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Ahhhh! A new puppy: All our hopes and dreams and aspirations tied up in one cute, cuddly bundle of energy and love.

When the talk turns to agility, most folks readily admit to the “mistakes” they made training their last dog. So now, here’s all the hope and promise of your new puppy, and you’re determined to get it right this time.

Unfortunately, it’s only natural to start right off training the wrong dog—our last dog—to compensate for those mistakes. But each pup is an individual, and the challenge is to see who this new pup is. You need to give him the exposure and training that suits his specific needs, not just do what would have worked for your last dog.

“Watch their bodies. Listen to them. Language is in every movement.” This line is from a Mary Jo Kennedy song about horses, but it applies perfectly to beginning training for puppies and dogs. Watch them intently, listen to them, and find out who they are and what they are telling you. Then make the effort to tailor the training to their individual temperament.

Hello, Puppy!

Who are you... and what should we do with you?

By Sheila Booth

The Right Pup

Once you decide what kind of partner you want for your next dog, you don’t have to take a chance this time around. Use valid techniques and you can find out whether each pup is social, or stable, or driven, or dominant, or independent, or body sensitive, or whatever combination of traits you are looking for.

If you want to be competitive, one of the most important qualities you want to choose for is “drive overcoming stress.” This is a key factor in our “Positive Puppy Preview” evaluation, which is on audiotape and available through Clean Run Productions.

Puppy testing has taken some serious bashing recently from those in academia. But I’ve been doing it for more than 25 years now (so long that I’ve even devised my own system). I’ve watched these puppies grow up, fulfill their potential, and become exactly the same adult dogs they showed us they were at 8 weeks old. Give the pups a chance to show you who they are and they will show you more than you ever expected you could know about them—even at this tender age.

When choosing a puppy specifically for agility, expose the pup to strange footings and watch his reactions: a piece of thick, folded plastic on the floor, an x-pen section on the ground, an unsteady plank, and so on. You can always compensate for a pup who is unsure on strange footings, but why not start with one who just doesn’t care—or better yet, one who even enjoys the challenge.

Also, even at 8 weeks, check for a pup who might be afraid of heights. This is unusual, but it is easy to spot in the elevation test. You can work this through quickly in a week or two. But why start with that skeleton in the closet? The pup is showing you who he is genetically. Anything you fix after this age is just a disguise job. Remember: You can modify behavior, but you can’t change temperament.

Watch how the pup uses his body. Is he coordinated? Does he seem to enjoy climbing a single stair, or scrambling over a small, wooden barrier?

Look carefully and be sure of what you want and what you can work with.

Integrating the Pack

Bringing your new puppy home is such a big day. Be sure to focus and keep your attention on the resident dogs, the senior dogs—the ones who have already proved themselves and earned their place in your life and in your heart.

Too often you start to focus totally on the new pup. It’s only natural. But take the time to make the right association for the older dogs: “See puppy, you get food. See puppy, you get petting. See puppy, you get loving. See puppy, you get bones. See puppy, you get toys. See puppy, you get playtime.”

For the first few days, if you keep all your attention on the resident dogs (whenever they are in the presence of the pup), they'll be thrilled at having this "interloper" join their pack, since his presence brings them everything they ever want from you—their hero. This makes pack integration so much easier on all the dogs. It's only fair, and it starts life together off on the right paw.

Exposure with Protection

Socialization should be a positive experience for the pup. Work on his agenda. This means avoid taking him to the supermarket shopping center and letting everyone touch and pet him. Allow the pup to stand back and watch and to proceed at his own rate—getting curious and wanting to go closer. Prevent him from getting overwhelmed. Be his protector.

Some pups will need to learn certain skills before going to certain places. A pup who gets highly aroused at movement needs to learn some impulse control and basic obedience commands, and leash protocol before being exposed to an exciting agility venue.

A dog with any aggressive responses, either to dogs or people, needs to learn to *Sit* and *Watch* his handler before he can be introduced to new, uncontrolled situations. An overreactive pup also needs some impulse control and obedience training before being put in stimulating circumstances.

An unsure pup needs confidence building and a strong relationship with you—one that he can count on—before venturing out into a scary world. A bold, independent pup needs to recognize your leadership before he gets too caught up in his own agenda. Work on relationship first, at home, so you and your pup can face the world together.

Wherever you take your new pup, be sure to plan it well so you have your entire focus on managing the puppy. Don't walk in with your soda in one hand, the crate in the other, and your puppy as an appendage hanging out at the end of the leash. Go in first and scope out the place. Set up your space in a quiet corner, and then bring in the pup when you can give him all your attention.

Don't be in such a great hurry to socialize your new pup in situations that you cannot control. Set up for success. Several of the most stable, social, confident dogs I have known spent their first several months in a crate, or a kennel, never being exposed to anything new or different. Granted, these were great dogs to start with, but protecting your pup from negative experiences is an important part of socialization and development.

My most recent seminars have been on "Zero to One," those things that young dogs should know before they start their career training, and this is especially true for agility classes. The result of these seminars was more than 25 things that each pup needs to know before beginning his career (see sidebar).

So wait for the right circumstances to get your new pup out. Take the time to build your relationship, and teach him what he needs to know at home, so you have some skills to call on when you need them.

Make A Plan

Decide what you want. Make a plan for this new pup, now that you've taken the time to watch him and find out who he really is. List the words you are going to use. Decide on the rewards (and consequences) for each behavior you want to teach him. Set up each session for success.

If you are a beginner or if you are changing training methods (probably because of your last dog's limitations), be sure you know your performance criteria. I cringe to remember that I taught my first agility dog the weave poles without my knowing that the dog needed to enter on a specific side. Now I'm sure you won't be that stupid, but being sure you know the rules—and the precise picture of what you want to train—is critical, even at the beginning stages of training. It's even more important at those beginning stages.

You First

Almost everywhere, but especially at agility venues, the main thing you want to teach your pup is: All heaven comes through me.

At trials, if you want to be competitive, allow your pup to socialize with people and other dogs there, but only until teething. Once teething has begun, take your pup along, by all means, but from then on, all his interactions should be with you when you are at any trial scene. This goes for your club, classes, or training field, too. After teething, the pup should be developing focus on you and self-control. You should be the center of all his games.

At this age, allowing your pup to romp with other dogs at agility venues is simply training him that it's way more fun to play with other dogs than with you—and he comes to expect that there. Remember this major rule: What you accept, you train.

So, until you can train your dog to read the course map, and place and Q without you, keep yourself Number One in the picture in these scenarios.

Teething Time

An extra word about teething: In the larger breeds, once the major teeth begin to erupt, it marks the beginning of a difficult period for the dogs. This usually begins somewhere around four to five months of age.

You can do a lot of fun stuff with the pups before teething, but during these two to three months, give the dog a break and lighten up a little. Their mouths often hurt, so be careful with tug and retrieve games.

About this time, the hormones are also starting to flow if the dog is intact. This can add to the confusion and stress for the poor dog, and some get overwhelmed and confused.

Watch your dog carefully during this time, and pay attention to what he is showing you. Be prepared to back off and keep things simple and successful. He has enough to do just growing up right now—and you'll have lots of time with him to go forward in your chosen field once he is through this difficult time.

Language is in every movement.



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A pup that gets highly aroused at movement needs to learn some impulse control and basic obedience commands, and leash protocol before being exposed to an exciting agility venue.



Remember: You can modify behavior, but you can't change temperament.



Zero to One

What every young dog should know before beginning career training

Collar

Being handled—picked up, and so on.

Touching—feet, teeth, tail, and so on.

Grooming—nail cutting, ear cleaning, and so on.

Confinement—crate, kennel, x-pen, baby gates, and so on.

Car

Walking on leash

Socialization to people (acceptable greeting procedure)

Socialization with other dogs (integration into family pack)

Exploring the environment (footings, noises, and so on.)

Praise—"Good Dog," "Yes"

Petting—gentle and calming vs. invigorating and exciting

Bite inhibition—no teeth on people

Food drive—taking food properly, following the lure, and so on

Play drive—toys, retrieving, tug, and so on

Switching between food and play drives

Targeting—nose touch if desired

The start of warm-up exercises—examples: *Touch* (hand), *Wave*, spin to the right, spin to the left, *Bow*, weave between your legs, *Back Up*

Retrieve basics—brings object back, not necessarily delivery to hand

Recall—*Come* (absolute if going off leash)

Commands

- *Sit*
- *Wait*
- *Watch* (attention—eye contact)
- *Down*
- *Stay*
- *Get It*
- *Leave It/Give*
- *Go*
- *Target*
- *Quiet*



Tailor Training to Temperament

Now that you've taken the time to get to know your new pup and who he is, choose training techniques that enhance his strengths or compensate for his weaknesses. If your pup tends to get hectic, then teach him calmness and self-control. If your pup's attention tends to scatter, then work mostly on focus. If he is too single-minded, teach the start of multitasking. If your pup is more laid back, teach him to energize himself, raise his excitement level, and maintain his drive.

If you want to use free shaping, be sure your young dog has a frustration level that is suited to this method. If he quickly exhibits barking (or other frustration behaviors such as whining, spinning, scratching, leaving, digging, grass chewing, and so on), then get clearer in your criteria, and quicker and more generous in your reward schedule. You'd learn these things in a hurry if you were training a killer whale, because you'd recognize the danger of ending up a mere pancake stain on the water platform. Think in those terms with your dog.

Whatever method you choose (I hope, a positive one), be clear and quick and generous and your pup will learn faster. Luring, targeting, and just plain "Show and Tell" ("Show" your pup what you want and then "Tell" him he's good) all have their place. And it works well to have a repertoire of training methods to call on in different situations.

Every time you have success—your pup exhibits the behavior you want and you reward it—it's money in the bank that he will repeat that behavior that way. So make a plan, prevent unwanted behavior, set up for success, and reward it.

Work the Weakest Drive

If your pup has way more food drive than play drive, then be sure to work more on building his play drive so toys become important motivators and rewards to him—and vice-versa. If your pup is nuts for toys and tug, be sure he won't shun food when there is a toy around.

Balancing these drives, so you can use either one when you want, is your best insurance of training success, as we emphasize in *Schutzhund Obedience: Training in Drive*. Be sure your young dog will switch from food to play—and back—in every situation. Teaching him to retrieve to hand for a food reward and then play tug, and then repeating the sequence, is one of the best exercises, both to teach this balance and to test it.

Don't let your young dog sucker you into playing only the games he likes, or with only the toys he likes, or using only the food he likes best. Control the games and control the food, and you control the dog and the training—and enhance your relationship and broaden his horizons along the way.

Joy of the Game

Once at the agility field, with all those fun obstacles around, teach the "Joy of the Game" first. Play with your pup at the field, around the obstacles, but not on them. That means play with you, not with other dogs.

The association you want to make is: “See obstacles—have fun with me. Run fast—away from me and toward me.” So any game that promotes those goals works best. Put the young dog’s attention on you first, not on the obstacles. Those will become self-reinforcing soon enough.

100% Recalls

No dog should be off leash in a situation with other dogs before he has a 100% recall—that means with serious distractions. Once a pup learns the “joys of freedom” versus the “constraints of control”—he knows the difference, and most often will choose to enjoy that freedom. So train a great recall first, way before starting agility class. This is one of the best investments you can make in training.

Start with restrained recalls across the agility field and then reward with 30 seconds of feeding the *good* food, (yes, 30 seconds, just as Leslie Nelson teaches in “The Really Reliable Recall”) followed by a fun game. Every time you do this, you put major money in the recall bank account—that coming to you is just plain more rewarding than anything else out there. You’ll be surprised how quickly this works.

Further easy and effective steps for teaching a reliable recall are outlined clearly in my book, *Purely Positive Training: Companion to Competition* (available through Clean Run Productions).

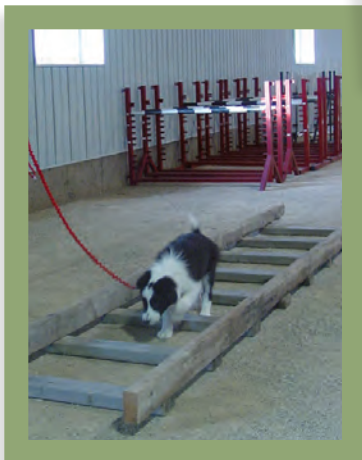
A Leg At Each Corner

Once all this foundation is in place and you are getting ready to start obstacle training, first teach the young dog that he has a leg at each corner. Pups just follow their noses. They aren’t even aware of what their rear end is doing, and they don’t know how to control it and use it effectively.

Start the young dog on ladder work. Teach him to love the unsteady footing of a Buja Board (a square piece of plywood with a tennis ball at the center underneath). Just stopping and sitting on stairs is a great start for two-on/two-off contact training.

Put a plank on two bricks and teach him how to get on straight and stop at the end. Teach him to sit, down, and turn around on a narrow plank, if he’s physically capable. But allow him to turn around only once or twice, so it doesn’t become a habit. (This move isn’t in any agility course I’ve seen so far.)

Continue exposure to strange footings, such as a space blanket folded on the floor or plastic fencing on the ground. Use the clicker, or his best motivators, to make your pup want to jump onto these footings, not just to tolerate them. Put a plank over a jump bar in the middle and teach your youngster to love making the plank move up and down.



Setting the Bar

Soon after teething is done, start cavaletti work (two to four poles on the ground). Start with bars right on the ground, and then quickly raise them to the height suitable to your young dog (2" to 4"). Use this grid to teach him to compress his stride, and to extend his stride—valuable skills for future jumping success. Put the cavaletti in a fan shape, and teach him to circle in each direction, both on the inside and the outside of the fan. Take the time to teach your dog how to use his body—especially to make him aware of those two legs at his rear corners—that’s where the engine is.

By now the dog is about 10 to 12 months old, and it’s time to start work over one low jump (below elbow height), as outlined in The Jumps chapter of *Purely Positive Training*. Teach the dog to leave the bar up while jumping in drive at full speed.

Having taught horses to jump for most of my adult life, I firmly believe that it is *the dog’s* responsibility to clear the top rail of the jump. Still, it is *my* responsibility to teach the dog that this matters, and how to do it when in drive. With horses, it is the

same concept—I can ride the horse down to the perfect takeoff spot, but he has to understand that it is his job to get over the top rail of the fence.



PHOTOS BY ANNA JONSSON

The time taken at this level will pay off over and over again, especially if something should go wrong down the road (such as a teeter collapsing under your dog). This solid foundation means you always have something to return to that you know your dog enjoys and knows for sure.

Two cautions: upright weaves and bounces (two jumps with no stride between). Doing these two maneuvers too early or too often, can break a dog down much faster than they build him up—especially with a young dog. A good rule of thumb is to wait until the dog is at least a year old before doing much of either of these—longer with a larger breed or a dog with any physical limitations.

Obstacles Last

After all this talk about exposure and socialization and preparation and basic obedience training, you’re saying, “Hey, what about the obstacles?” You’re right. The obstacle training comes last.

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Two of England's top trainers agree. They focus on foundation first—relationship, games, manners, obedience, drive-building, basic control, and lots of flatwork—all before they teach the obstacles. All of us are in such a hurry here to get our pups to run through a tunnel that it's just plain counterproductive. Don't worry; they'll become "tunnel suckers" soon enough.

And why would you ever want to teach an A-frame or a seesaw until your young dog was old enough—and physically and mentally capable—of learning it exactly the way you want him to? Why not wait until your young dog has all the basics, including a solid stay at the start line, a perfect recall and full attention to you, and then integrate them seamlessly into the program.

One of my favorite basic sequences at this point is Jo Sermon's low jump chute to the table—backchaining to the table and rewarding there and using the Run With, Recall, and Send method for each new repetition. It builds a great love of the table—and makes many other basics more solid along the way, like teaching the dog to focus ahead and how to adjust striding between the jumps, all at top speed.

That Confounded Start Line

One last note: Teach the start-line behavior that you want right from the beginning. Long before your dog has a sit-stay, you have someone hold him. But don't just let your young dog stand and leap and whine and pull.

Hold off on this training until your young dog at least has a solid sit. Start with him in a sit beside you. Then have a friend come on the other side of him and simply slip one finger into the pup's collar to hold him. (The friend says nothing.) If he gets up from the sit as you leave, just come back and reposition him, and then start again.

He'll learn that the game begins only when he remains in a sit, even while he's being held. The restraint is motivational, and teaches him to burst out of the sit at full speed—right from the start.

So teach it right the first time. Set up for success. And please, don't be in such a hurry with your great new young dog, either to start in an exciting class situation or to enter a trial. Remember that the single biggest cause of failure for young dogs is simply taking them to a trial too soon.

Happy training—and here's to your next Perfect Puppy! 🐾

*Sheila Booth is best known as the author of her award-winning book, *Purely Positive Training: Companion to Competition*. She has trained dogs successfully in several venues for more than 30 years. Her Belgian Malinois, ADCH VINO, just turned 10 and just finished his AX and V-NATCH.*

