. Acquisition – the dog is learning a new behavior. 2. Maintenance – the behavior has been learned, been put on cue and you are playing proofing games.

The challenge is that you don't always know when the dog is in acquisition or maintenance. If you have trained your dog to turn left and right on verbal cues and you don't practice the left and rights for three months, your dog may not remember the cues and revert to acquisition. Seems a little frustrating, but training your dog to do agility is not like

riding a bike. The dog will eventually forget the behaviors if you don't practice and reinforce. Behaviors that are self-reinforcing will be more resistant to falling back into acquisition. Behaviors that are less self-reinforcing will require periodic reinforcement in order to be maintained. Murphy's Law says that usually the self-reinforcing behaviors are those we don't want.

Overshadowing

Imagine this. The phone rings while your friend is dictating a phone number to you. You answer the phone and now have no idea what phone number your friend was giving you. The ringing phone "overshadowed" the hearing of the phone number. When two stimuli happen at the same time, one will dominate the other even though both would be effective if presented one at a time. A stimulus is anything a dog can perceive (Pamela Reid). Dogs don't multi-task well, and neither do most humans.

While your dog is learning, she needs quiet to focus and to become aware of your cues. If you are constantly talking to your dog while attempting to teach a new behavior, your talking may overshadow your cues or what you are trying to teach her. To prevent overshadowing quietly observe your dog while she is learning, then after clicking and while reinforcing, cheer and chatter all you want.

Blah, Blah, Blah

"My dog is blowing me off." The trainer calls and calls "come, come, come, Fido, come now," and the dog standing by a tree conducts a precise investigation of a crumpled leaf. The trainer's calls reach a feverish pitch yet the dog blissfully ignorant of her trainer's wishes, continues her leaf information gathering. To this dog the cue, "come" means nothing. Come doesn't predict anything important and the dog can't discriminate between the repeated words and cues. "Come" becomes white noise. The dog has been trained to ignore the cue. Training is what the dog does, not what we want the dog to do. Give all cues

— verbal or body — only *once* and only when you are certain the dog will respond.

Cues are precious information. Avoid using cue words or physical cues as part of your praise. Praising your dog with “good sit,” is weakening the link between cue and behavior. A cue is a signal for your dog to take action; if a dog is already sitting, she can't sit again.

Does a Hammer Work?

Some trainers will comment that they tried the clicker but it did not “work.” It is possible that these trainers inadvertently taught the dog that a click means nothing, an example of learned irrelevance. A clicker is like a hammer: it can work, but how well it works depends on who is using it. If the noise of the clicker is not consistently paired with a reinforcer, or if the reinforcement is not something the dog really wants, then the click loses its meaning or never gains meaning in the first place.

There is a lag time while the dog learns that the click marks the behavior. They learn the click = reinforcement link quickly, but working out that they can *make* the click happen may take longer. The clicker may seem not to be working, because the dog has not yet understood that she can control the click. Repeat what I click and I will click again. The clicker still works, but the training may need to be modified.

Fluent Responses

The process of training fast and accurate responses to cues is called fluency training. Just like a person can be “fluent” in a language, you want fluency in your dog's response to cues. If a dog reliably and promptly responds to a cue, then that behavior is fluent. Successful agility requires fast and accurate responses to cues. To see some great fluent agility training, watch world-class agility competitor Greg Derrett's “Foundation Training” video.

Somebody please clone this man, so that my home state of Florida can have its own Greg Derrett.

First Fluent Then Fast

Karen Pryor says, "fluency is precision teaching so that cues are consistently well-executed, quickly and easily performed in various environments without hesitation." Fluency and speed training however are not the same thing, but you can't get speed if you don't have fluency. It is possible for a dog to fluently respond to a weave cue, but then to weave very slowly. A quick response to the cue does not equal a quick execution of the entire behavior. First, the dog must be able to fluently respond to a cue, and then you can begin to only click and reinforce the dog for performing the actual behavior quickly. This is why it is important to change a cue when retraining a behavior. In order to do the best agility your dog is capable of performing, you want her to respond to your cue and perform that behavior quickly. Only then add your verbal or physical cue.

Fluent = dog responds quickly to cue. The actual behavior may be performed slowly.

Speed = dog performs the behavior quickly.

You achieve fluency by clicking and reinforcing your dog for fast responses to cues (starting to do the cued behavior is clicked and reinforced).

You train speed after you have a fluent response to the cue, by reinforcing only fast behaviors. Some dogs naturally do everything fast. If you have a dog like this, count your blessings, you just saved months of training.

Energy

Be sure to bring energy to the training session when working on fluency. If you are behaving casually and moving slowly, so will your dog. Over time, dogs usually match our body language. A super fast dog with a very

slow moving trainer may eventually match that trainer and slow down or the trainer may have no ankles left from the dog's frustration biting. If you want fast, crisp responses, then your training and attitude need to be fast and crisp. Get on the balls of your feet and let's see some peppy movement. Otherwise, don't expect it from your dog.

There are some exceptions. Some shy dogs may become stressed if you bring a great deal of energy to your training. Part of the art of training is reading the dog and evaluating what that dog needs. If your dog is shy or overly reactive, bringing a lot of energy to your training should be done gradually so the dog can adjust to it. Don't just do something because you read about it — listen to your dog.

Relax

If you are training a dog naturally wired to do everything fast, you may want to stay relaxed and calm during training. You won't have any difficulty getting fast behaviors, but it may be a challenge to get the dog to focus enough to pay attention to your cues. The trainer staying calm and relaxed will help a dog like this. Also teaching a dog like this to relax by very lightly and slowly massaging her will be helpful. You can put the relaxing on cue by saying "relax" before you begin a gentle and slow massage. The word "relax" predicts the massage prompting a relaxed state.

Assuming your dog is neither extremely excitable nor shy, you will be setting her up for success by playing with her and getting her excited before asking her to do a behavior quickly. Play tug with your dog, pretend to grab her feet to get her going. Then with an excited voice, suddenly cue her to down. If she does so quickly and enthusiastically, click and release the dog from the down and start playing again. You can have your cake and eat it too by getting a fluent response and a fast execution of the behavior. If the dog does not respond to a cue, just wait a few seconds

and try again. Fluency training is for cues in acquisition. Speed training is for cues in maintenance.

You get speed by clicking and reinforcing the dog for fast behaviors and not clicking and reinforcing slower ones. The cool thing is that if you teach your dog to perform all her cues quickly, reinforcing only speedy behaviors, then speed will begin to permeate all of your dog's training. Speed is contagious -- isn't it wonderful? Soon you won't be able to get your dog to do anything slowly, but don't send me email complaining about it.

When working on fluency or speed, less is more. The fewer repetitions you do, the more success you will have. If you ask your dog for a fast down and she slams down quicker than you have ever seen, click, release and reinforce her with tug and make a big fuss over her. Have a party and then don't ask her to do it again! If you do, she may think that you did not want "fast" after all, and perform a slow down. I am still missing some hair, from pulling it out, after I made that mistake. Nicki and I would be playing table games and I would get an amazing fast down. I would click and reinforce and then the obsessive part of me would start whispering, "get her to do it 50 more times." So I would ask her to perform the down again and the moment the cue left my mouth, I knew it was a horrid mistake. In Nicki's eyes, I saw the Border Collie brain wheels turning and sure enough, I got a slow down. ARG! I would want to slap myself, why didn't I just leave it alone? So if you want your 50 fast downs on the table, reason with yourself that you can't have them all at once. Play short intense games and move on to the next behavior. You can always come back to the table. Know your dog; if she is the thinking type, like Nicki, don't use a lot of repetition. Even if she is not the thinking type, repetition is boring. Mix your training up to keep it more fun and interesting.

Fluency Assessment

Take the fluency assessment to see how your dog is doing in terms of fast and reliable sit and down cue responses.

1. Can your dog sit immediately on the first cue while another dog walks around her?
2. Can your dog down immediately on the first cue while another dog and handler run around her?
3. Can your dog sit while squirrels play in a tree near by?
4. Can your dog down if you just released her from playing tug?
5. Can your dog down while recalling toward you?
6. Can your dog down while you do jumping jacks?

Scoring

6 “yes” responses – your dog has passed the sit and down fluency test with flying colors.

4 – 5 “yes” responses – your dog is doing well; keep working on it until you score a 6!

3 – 0 “yes” responses – keep working on what your dog can do and build on success from there!

Fluency and Patterning

One way to attain fluency and speed is to use patterning. Asking the dog to repeat the same behavior repeatedly can help some dogs gain confidence and speed in the behavior and in their response to cues. Although physical wear and tear can occur. Doing many repetitions, when it comes to a physically demanding sport such as agility, is less than ideal. In addition, patterning is boring, causing loss of attitude and motivation in some dogs. Dogs that are still building drive for agility, soft dogs like Nicki, who think more than they need to, probably will not reach their best potential with patterning. While pattern training works for some dogs, clicking and reinforcing only excellent responses works for *all* dogs.

If you want your dog to notice your cues and respond immediately, be aware of your every word and body cue in the presence of your dog. Every interaction with your dog is training. If you are aware, you train effectively.

Clean Behavior Cues Game

After your dog responds fluently to all of her cues, the next step is to stack the cues one after another and still get that same fluent response. The process of doing this is the game of clean behavior cues.

When you first begin stacking cues start with the cues your dog knows the best. Kay Laurence labels these cues "A." Cues that your dog is performing reliably, but are newer are labeled "B" and "C." Laurence then recommends a simple formula for chaining cues together: ABACAB.

A – very familiar cue (sit)

B – newer cue (down)

A – very familiar cue (sit)

C – another new cue (stand)

A – very familiar cue (sit)

B – newer cue (down)

By following this simple formula you are creating a list of stacked cues that ping pongs the dog between the easy very familiar cue and the newer, less generalized cues. This sets the dog up for success. Once you have practiced the ABACAB game for a while, you can begin playing the clean behavior cues game.

A list of behavior cues is clean when every cue you give is responded to fluently and the cues are only given once. All the cues you give the dog and all the responses flow because the dog cleanly goes from one behavior to another. This flow may even be reinforcing to some dogs. This means that the activity of performing the cues fluently one after the other is inherently fun. Agility is a chain of alternating cues and behaviors. If you strive to train to

keep your chain of cues clean and free of repetition or hesitations, you are creating flow. Flow is fun and reinforcing. The activity of doing agility with you is reinforcing -- every trainer's dream come true.

Rather than clean behavior cues, it is common to hear cues like this: Spike, Spike, Spike, Spike, sit, sit, SIT, stay, STAY, STAAAAAY, okay, okay!, Spike, jump, no! jump, jump, Spike, come, come, COME!, COMMMMMME! Spike, tunnel, tunnel, tunnel. While the dog is performing a behavior chain, this handler is repeating cues and adding unnecessary words.

A behavior chain is the method used to teach a complex sequence of responses. If you are stacking cues, then you are creating a behavior chain. Alternatively, if you give one cue that triggers your dog to respond with a series of behaviors, that is also a behavior chain. If the stacked cues you are giving are repeated like in the example with Spike above, flow can't be achieved.

A list of clean cues would be: "sit," "okay," "jump," "jump," "come." All unnecessary words have been removed. Now this team can flow around the agility course! A list of clean behavior cues is much easier on both the dog and the handler. The dog running agility with clean behavior cues will be faster than the dog that has to go on a treasure hunt to find the next cue.

In order to successfully run a Master's level agility course, your dog will need to perform a minimum of 25 stacked cues fluently. In order to over-prepare be able to perform more than you anticipate in the competition ring, your dog may need to play the game of clean behavior cues with up to 50 cues. These cues include verbal and body cues.



Photo by Tien Tran

Beth Diehl's Jack Russell Terrier, Hustle is given clear verbal cues so she consistently runs speedy agility courses.

A Good Behavior Chain Gone Bad

Agility is a series of behaviors cued by the handler. If your dog gets up from her sit at the start line and begins running the course, you have trained a behavior chain that includes not holding the sit until released. Allowing inconsistencies in behavior chains is guaranteed to undermine your training. One step forward, two steps back. Don't let a good behavior chain go bad, if your dog gets up at the start, reposition her and try again.

Coming up next! Chapter 2 presents and discusses methods of clicker training that will help guide you and your dog to agility success.