

Handler Focus and Obstacle Focus

By Pati and Stuart Mah

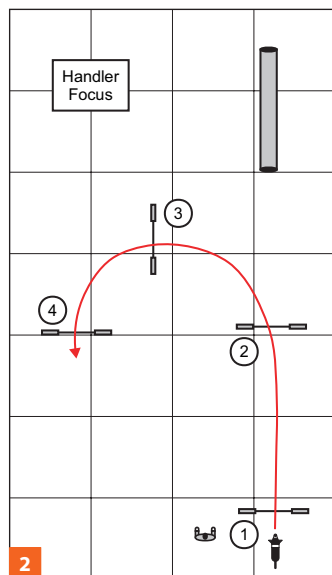
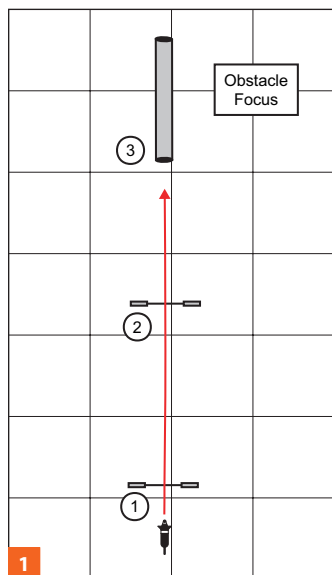


PHOTO BY JOE CANOVA

In a series of earlier articles for *Clean Run*, I wrote about City/Highway driving (“Highway/City” May through July 1999). Today, we more often refer to the idea of “changes of gear” on the agility field as *handler focus* and *obstacle focus*. These two concepts form the foundation for our training program at Rising Stars Dog Agility.

Obstacle focus is when the next obstacle is the logical obstacle from the dog’s perspective. The dog’s focus is on the obstacle staring him in the face. Handler focus is when the next obstacle is not the logical next obstacle. Here, you want the dog to focus more on the handler for direction rather than the most obvious obstacle. It is the responsibility of the handler to cue the dog promptly regarding handler focus or obstacle focus.

In **Figure 1**, the two jumps to the tunnel would be obstacle focus. We would simply say, *Go Tunnel* using obstacle focus cues. In the example shown in **Figure 2**, we would cue the dog between jump #1 and jump #2 that he was going to turn left after jump #2 using handler focus cues.



Both exercises should be done on the same hand, in this case, the right hand. The dog should clearly understand handler focus and obstacle focus and not need handling maneuvers (front crosses, rear crosses, and so on) to do both exercises cleanly.

Cueing handler focus or obstacle focus can be divided into six categories:

1. How you move
2. Your arms and hands
3. Your voice
4. Where you look
5. What you think
6. The path you take

How You Move—The first cue is how you move. When you want to cue the dog for obstacle focus, you move strongly. Often you run normally with your arms pumping. To transition to handler focus, you switch to running softly, taking smaller steps, relaxing your upper body, and often letting your arms drop to your sides (although not stiffly). This transition is used in preparation for a turn, although it can be used in other ways as well. A dog that is not steady on his contacts would benefit from the handler running softly instead of running strongly. Running softly must not be confused with stopping.

Your Arms and Hands—A second cue is the use of your arms and hands. In obstacle focus, if you need to send the dog away from you, a “whooshing” type of arm movement can often generate more impulsion by not giving the dog a static visual cue on which to fixate. If you don’t need to increase the lateral distance between you and the dog, you can merely send the dog forward and then drop the arm and hand and concentrate on running with your arms pumping naturally.

In handler focus, we want the dog to fixate on our hand so much that it draws the attention to the handler as the primary focus. Think of your hand as the turn signal on your car. It alerts the driver behind you that something is about to occur. This is the same way that your hands can alert your dog that a turn is coming up.

Your Voice—A third way to cue your dog to handler focus or to obstacle focus is with your voice. In obstacle focus, use a stronger, more authoritative voice (but not loud or aggressive). You don't have to call each obstacle; for example, in Figure 1, *Go Tunnel* can be much more effective information. For handler focus, whisper—there is no need to yell your dog's name and *Come* when you want to get his attention. Speaking softly is far more effective and treats your dog in the manner that you would probably want to be treated, with politeness and respect.

Where You Look—The fourth cue is where you look. When you want your dog on obstacle focus, look where you want to go. The course is your primary focus. To see what your dog is doing, use your side mirrors (peripheral vision) just as you do when you drive a car. When you want to switch your dog to handler focus, look at your dog. Your dog is now your primary focus and you use your side mirrors to see where you are on the course.

We often meet people who protest that they've spent a lot of money to be told to look at their dog constantly. I would suspect that what the instructor really meant was to pay attention to what the dog is doing and to keep the connection with the dog. That doesn't mean that you must run staring at your dog the entire time, just as you don't drive with your turn signal on constantly.

What You Think—The fifth cue is what you think. When you release your dog to obstacle focus, you give your dog his assignment, which he is now responsible for doing. Now your job is to think about and set up for what is next. If you are too busy distrusting your dog and micro-managing every step of what you asked of him, then you can't very well be performing your job of navigating the dog through the course and getting in position for the next sequence. In handler focus, you want to think only of the dog. The dog will feel the change in your focus and consequently become more focused on you.

The Path You Take—A sixth cue is the path you take. It is possible to give additional information to your dog by the path you take. For example, by sending your dog to the tunnel as in Figure 3 and taking a diagonal path to the dogwalk, the dog will be more likely to understand your cue for obstacle focus because you are taking yourself out of the picture. In Figure 4, you want handler focus out of the tunnel to turn your dog cleanly to the A-frame. By picking your dog up at the end of the tunnel, he will be more likely to come to handler focus because of your presence.

The cue of the path that you take is the one that can't always hold true. As you will see in later articles, sometimes the design of the course dictates the path that you must take so you don't have the luxury of using distance work, for example, to solve a particular challenge.

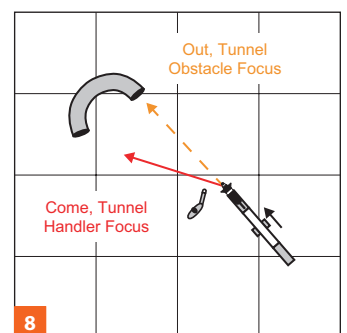
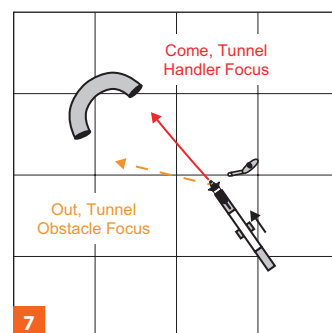
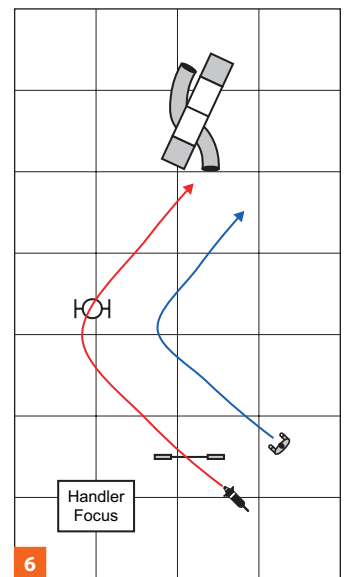
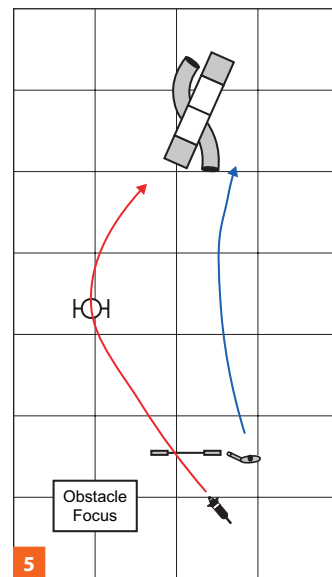
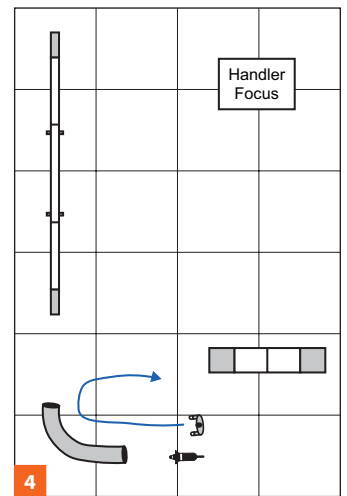
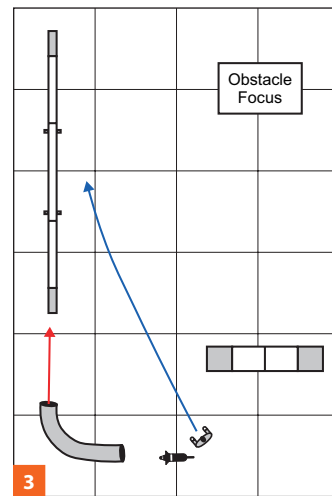
In discriminations, the outer obstacle is usually obstacle focus and inner obstacle is usually handler focus as shown in Figures 5 and 6.

Figures 7 and 8 show how your position changes obstacle and handler focus. Notice that the end of the tunnel that is handler focus and the end that is obstacle focus depends on which side of the teeter you are on. If the dog is on your left, the left side of the tunnel is *Out, Tunnel* (obstacle focus) and the right side of the tunnel is *Come, Tunnel* (handler focus) as shown in Figure 7. If the dog is on your right, the left side of the tunnel is *Come, Tunnel* (handler focus) and the right side of the tunnel is *Out, Tunnel* (obstacle focus) as shown in Figure 8. Work the exercise on both sides but do not use a front cross or rear cross at the teeter to avoid practicing handler focus and obstacle focus skills.

Look at the other examples in Figures 9 through 11.

As you experiment with the concepts of handler focus, obstacle focus, and cueing effectively, think about what happens if you mix opposing cues. Imagine the car in front of you puts on his turn signal and yet speeds up. Or that the driver puts on his turn signal yet never turns.

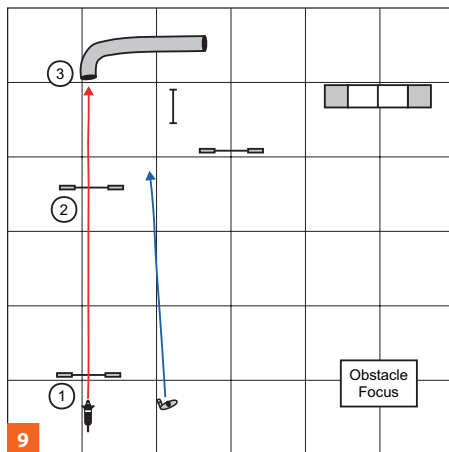
Unfortunately this inconsistency happens all too often in agility, leading to confusion for the dog. When the cues are ambiguous, the dog that is sensitive by nature will often become slow and cautious, typically waiting for you to show him the next obstacle before proceeding (following you through the course). The more extroverted dog will simply react to



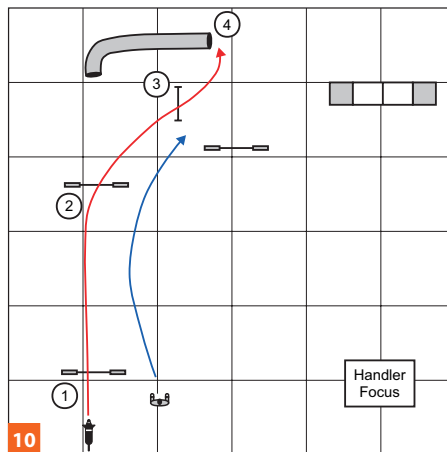
miscommunication by barking or spinning, or deciding to figure out the course for himself (grabbing obstacles).

When we introduce handler focus and obstacle focus to dogs, we show the dog first one and then the other, all within the same training session. As you do these sets, concentrate on using the correct cues for each. If necessary, go through the motions first without your dog to review how you would move, what you would say, where you would look, and so on. Make sure you show a difference. Someone watching should clearly see a difference in your use of the cues, depending on whether you want handler focus or obstacle focus. 🐾

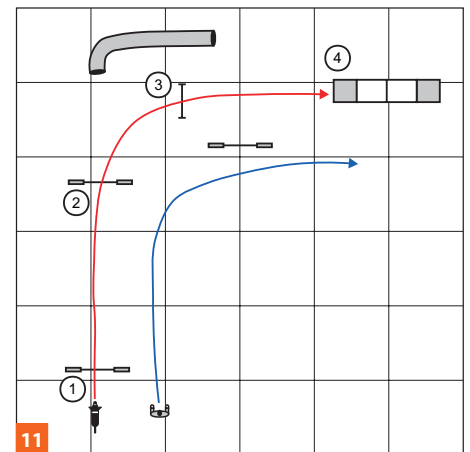
Pati Hatfield Mah and Stuart Mah have been highly regarded agility competitors and instructors for many years. They have both represented the U.S. in international competition on multiple occasions and have won multiple national championships with their dogs. Their training programs focus on the skills that both the handler and dog need to do quality agility. The emphasis is not on just getting through a sequence, but rather the way in which it is accomplished. Pati and Stuart focus on the skills necessary to handle proactively rather than resorting to a crisis management approach. Their students have attained the highest titles in the various agility organizations. You can reach Pati and Stuart through their website at www.dogagility.biz.



9 The obvious obstacle is the correct one in this sequence, so obstacle focus is appropriate here.



10 The obvious obstacle is not the correct one now, so a cue for handler focus is required.



11 This sequence requires slight handler focus just before #2 to get the right turn and then obstacle focus as the handler drives forward to the A-frame.

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ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

Concerns about Weave Pole Spacing

By Ann Croft

...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 these strains be due to repetitive stress, and could tight weave spacing be the major contributing factor for these injuries?

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