

Beyond Tolerance—Shape for Demand

By Julie Daniels

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You want to trim your dog's toenails, so you're shaping for tolerance: of the clippers, of foot handling, of nail touching, and so on. You want your horse to ride in the trailer so you're shaping for tolerance: first of the trailer itself, of getting in, and then, of riding. We all know that even remote goals can be achieved this way. Some trainers are expert at counterconditioning, using a well-learned simple task to keep the subject calm and focused while we up the ante on tolerance—all well and good.

But, I want to talk about moving through tolerance and out the other side. What I want is for the dog to bark at me and run to the nail clippers on the counter, long before he can tolerate a full set of nails clipped. I want my horse to pin his ears and stomp when I turn him *away* from the trailer. He seems to say, "Don't give me that 'relief' nonsense! I'm *working* here!" This happens long before he is ready to walk into the trailer. It's stronger than being in the game. It's that winning attitude that takes over and runs the training sessions with focus, flourish, and intensity. I call it *demand*.

The Value of Demand

Demand is an intermediate level of learning, a measure of confidence and half-baked understanding of what is wanted. In the session, it looks brash and sometimes even sloppy. That's no problem. We are far from the finished product. We are at a good place for initiative and confidence to be foremost in importance. I am not thinking of stimulus control when I invite demand; I am looking for that powerful go-get-it attitude that will anchor the dog's confidence as the job gets more difficult and more technical later. Demand is not "Will this work?" Demand is "Click this! Hey! Click *this*! Hey, I'm *good* at this!!" That's what I want in my agility dogs. And the more I clicker train, the more I've learned to go for demand in everything, from nail clipping to trailer loading, and certainly for agility training. It works for me.

When shaping for demand, don't just gradually up the ante on complex tasks. Each element of difficulty deserves separate attention. Regulation obstacles bring too many challenging variables into play at once. So, you need to start with downscaled and simplified toys that will allow the dog to develop. Let him enjoy and explore the skill you want. You want the dog to own that piece of equipment, to play "101 things to do" with whatever contraption you've devised to isolate that particular skill.

Clicker Training Isn't Automatically Stress-Free

Because clicker trained subjects generally choose to work, it's tempting to present the whole task—for example, the regulation seesaw, perhaps propped against a pause table—and simply help skills and attitude evolve with your clicker. While the right trainer with the right dog might end up with a good performance, the chances are slim for most of us. Using the seesaw as an example, it has become popular to shape from square one on the regulation obstacle, and I don't like what I see!

When introduced this way, the dog does not fully explore the different elements of seesaw difficulty. What he does do is learn to get across the obstacle in some way despite his weaknesses. For example, I see many dogs, clicker-trained and otherwise, that do not have a handle on seesaw noise. They don't like the noise, but they generally tolerate it in order to earn a living on the obstacle. They do learn to perform the seesaw. That may sound okay, but it meets only the most minimal performance standards. Like all weak foundations, it will crack under pressure.

The top agility dogs have to make performance decisions at full speed. We want 12 weave poles done in 2.5 seconds, dogwalks completed in 2 seconds, and seesaws performed in 1.5 seconds. The courses today are tricky, so inadequate training is unsafe and irresponsible. Our dogs' skills and confidence should not be marginal.

I shudder to see clicker sessions with a dog over his head in work, tentatively asking whether this or that might be enough to win a click. When the dog routinely wants to do as little as possible, you are over facing him in the sessions, therefore, you are damaging his chances for full confidence. One beautiful thing about clicker training is that we allow the dog to experiment. But, first impressions are lasting, so the dog needs to be operating from strength early on. That's why I want to get to the demand stage long before the complete job at regulation difficulty is available to the dog.

The weakness of using regulation obstacles too soon is that too many challenges face the dog at once. For example, your early clicker sessions might find the dog walking up the ramp with front paws only, leaving the back ones on terra firma. Sure, you can gradually up the ante to three paws on, and then four paws. But, I think that is missing the point. The dog needs help with the individual elements of difficulty. It is likely that there is more than one problem contributing to his lack of confidence. So, don't just expect less before you click. Break the job *apart*, into its separate elements of difficulty. Then break each element down into smaller chunks. Go for demand in each element, building a huge bank account of skills and confidence.

The Agility Seesaw as an Example in Demand Training

What elements of difficulty distinguish the agility seesaw? I'll use these three main ones:

1. Noise
2. Balance
3. Height

Many people nowadays are clicker training the regulation seesaw by placing a platform, usually an agility pause table, under the high end. The benefits are three-fold:

1. The dog walks to a platform rather than out into thin air.
2. The plank does not fall to the ground but falls only to the table height, so the tip itself is modified. Lower tables, allowing more tip, are gradually introduced.
3. Padding is used to muffle the noise of the plank hitting the table.

This is a great idea, but for most dogs, it is not the best choice for step 1. If your dog begins to quake and shake on this arrangement, it's counterproductive to wait it out, clicking and treating while the dog worries his way along. When a clicker dog runs to the big seesaw and then trembles as he climbs on board, a big red flag should start waving in your mind! Especially if you are retraining a dog that already has a seesaw problem, the last thing you want is for him to be afraid. It makes much more sense to isolate each element of difficulty and shape each skill separately out of context. It doesn't take long.

Choose a step 1 that is easily accomplished by this dog and don't move on until the dog demands attention through the action. You've probably shaped many tasks for which your dog engaged in demand behavior along the way. The seesaw should be no different. Here's one way to start

from scratch so your dog will love seesaws, swings, wheelbarrows, sleds, anything unstable.

The Prerequisites: Ladder and Straight Planks

Start with an aluminum extension ladder and lure/free shape his stepping along between the rungs for start-up confidence and coordination. You can start by working across rather than the long way if necessary. Demand comes with the dog rushing into the contraption and prancing back and forth at a trot, looking ahead rather than at his feet. I trained one Briard that loved to step on the rungs rather than between. Sure, I clicked it! The ladder served its purpose. And, if you're uncertain how to recognize demand, just sit in a chair next to the ladder with clicker and treats in hand. The dog in demand mode takes one look at you and then charges directly to the ladder and begins operating. The dog in demand mode works you by working the ladder. He may or may not stop to pick up the treats you toss each time you click, but most importantly, he is not continually looking at you with a question on his face. He plays the ladder.

Next, prop an 8' plank on cinder blocks and free shape that until the dog is trotting it, turning around on it, jumping on and not falling off the other side, offering sits and high-fives up there, and so on. Laugh and enjoy his antics, and when he demands a click by overusing the prop, click it! That confidence will stand you well very soon. You want the dog to make up games. And, don't reserve early clicks only for ideas that work. That comes later. I'm more generous with new stuff than with the familiar, because I want a variety of brave, silly, and especially noisy games, and I want demand. If you've ever enjoyed the clicker game "101 things to do with a box," you'll love this.

Next Step: Bouncy Planks

Now change to a 12' plank (such as a regulation seesaw plank) and prop it on the blocks. The plank gets bouncier as you move the blocks toward the ends. I lure the dog into the bouncy section a couple times, clicking and feeding while minimizing the bounce. Free shaping is also fine—you know your dog. Many dogs scare themselves if they rush and feel the sudden bounce on their own, so I prefer initial luring. I click and treat (c/t) a forward step or two, then move the dog sideways off the plank before he hesitates. Soon the dog is demanding to get back on. That's when I go to free shaping. To my thinking, demand is the most important step; I don't move on without it. Enjoying the demand mode will get you antics like:

- Running along at full speed with any three legs on the plank
- Jumping on, off, on, off, and so on, down the line (as you up the ante on this one, it becomes a stunning sideways leap on, sticking the bouncy four-paw landing)
- Hopping the rear end only onto the plank
- Standing in the middle and getting the plank to bounce (this is usually discovered via the trick above or by operating with one foot on the ground)
- All manner of turns, spins, and tricks

I'm sure you have the picture. Can you take it? Not everyone likes to train this way! You have to be a process trainer, and you have to have the faith that your goal behaviors will ultimately be much more solid for the artful indulgence of all this nonsense now.

That said, many advanced dogs that were not trained this way could benefit from a quick remedial recess in ladder and bouncy plank play. Let your dog become so confident that he loves it when you use your foot to bounce the plank harder while he's up there. That's the lively raucous "Hey, can you ride this" game.

Next Step: Tippy Planks

Put a scrap of 2x4 under your 8' plank so the 2" fulcrum allows a minimal tip. (Note: if you are working on very soft ground, you may need a higher fulcrum in order to get any tip.) Whatever your path, soon it's only the tip that pays a c/t. Now we're really headed for noise. When the dog realizes that he is causing the tip/c/t, I start free shaping. I especially want the dog to demand by using noise. No doubt about it, he will snag the higher end and slam it down without getting on. Buy it! Perhaps he gets so powerful that he knocks the plank off the fulcrum. That's great! Noise is your friend in agility, and you'll get a much more confident seesaw performance if the dog loves the noise and uses it to make you click. If you've been appreciating noisy creativity up to now, this will come quickly.

Next step, out with the 2x4 and in with a 4x4: Same stuff (again, I lure the first couple times in that proactive way above, then free shape when he is in demand mode). Soon the dog is charging back and forth on the tippy plank, thereby constantly changing the pivot point and making a wild racket and getting rich. Now you should complicate the job with a Buja Board, which tips in all directions. The best Buja Boards have a smaller ball fastened to one side and a larger on the other, so they can be flipped over to change the challenge of balancing.

Next Step: Planks on Cinder Blocks

It's time to put the plank on a cinder block fulcrum and help your dog learn the two-part tip (it tips level, then down to the ground). There is a lot of positive transfer from this work to the regulation seesaw. After the dog is in demand mode, it is here that he learns about waiting at the bottom of the ramp. Self-control now begins to be an important component of his performance. Help the dog discover the benefits of self-control on this obstacle. You can do this by upping the ante on clicking for staying on the plank. Then start to shape the contact performance you want, such as two-on, two-off, or sitting or lying down at the bottom, touching a target, and so on. This step is also a good time to name the obstacle and to move toward stimulus control. I spend many sessions with the plank on a cinder block. It's fine to start with a 12' plank, which is easier to manage. But, work up to your 8' plank, which will tip more abruptly.

Now—The Regulation Seesaw

Use your clicker to get to the demand stage on noise and balance with your downscaled equipment. Then enjoy the regulation seesaw, knowing that you are drawing from a large bank account of skills and confidence. If you have an adjustable seesaw, the lower heights will be no problem. Then use the pause table trick to introduce the element of height. Pad the table



A dog balancing on a Buja board.

to muffle the noise? My dogs would be so disappointed! Noise pays well because agility is a noisy sport and the seesaw is a noisy obstacle. So put a tall pause table under the high end and let your dog run up and down, slamming the plank around and earning a living with antics and noise for a bit. That's what it looks like when the dog is ready for height. It's nothing more than a new twist on a familiar set of skills.

Once you've mastered the element of height, you can do as you did with the cinder block, and lure/target/free shape a steady performance. Introduce a lower table for more tip, and move toward stimulus control. You'll also love the game using two pause tables of different heights. The dogs run back and forth from one landing pad to another. Because of the strong foundation you've built by training in demand mode, the dogs become very fast very quickly.

General Rules of Shaping for Demand

A shaping session should never look like self-imposed emotional torture. Just because the dog chooses to work for his click does not mean that what you're asking is appropriate. It is amazing but true that many clicker trainers claim moral superiority because they are hands-off, all the while allowing their dogs to stress and frighten themselves. The beauty of the clicker method is in using your head to design a shaping program that makes learning easy and fun for the dog. Don't abuse the power of your clicker. Break the job apart into its separate elements of difficulty, and then shape each of those elements in smaller increments. Recognize and reinforce the early signs of initiative at each step, so the dog can begin to drive the training sessions in demand mode.

Rules of the Order of Operations in Shaping a Task

1. Itemize the elements of difficulty of the task.
2. Go after these skills separately. (As you know, it often makes no difference in which order you tackle them, and sometimes it's fine to overlap them. That is your judgment, based on that subject and that task.)
3. Shape for demand in each of the separate elements.
4. Combine elements. Clean it up as you go, whatever your performance cues and standards.
5. Polish the finished product. 🐾

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