

Editorializing...

For Our Dogs' Sake: Concerns about Weave Pole Spacing

By Ann Croft, photos by Susan Perry
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A few years ago well-known international agility trainer, Guy Blanke, posted photos and videos comparing his Belgian Sheepdog weaving 20"- and 24"-spaced poles. He observed how the dog's spine was bending in three places—neck, mid back, and lower back—to negotiate the 20" spacing. There was far less contortion of the spine at 24" spacing and the dog moved more freely through the weaves. I am thankful to Guy for bringing this to my attention, since 20" to 21" weave pole spacing is very much the norm in the U.S. Over the years I have become aware of many otherwise healthy athletic agility dogs in their prime with shoulder tendon, knee, or back injuries (especially mid and lower back), some chronic, where no trauma had been observed. Could it be these strains are due to repetitive stress and could tight weaving be the major contributing factor for these injuries?

Weaving is the least natural thing we do with our dogs in agility; running up and down hills and embankments, even steep ones, or jumping over logs and other obstacles comes naturally to them. But there is no parallel to weaving in nature; in fact, there's nothing else we do with them that bends their spine in three places. While it's difficult to prove scientifically that tight spacing presents a health risk for our larger dogs, it is rational to consider it may be a potential danger. In preferring to err on the side of protecting our dogs from harm, we should consider standardizing weave pole spacing to 24" in the U.S.

First, let's look at dogs weaving:



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As you look at the images of these big dogs weaving, note how several of them really struggle to maneuver through the small spaces. Note how the dogs' bodies have to bend around the poles at the hip, mid back, shoulder, and neck. Note how often multiple poles are bent, putting pressure on the dog's spine. Look at the pictures of the second Border Collie and the Belgian Tervuren and consider the unnatural pressures

on the shoulder assemblies of these athletic, driven weavers. Observing how big dogs try so hard to maintain speed through the poles is also interesting. If they cannot physically bend or use their fronts like some of the dogs shown, many dogs (like the Boxer pictured) tend to go somewhat vertical to negotiate these tight spaces.



Compare the previous photos to images of smaller dogs weaving:



The small dogs often have all four feet on one side of the weave poles; and even when changing sides, their spines are straight, and they are not forced to bend poles to negotiate them. Typically the turn is accomplished by a far more natural lead change than what the large dogs must do.

You can view Guy Blanke's comparison videos of his Belgian Sheepdog weaving 20"- and 24"-spaced poles at <http://smoothmovesagility.com/weaves/PerformanceAnalysis.html> and <http://smoothmovesagility.com/weavespacing/PerformanceAnalysis.html>. In those comparisons, we see the dog can power through the wider spaced poles with far less spinal torque. Note that although the 24"-spaced poles are about 1.25 yards longer, the dog completes the

poles much faster because he does not have to negotiate the poles with such sharp turns and can open up his stride, making his performance more similar to that of smaller dogs.

Well-known agility competitor, trainer, and judge Elizabeth Evans also conducted an informal study comparing dogs of different sizes weaving in 20"- and 24"-spaced poles. You can view the video comparisons at www.youtube.com/watch?v=drAcPoKCNyk and www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaJTVpt_L8Y. Dogs of all sizes appeared to gain rhythm and to speed up in the 24" weaves, and big dogs were noticeably more comfortable. Elizabeth said, "In my informal video comparison of 20" versus 24" weave spacing, many dogs were faster and appeared more comfortable on wider spacing. In particular, some very

large dogs develop a better style through the poles. I suspect that since they don't have to bend so extremely, they can use more power to drive forward while weaving, resulting in improved footwork." Elizabeth also made a sound-only comparison of a fast dog weaving. For a dog weaving the 20" spacing, you can hear a loud clattering as his body hits the poles; at 24" spacing there were no sounds of the dog's body hitting the poles.

I solicited opinions on weave pole spacing and the possible effects on our big dogs from several canine health professionals who help us with our dogs. All expressed concerns for the dogs' shoulders based on their hands-on work with agility dogs. Some expressed concerns for knee injuries because some dogs have been injured hitting the poles with their knees, and some expressed concerns for the spine. All were 100% for wider spacing to help avoid these injuries.

Canine sports massage therapist Maria Duthie said:

Weave poles put an increased amount of pressure on the dog's mid-back area. I have found that dogs in heavy weave pole training, following a weave pole challenge, or after completing a difficult entry have muscle strain and tenderness in the thoracic lumbar junction. The weakening of this area compromises the rear legs after a period of time and can contribute to stress injuries such as to the iliopsoas muscle. Twenty-four-inch spacing would also put far less stress and strain on the dog's shoulders.

Debbie Gross Saunders, DPT, MPT, OCS, CCRP commented,

I have seen a lot of shoulder injuries in long-strided dogs and large dogs from weaving closely spaced poles. The shortened distance between poles in relation to the length of the dogs' reach causes them to stress the inside of the shoulders more, leading to increased stress and tension on the inner shoulder muscles. I see way more shoulder problems in large dogs and long-strided dogs (examples: 20" Border Collies, German Shepherds, Standard Poodles). I think the smaller space between poles is a disadvantage. Larger, long-strided dogs have to place their shoulders in a shortened position to power through. With regard to the hind limbs, I think it is the same thing. I am all for the increase in distance between poles and think it would reduce the number of injuries we see.

Wendy Wallace, DVM, certified canine acupuncturist and chiropractor, offered these observations:

I have very strong feelings on the subject of spacing in the weave poles. If agility is to be a sport for all dogs and not just athletic breeds, I believe we need to ensure that all breeds may successfully and safely perform the equipment. If you watch a giant or long-bodied breed of dog perform the weave poles you may see as many as four poles being experienced by the spine at the same time. This puts a very unnatural force on the spine. It may be painful for any dog with arthritis or restriction in spine mobility. I believe it is unnecessary to have the close spacing to ensure the dog is competent on the equipment. I have observed dog after dog fault the weaves when the spacing is at the minimum distance. Many of these are dogs that otherwise do the obstacle well. I do not believe there is a reason to ever ask a dog to wrap more tightly. On the other hand, I find



that when a trial has the 24" spacing, many dogs that are usually slow in the poles actually speed up when they discover the larger spacing (my 11 1/2" Sheltie Sera is a prime example). I believe there is no reason to make this obstacle more structurally challenging than it already is. Expertise at entries and exits still exist and the larger spacing is kinder on the body of any dog. Take a look at pictures of St. Bernards or Wolfhounds doing poles at either spacing. You will see a huge difference in the spinal deviation during the obstacle's performance.

Jean Lavalley, DVM, commented:

I agree there are back problems. I also suspect some front-end problems happen with the 'entry' effort and 'holding' the poles that you see with the tighter spacing. I feel we should change [the spacing] for the health of the bigger dogs. I hate seeing the way they tie themselves in knots to accomplish narrow spacing and love seeing how freely they move in the wider poles.

Debbie Brooks, DVM, veterinary orthopedic surgeon, said:

Being involved in a variety of dog sports personally has helped me to cultivate an interest in sports medicine injuries of athletic dogs. I am a big proponent of moving to weave poles spaced 24" apart. Over the past five years, I have seen an increasing number of supraspinatus tendon injuries, almost exclusively in the bigger agility dogs. At this time, 95% of the supraspinatus tendon injuries I see are in agility dogs; the others are traumatic in working dogs that do not do agility. And some of the dogs with chronic mineralized supraspinatus tendon tears have secondary biceps tenosynovitis [inflammation of the fluid-filled sheath surrounding the tendon] since the biceps tendon is adjacent the supraspinatus tendon. These tendons are part of what is called the rotator cuff in people; and while dogs do not ordinarily rotate the shoulder like people do, it is my opinion that the weave poles are huge contributor to these injuries since they [weave poles] do create more rotation of the shoulder joint than the other agility obstacles do. In most dogs the lameness is due to chronic wear and tear on the tendon and is insidious in onset—one of my own dogs required surgery for this type of injury as well. It is my opinion that moving the poles farther apart would decrease the risk of this injury, particularly for the larger and high-drive dogs.

What objections might the U.S. agility organizations have to standardizing the weave pole spacing to 24"? One objection might be that our dogs would be at a competitive disadvantage outside the U.S., but this would not be the case. FCI rules require the weave poles to be spaced 24" apart. Agility is conducted under FCI sanctioning throughout the world in over 30 countries across five continents, including all of Europe, the former Soviet Union, Asia, and South America. Weave poles are required to be spaced 24" apart in Australia under ANKC rules. The Kennel Club in the U.K. allows 18"-24" spacing; however, it seems 24" spacing is the norm.

Another potential objection might be that some could think our small dogs would be at a disadvantage or that dogs accustomed to 20" spacing might not adapt; again, this does not appear to be the case. As noted previously in Elizabeth Evans's comparison and also by Wendy Wallace, many small dogs also appear to open up and enjoy the wider spacing as well. Elizabeth Evans has poles spaced at 20", 22", and 24" set up for training regularly at her facility in Texas, and hasn't noticed dogs having problems switching back and forth when the switch is done regularly in training.

The use of 24"-spaced poles in AKC trials where they are optional has become common in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. Jo Ann Mather, long-time competitor and judge from Washington state, notes that her 16" Sheltie had no problem adjusting to 24" spacing, while her 12" dogs did take more time to establish a rhythm. Jo Ann's dogs train regularly on 20" spacing and compete often in AKC at both 20" and 24"- spacing and USDAA at 20", and they adjust readily. Also a long-time competitor and judge from Washington state, Barb Davis has not had a problem with her own small- and medium-sized Shelties adjusting to 24" spacing for FCI competition overseas or in AKC competitions at home. Barb does feel that some dogs have trouble switching space requirements from weekend to weekend (large dogs to the smaller spacing and small dogs to the larger spacing): "Overall I would like to see the larger spacing become the norm. It seems to be easier on the big dogs overall and I believe [wider spacing] would help in the longevity of a dog's career. With the amazing speeds we are seeing in agility dogs now, every venue needs to be responsible in being aware how their equipment regulations can impact our dogs. At the very least within each venue we should see consistency."

Pacific Northwest competitor and judge Lisa Selthofer said, "In my observation, after the initial introduction, the larger 23" to 24" weave pole spacing is generally more beneficial to bigger dogs since the increased spacing allows them to extend to their natural stride length. On the other hand, I've observed that the extended spacing requires smaller dogs to add additional steps into their weave footing in order to compensate for the added inches. There is no doubt that dogs are capable of and do successfully adjust. I have to admit it's fascinating to watch the small dogs (previously trained on the 20"-21" poles) think their way through to their new foot pattern; and it's even better when you see the light bulb go off and they get it right."

Jean Lavalley, DVM, of Tennessee has also experienced training and competing with her Shelties on 20"- and 24"-spaced poles: "I absolutely think it's better for the big dogs, and I don't think anyone

would argue with that. But the argument usually given is it's not good for the small dogs, due to trouble with their getting a rhythm. As a small dog owner, I disagree. The small dogs can learn to power through and get a rhythm with the wider poles. I have a 12 3/4" dog and a 13 1/4" dog that are as fast in the wide poles, and my 14" dog was better in the wide poles. All it took was a few exposures and they had it. I feel we should change for the health of the bigger dogs. I am big-time for this recommendation as a vet and competitor."

While not scientifically validated, it appears most dogs 12"+ in height are able to obtain a more natural stride through the poles, look more comfortable at 24" spacing, and complete the poles as fast or faster than poles spaced at 20". Some dogs smaller than 12" in height add a stride at the wider spacing, and sometimes have trouble adjusting when the pole spacing changes unexpectedly from 20" to 24". This is a training problem and would likely be remedied by standardization to 24" spacing for the sake of our big dogs' health. Were evidence to be provided that the much smaller dogs are far better served by 20" spaced poles one option could be to standardize 24" spacing for jump heights over 12", and 20" spacing for jump heights of 12" and lower.

Agility is becoming a mature sport and there are now many more dogs participating in many more trials than when the organizations originally adopted their equipment specification. Many dogs compete 25-30 weekends per year, and many are running at faster speeds than ever before. The result is that we are seeing more injuries. Simply changing the weave pole spacing specification could help many dogs avoid repetitive stress injuries. I hope all U.S. agility organizations will carefully consider standardizing weave pole spacing at 24" for the health and safety of our dogs. 🐾

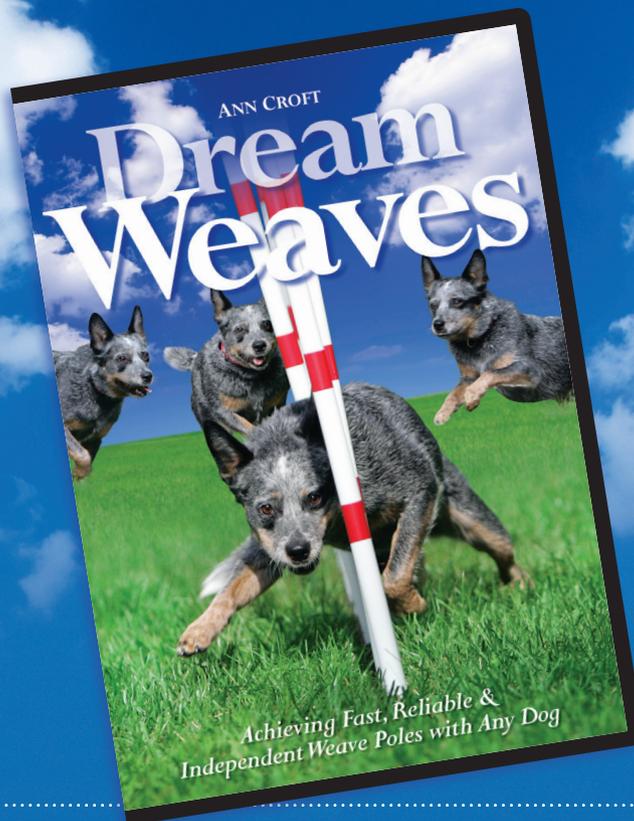
Ann Croft

Author's note: All photographs of weaving dogs on pages 1 and 2 were graciously provided by V. W. Perry. These and more examples may be studied at www.vwperryphotos.com/DogAlbums/Cleveland_web/index.html.

Ann lives in San Diego, California, with her four Border Collies, Trigger, Flurry, Kit, and Stun. Her first agility dogs, Bostons Mystic (1992-2004) and Chance (1992-2007), achieved many agility firsts for their breed. Chance, Caper (Ann's first BC, 1996-2007), and Trigger are all double agility champions, MACH and ADCH, and have all been AKC Nationals finalists, with Trigger placing second overall in 2003. Trigger and her teammates won the 2004 DAM National Team Championship. Flurry and Kit are just beginning their agility careers. Ann now teaches full time at her training center, Paws on the Wind Dog Sports, and is also an AKC and USDAA judge. Learn more at www.pawsonthewind.com.

*If you have built castles in the air, your work
need not be lost; there is where they should be.
Now put foundations under them.*

Henry David Thoreau



Are you often out of position for handling the next obstacle because you have to stay close to your dog in the poles?

Are you losing Qs because of pop-outs or missed entries?

Is bad footwork in the poles slowing down your dog and keeping him from reaching his weaving potential?

Or maybe you're looking for a start-to-finish method for training your new agility dog?

Your dog can have fast, reliable, and independent weave poles!

Ann Croft shows you the training progression from step one to the finished product, including what to do if things don't go as planned. She demonstrates how to work with a dog that is food motivated as well as a dog that is toy motivated. You won't believe the results!


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