



USING CATO BOARD PLATFORMS IN AGILITY TRAINING

By Frankie Joiris, photos by Casie Brettell

When people think about platform training, what often comes to mind is something on the tall side. Perhaps the pedestals that trick dogs and circus animals balance on while waiting for their turns to perform, or the more recent plastic creations that resemble slightly smaller, slicker agility tables. While size and height might look flashy in performance, from a training perspective, there is no advantage. It is easier to fade the platform later on if it is lower to the ground, and there are many more exercises that can be trained and worked on with something the dog can easily navigate without having to jump onto it.

Coming from a background in theatrical animal training, I have used low platforms to train a wide variety of species for decades, they're one of the most useful and versatile tools around. Although many things taught on a platform could be taught on the ground, having a slight elevation and different texture underfoot gives the animal a clear indication of when she's in the right place and when she is not, making it easier for her to know right away when she is right. The Cato Board works extremely well for all manner of platform training. The board is low profile and seemingly un-tippable,

with a high traction rubber surface (or artificial turf if you prefer that model) and nonskid feet.

FOUNDATION SKILLS

Foundation training on the Cato can start as soon as the puppy can step onto the board. Introduce the basic positions, front feet on, rear feet on, all four feet on, left feet on, and right feet on by luring with a treat directly in front of the dog's nose, or, even better, by letting the puppy nibble on the treat in your hand as you lure her into position. Early training is an excellent time to teach careful and thoughtful, rather than rushed and casual performance. Attention to detail now, making sure the dog's head and spine are aligned, and that her stance is balanced and comfortable, will pay off in years to come, as not only will the dog develop good habits in general, but these foundation exercises will also be useful as fitness and conditioning exercises throughout the dog's life.

Once the dog is happily being lured through a variety of positions on the Cato Board, specific actions can be taught on cue. Front foot targeting and pivoting around the board are useful skills for turning and proprioception. Rear-foot targeting by backing onto the board lets you

teach hind end coordination and balance as well as the beginning of a stopped contact performance. Getting onto the board with all four feet on the board is the first step to teaching a wide variety of behaviors.

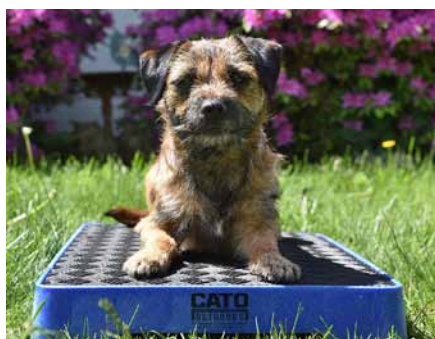


Rear-foot targeting

Asking the dog to sit, stand and lie down from each of these foundation positions (two front feet on, two rear feet on, all four feet on) gives the dog a wide variety of different physical challenges as well as reinforcing the concept that each behavior happens exactly in the place where it was cued.

The classic platform exercise is "place," teaching the dog to go to and remain on the platform until released. Much like crate games, place games teach the dog that staying on the platform is fun and highly rewarding. Because the plat-

form is elevated, it is much easier for the dog to learn the boundaries than simply staying in place on the ground, and so an excellent way to introduce young dogs to the concept of staying. This is often the first game we teach puppies and young dogs on the Cato. Run to the board on cue, get a cookie. Stay on the board, get a cookie. Run off the board when released to me, get a cookie. This simple exercise, gradually building distance and duration, is truly the foundation for a good start line later on. The traction makes it easy and safe for the dog to really power off at speed without skidding or sending the platform flying, which encourages a solid start line with an explosive, fast start on release.



Stay on the board, get a cookie.



An explosive, fast start upon release.

Agility is a sport in which the dog nearly always needs to be somewhat parallel to the handler. At any given time, the dog might be ahead, behind, or laterally away from the handler. But other than a few brief instances when the handler and dog are crossing paths, the dog should not be facing the handler or turning in strongly toward the handler. Yet this is something dog and handler teams com-

monly struggle with. Even in everyday life, many dogs will, by default, turn in toward their handler when asked to sit, lie down, or even just stand still. Using a Cato Board to practice positions helps the dog to maintain alignment in the correct direction. The dog is taught to always sit, stand, and down aligned on the board as the handler gradually changes positions around the board, from both sides, moving gradually further ahead and behind, rewarding the dog mightily for staying in correct alignment.

As the dog gains expertise, the challenge can be increased by walking with the dog toward the platform and giving the positional cue (sit, down, stand) while continuing to slowly move forward, rewarding while in motion. The handler can increase speed until she and the dog are running, and the handler runs past the platform as the dog stops and gets into position.



The dog maintains a straight sit, stand, or down while the handler practices changing positions around the board.

A similar exercise involves sending the dog ahead to the platform, then running past them without releasing. In each of these instances, the platform helps to reinforce the idea of staying in place.

SENDS AND DIRECTIONALS

Sends and directional cues are another great use for Cato Boards, once the dog has a good understanding of the concept of running to the platform on cue. Three Cato Boards are set up, one directly ahead of the dog and handler, one to the left and one to the right. Initially, the boards are quite close to the team, so that success is inevitable. Whether the handler chooses to train with a combination of physical and verbal cues or just verbals, the handler sends to each platform in turn and rewards the dog for success. Paying careful attention (because when dog and handler are no longer together, their right and left might not be the same anymore), the handler can randomly send the dog from one platform to another, gradually increasing the distance as the dog gains understanding.

Once enough distance is achieved, jumps, weave poles and tunnels can be added to increase the challenge. As the distance increases, the Cato Board's low profile makes it less apparent—the dog might not see it until she halfway to it or more. This is one of the benefits of sending to the platform rather than simply sending to a toy or target plate. Although the toy and target plate are also low profile, the dog's action is different. With the platform, she will continue to move forward with speed right up to the platform as the traction is good, and she is not lowering her head to grab the toy or treat on the ground. Once she is on the platform, she can be rewarded. For a while, the platforms remain out in the distance, but the dog is rewarded or redirected *before* reaching the platforms. When the dog is confident of her task, the platforms are completely faded away.

WEAVE POLE TRAINING

The Cato Board can also be used in a similar fashion to focus the dog's attention when teaching lateral distance with weave poles. With the platform several feet beyond the end of the weave poles, the handler asks the dog to weave, going along with her in their normal way, then sends her immediately to the platform and rewards heavily. After several repetitions, the dog will generally be driving to the platform with no extra encouragement, and the handler can start to modify her path gradually, moving laterally farther and farther away, always returning to reward the dog on the platform for success.

In this same way, the handler can practice a wide variety of handling maneuvers at the weave poles, as the dog will be focused on driving forward to the platform. If the dog skips the poles to just go straight to the platform, there is no actual reward there, as there would be if she were running to a treat or toy.

Like with directionals, the platform can slowly be faded farther and farther away, and as the dog gains confidence and expertise, she can be rewarded and redirected after the poles without being sent to it.

CONTACT TRAINING

When people teach stopped contacts, they are often concerned with the angle at which their dogs stop, and the possibility of the repeated impact causing long term shoulder damage. Teaching dogs to stop very low on the contact obstacles, so that their back is as close to level as possible, helps mitigate that problem by avoiding the "lawn dart" position that torques the dog's body. Rather than teaching rear foot targeting on a step or other highly elevated object, having the dog learn and practice on a low platform creates good habits from the start. The foundation exercises of backing up until her back feet are on the platform and walking forward across the platform until only her back feet remain on it

serve as a starting point for teaching the stopped contact performance. Using the Cato Board to practice, the dog can be encouraged to move to the very edge and stretch without fear of slipping or flipping it over as both traction and stability are good. These same qualities allow for the dog to approach at speed and stop abruptly on the board without sliding or skidding, giving the dog a similar feel to stopping on an actual rubberized contact obstacle.



For stopped contact training, the dog can be encouraged to move to the very edge of the board and stretch forward.



CATO BOARD

A perfect platform for canine fitness, agility, and go to place training



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- Ultra-stable
- High-traction surface
- Incredibly durable
- Stackable
- Only 6.5 lbs.

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The increasing popularity of teaching running contacts both to reduce strain on joints and to increase performance speed has led to a wide variety of training methods. Many people have had great success teaching dogs to stride over a mat on the ground, later transferring that to actual contact obstacle. Keeping the mat from moving around on some outdoor surfaces, particularly with large or fast dogs, can pose a problem. Although the Cato Board did not, at first, seem like the ideal candidate for teaching running contacts, initial experiments with it have shown it to be quite useful in some types of grass where mats are not working well. The stability of the platform and the high traction surface builds the security and confidence needed for a fast, driven performance, and most rubber mats adhere quite well to the surface of the platform.

FITNESS AND CONDITIONING

There are a wide variety of fitness and conditioning exercises that can be done with the Cato Board. The basic warm-up exercise we start with is sit-

stand-down on the board, then back up so that on the front feet remain on the board and repeat the sit-stand-down, move forward so that only the hind feet are on the board and repeat the sit-stand-down.



Running contact work on the Cato Board.

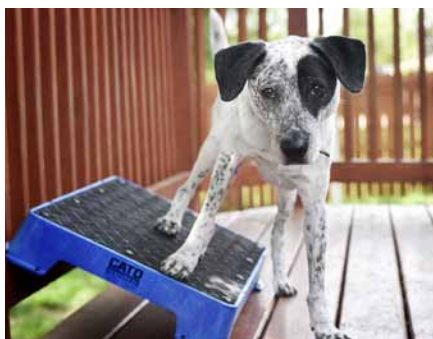


A basic warm-up exercise: sit-stand-down.

AT THE RISK OF MAKING THE CATO BOARD SOUND LIKE A PANACEA, THERE ARE A FEW OTHER USES FOR IT THAT I HAD NOT EXPECTED. IT HAS PROVEN TO BE JUST THE RIGHT SIZE TO WORK AS A CRATE TOP GROOMING TABLE, AN EXTRA DOG BED WHEN WE'RE ON THE ROAD, AND, UNEXPECTEDLY, IT IS PERFECT AS A NONSKID RAMP FOR GETTING DOGS IN AND OUT OF THE CAR!

For more of a challenge, three Cato Boards can be stacked in a pyramid so that the dog must climb backward and forward up “steps.” For a lateral stretch, have the dog walk just the left or just the right legs onto the board. Angle the board against a wall for more of a challenge. Again, this high traction surface makes this safer than stretching on many other surfaces and gives the dog security to stretch comfortably.

At the risk of making the Cato Board sound like a panacea, there are a few other uses for it that I had not expected. It has proven to be just the right size to work as a crate top grooming table, an extra dog bed when we’re on the road, and, unexpectedly, it is perfect as a nonskid ramp for getting dogs in and out of the car! 🐕



Lateral stretches



Other uses for the Cato Board

Frankie Joiris has been coaching and competing in agility since 2001 and has been a regular writer for Clean Run magazine since 2004. For 25 years, her “day job” was training and handling animals for theater, television, and film, which has given her experience training pretty much anything that breathes and moves, from turtles to tigers. She has successfully competed in agility with a wide variety of breeds, including the only Champion MACH Norfolk. Her up and coming agility dog is Gimli, an Australian Terrier, and in the wings is her third-generation homebred Border Collie, Logic. She can be reached on Facebook and at fjoiris@me.com.

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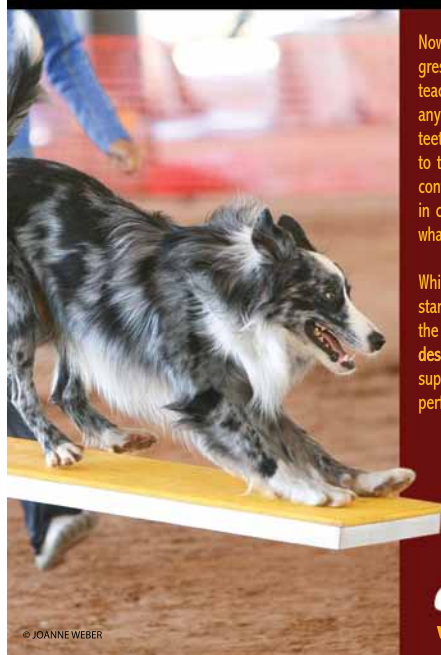
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Now there's an easy-to-follow, progressive program that will help you teach a terrific teeter performance to any dog, large or small. Jen Pinder's teeter training program is designed to teach the dog that he is truly in control of the motion. Part of being in control means the dog must know what is expected and how to do it.

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