

Improve Your  
Handling Skills  
at Home

# Backyard Dogs



By Stuart Mah

This month's column is a little different than previous ones. This month *you* get to make up the course. There will be some guidelines so that you don't go completely amiss.

Before considering the setup, let's ask one question about agility handlers: What separates mediocre handlers from good handlers? If you answer that good handlers are better at some type of handling maneuver (front cross, rear cross, blind cross, RFP/false turn) or that good handlers are faster, you would be wrong. Often the faster or technically more proficient handlers have trouble getting through a course. While being faster or technically proficient is important, it is not the most important factor that separates mediocre from good handlers. So, what *is* the difference between mediocre handlers and good handlers?

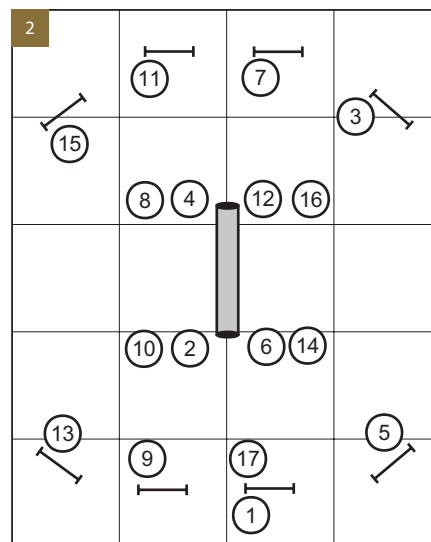
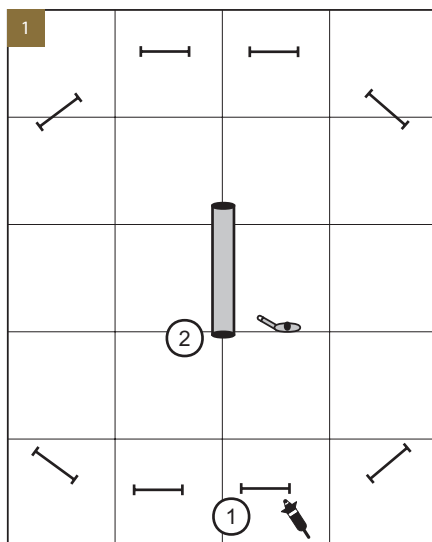
Two basic qualities separate the mediocre handlers from the good handlers. The first is being a better dog trainer. While not the focus here, it's sufficient to say that a handler who always relies on a handling maneuver or speed alone to steer or control a dog is often going to be at a disadvantage to a handler who has taught the dog a number of skills so that the dog can help out the handler when needed.

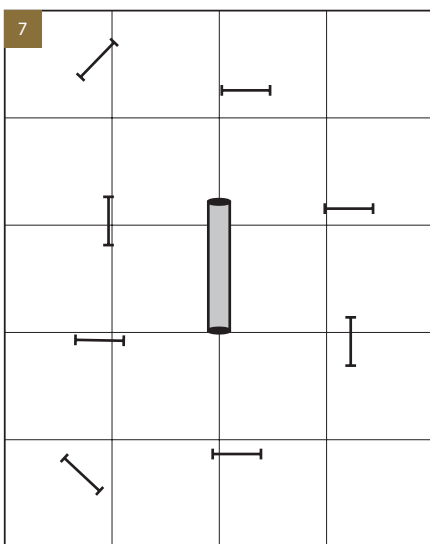
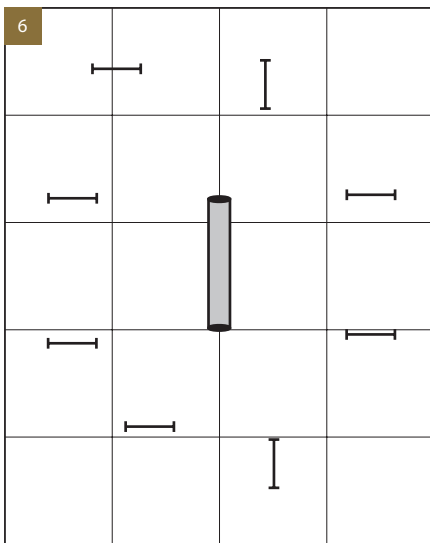
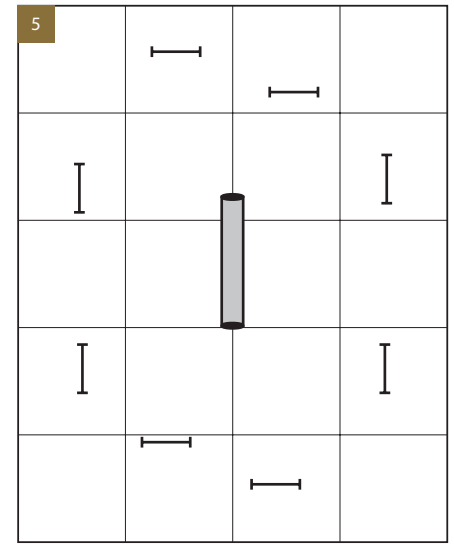
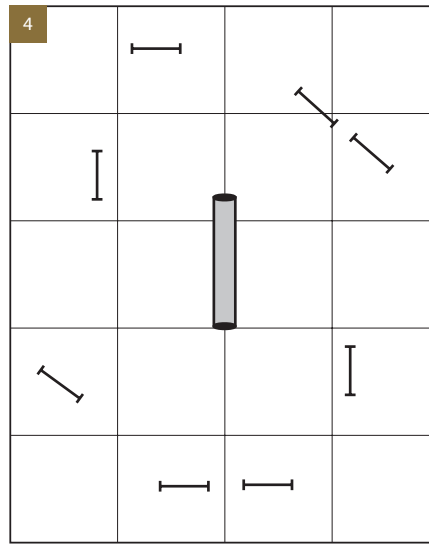
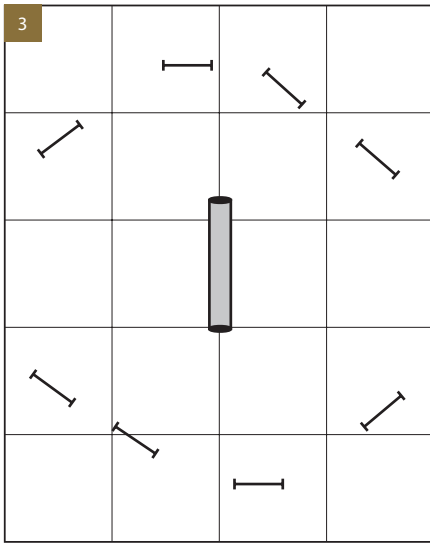
The second quality is being able to read changing situations quickly and react, most often without thinking, and knowing what the larger picture is at all times. This is called situational awareness.

When we train sequences or courses the focus tends to be on the technical skills of handling maneuvers. Little training or teaching goes into developing a handler's situational awareness. This is what this month's article attempts to demonstrate.

The ground rules are simple. As shown in **Figure 1**, each exercise starts with a jump going into the tunnel. You can lead out or run with the dog. Once the initial sequence of jump-tunnel is completed (first tunnel pass), you choose a jump and direct the dog to take that jump. Take only one jump. After the dog takes the jump, direct the dog back into the tunnel (second tunnel pass). After this second pass, you again direct the dog to take one jump before going back to the tunnel. As the dog emerges from the tunnel this time, direct him to take a jump, but *not* the one previously performed. Each time the dog emerges from the tunnel, you must direct the dog to a different jump not previously used. Jumps already used are out of play for the rest of the sequence. **Figure 2** is an example of one possible pattern you could do. You can choose which jump to start with and which jump to attempt next, so all of you could run a different sequence.

Run your chosen sequence without any break or pause in movement; no stopping for any reason. You must perform eight tunnels in 30 seconds or less so you need to have a helper or use a timing device that makes a noise at the end of a set time (a countdown timer or kitchen timer, for example). At the end of 30 seconds, if





you have not completed the pattern, stop what you are doing to praise, reward, and play with the dog. There is no finishing the sequence just for the sake of finishing.

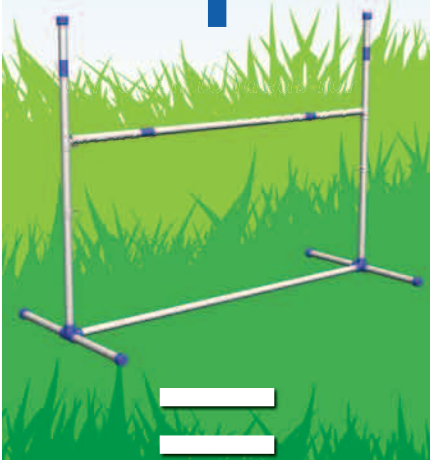
If the dog takes a jump previously performed (no matter whose fault it is), do not stop or reset the dog to take the correct jump. Instead, continue with your sequence and go back to the tunnel. You can then attempt to get the correct jump at some later point. The same goes for a jump taken in the wrong direction. Simply continue the sequence and adjust accordingly.

If the dog takes a jump you did not tell him to take, but the jump has not been done previously, continue the sequence without correcting the dog. Instead, adjust your plans to account for the change in the original sequence. For example, if you planned to go over jump #11 but the dog took jump #15, you adjust so that the next time the dog moves in that direction you do #11 instead of #15.

What does this type of sequence practice do? First, it forces you to make adjustments in your sequence based on what the dog does. You need to be flexible and adjust quickly to any change of sequence to perform all eight tunnel passes as well as each jump only once. Also, each jump is slightly different in position with respect to the tunnel so you are forced to constantly change your handling as well to fit the changing scenario. Second, you are forced to keep moving when an error occurs instead of stopping to think about what to do next. You must try to keep your wits about you and adjust as you move through the sequence. Third, with the time constraint of 30 seconds on the exercise, you cannot be so careful that you run the sequence slowly just to get the planned sequence correct numerically. If you run conservatively, you will not come close to completing the eight tunnels. Slowing everything down also defeats the purpose of practicing the development of situational awareness. Similarly, just running “all out” the entire time will make it hard for the dog to complete eight tunnels due to all the wide, time-consuming turns. Finally, you need to have an eye on the larger picture by keeping track of what has been done and what needs to still be done, even if something changes.

Don't be discouraged if you don't get all eight tunnels in 30 seconds. The tunnels are merely a yardstick to measure improvement. You should notice a gradual increase in the number of tunnels you do (first time, six tunnels; next time, seven tunnels; and so on). You want to get as close to completing eight tunnels as possible.

The sequences require jump changes as each set is completed. Each subsequent sequence gets harder than the previous sequence so it is important to follow the sequences in the order they're presented here. Realize that these sequences are exhausting for both you and your dog, so don't attempt all the sequences in one training session. Also, if you elect to repeat a given setup, the sequence that you choose to run must change so you are not simply practicing a set pattern of obstacles. 🐾

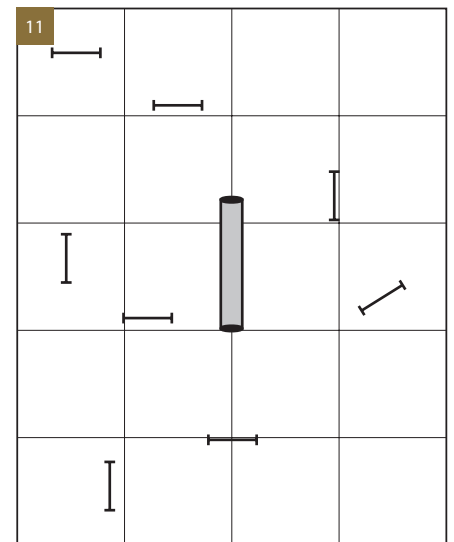
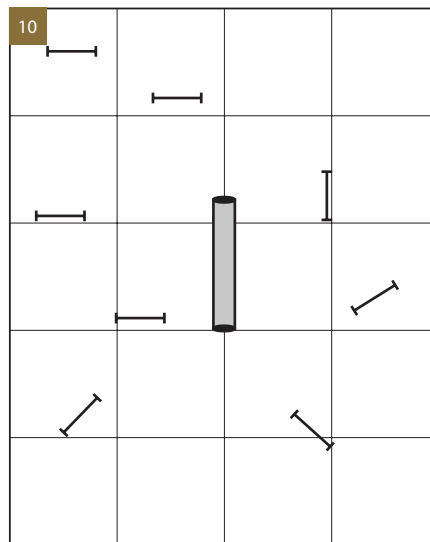
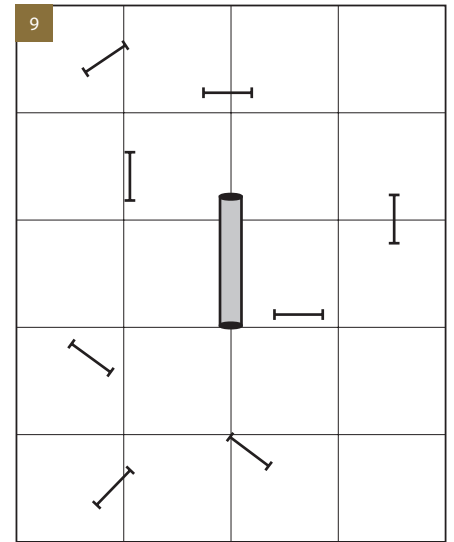
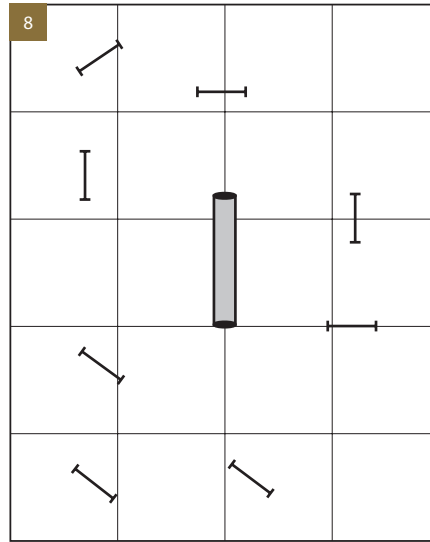


## What You Need to Perfect Your Team's Skills

Need help with your training, but tired of too much technical detail? Help is here! An easy-to-use system for learning handling and teaching dog skills that's presented in plain English, and that uses only 2 jumps!

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*These sequences are exhausting for both you and your dog, so don't attempt all the sequences in one training session. If you elect to repeat a given setup, the sequence that you choose to run must change so you are not simply practicing a set pattern of obstacles.*

Stuart Mah, a leading innovator of canine agility in the U.S., has been active in the sport since 1989. Stuart has excelled as a competitor and as an instructor, and has competed at the highest levels of agility to include 13 USDAA Grand Prix finals and five AKC finals. He has represented the U.S. eight times in international competition. He has four dogs in the USDAA Hall of Fame. His dogs have won six national individual and team titles in AKC or USDAA. His current dog, Qwik has also won gold, silver, and bronze medals in international competition. Stuart is a noted author and a leading expert on course design. He has written more than 30 articles for various publications on the sport of agility and has also written agility books: Fundamentals of Course Design for Dog Agility and Course Analysis for Agility Handlers.