



What Is a Handling System?

By Linda Mecklenburg

A handling system is simply the means of communication that you use with your dog on course. Think of it as the language you both speak. For your dog to reliably and promptly do what you ask, you both must understand what is being said. This can be more difficult than it sounds. Consider the language you use to communicate with other people; it consists of words that can be combined to create the desired message. The same message can be successfully conveyed in different languages, but to understand each other well, you should speak the same language, not interchange and use some words from one language and some from another.

Within one language, a single word may have multiple meanings. It is impossible to tell which meaning is intended when the word is used in isolation. Only when it is combined with other words or body language can you understand what the intended meaning is. If you are told, "You are bad," in conjunction with no other words or body language, you have no way of telling exactly what is meant by "bad" and you will be confused. If someone says, "You are bad," and frowns you might interpret that differently than if, in a different setting, someone says, "You are baaad," and smiles with a thumbs-up. In a language, it is the context of how the single word is used in conjunction with other words that leads to the interpretation of different meanings.

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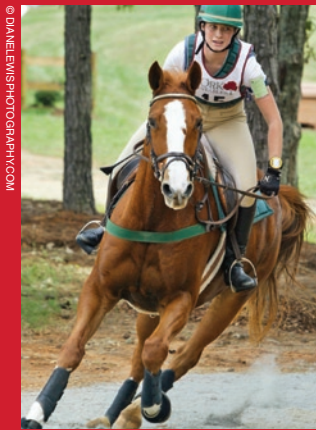
Cues in a System

Consider the primary cues you use to communicate with your dog in agility. The most common cues are your voice, hand signals, shoulder direction, location (position), and motion. Your cues in a handling system are like words in a language—they can be combined to create the desired message. The same message can be successfully conveyed via different systems, but for you and your dog to understand each other well it is best to use one system and not interchange. Within a language, a single word having different meanings is confusing unless it is combined with other words. The same is true for a single cue having two different desired responses. It is impossible for your dog to tell which response is desired when the cue is used in isolation. Only when it is combined with other cues can your dog understand what the desired response is. In a handling system, it is the balance of the cues that leads to different interpretations and results in the appropriate behaviors.

Even if you wanted to, it is difficult to isolate any of the cues so that your dog is cued by only one, independent of the others. Many times you may believe you are using a single cue when in fact you are inadvertently using several different cues simultaneously. Your dog may be interpreting a cue you are not even aware of. It is very common to use a specific verbal command or hand signal to cue a behavior; and your dog may respond appropriately, but as a result of some other cue, such as your motion, rather than your intended signal. It is also very common to use a specific verbal command or hand signal to cue a behavior and have your dog respond inappropriately as a result of some other cue such as your motion, rather than your intended signal. In order to be consistent with your cues, the first step is that you understand what those cues are.

Different Types of Systems

How you prioritize your cues defines your system. Agility courses are far too complex for just five separate cues to be effective. For example, if you were limited to cues that meant forward, stop, right, left, and back up, that would not be adequate. You can solve this problem by using combinations of the cues to achieve



Consider the primary cues that a rider uses to communicate with her horse. The most common cues would be hand signals (delivered through the reins), leg signals, and "seat" (shifts of weight in the saddle). Additional cues not used by all riders might include voice and whip. There are various equestrian riding "systems" in which the emphasis of each cue has variable importance. In each system there are cues that have higher or lower priority and it is the balance of how those cues are applied that produces the desired effect. Compare the difference between a rider's cues to go forward vs. turn, or go fast vs. slow, when riding a Thoroughbred racehorse, a dressage horse, and a Western pleasure horse. With each style of riding, the horse will understand the desired response, but the combination of cues given by the rider to obtain the responses from the horse will be different within each system.

the desired effect. How those cues are used in relation to one another and their order of priority is what makes one system different from the next.

In general, most systems emphasize one cue over the rest. There are verbal-based systems, motion-based systems, and position-based systems. Alternatively, some systems place much higher priority on the value of shoulder direction and hand signals than others. My handling system is based on motion, location, shoulders, hand, and verbal signals in that order of priority. I like to take the body language cues that my dog is naturally responsive to without training (motion, location, shoulders) and use those to my advantage. Other systems use trained skills to override the dog's natural tendency to cue off body language. For example, in my system, if I am decelerating on the

approach to an obstacle, my dog will naturally assume he should turn. Because I want my dog to give priority to my motion cue, I do not override my motion cue with a *Go On* command to keep him going straight. If I want him to go straight, I must go straight with forward motion. In contrast, with a more verbally oriented system I could lag behind and might indeed use a *Go On* verbal command to tell my dog to keep going straight and ignore my motion cues to turn. If I do so, over time I will lose my dog's natural responsiveness to my motion and increase his dependence on verbal cues. How I choose to keep my dog going straight in each system depends on which cue I want my dog to give priority to, motion or verbal command. The priority cue is the one he will be the most responsive to.

Choosing a System

There is no one system that is best for all dog and handler teams. Some systems are indeed more suited to certain teams' needs than others. Your mobility, your dog's level of drive and speed, and the venue that you compete in, with the unique challenges of each, dictate which system might be best to use. For example, if you are competing in NADAC where the distances between the obstacles is greater and the courses have relatively fewer turns, you would probably be best served by a verbal-based system. In a system that emphasizes verbal cues, your dog learns that the verbal cues override your body language cues. Thus you don't have to keep up with your dog and your dog will still understand where he is to go, as long as you tell him in a timely manner. If you fall behind on a straight-line sequence, you can cue your dog to drive to the obstacle ahead, even though you might appear to be decelerating to your dog, by training him to *Go On* with a verbal command. If you are competing in AKC where the distance between obstacles is decreased and the courses have relatively more turns, you and your dog might benefit from a motion-based system. In a motion-based system, your dog is taught that the motion cues take precedence over verbal commands. If you are competing in USDAA, with its variety of challenges in the games classes, including distance handling and occasionally bypassing obstacles, you might benefit from a more balanced system where the emphasis on the different types of cues is more equal.

If you are fast and athletic and can outrun your dog, a motion-based system is a viable choice for you. If you aren't as mobile as you'd like and your dog easily runs circles around you, then a more verbal system might be more appropriate. Alternatively, if your dog lacks confidence and needs motivating, a motion-based system is a better choice than a verbal one. If you want flexibility, the system you use can be more equally balanced.

Consistency in a System

The handling system you use should allow for consistent use of the cues. If you use a motion-based system, then you should never move inappropriately, which means you need to be mobile. If you use a verbal-based system, then you should never be late with your verbal commands. This seems like common sense, but many handlers are inadvertently inconsistent with their cues. For example, when I want my dog to assume he is to extend and go straight over a jump, I run forward. If I am frequently late for a front cross and then abruptly turn my dog back around me as he lands (in effect telling him he was wrong to trust my forward cues), I am being inconsistent. My dog may learn to cope by no longer trusting my forward cues and simply going slower so that he's "ready" for the late front cross. When I want my dog to turn away from me I might choose to move laterally toward him.

If I do a rear cross on the takeoff side of a jump and then, when he starts to turn, verbally redirect him to go straight, in effect saying, "Nope, you were wrong to turn; this time I want you to go straight," I am being inconsistent. My dog may learn to cope by always going forward after a jump until he hears a verbal command, despite my lateral motion (in effect, ignoring my body language). I may inadvertently train him to be verbally focused when that is not my intention, and wide turns will result.

When I want my dog to turn toward me I might choose to decelerate on the approach to the jump. If, on a closing sequence, I start to slow down prematurely while at the same time verbally telling my dog to go ahead (in effect, telling him he should ignore my deceleration cue), I am being inconsistent. My dog may learn to cope by no longer trusting my turning cues. Once again, I may inadvertently train him to be verbally focused.

Responsibilities in a System

In a handling system it is useful to expect your dog to default to certain behaviors in common course scenarios. This helps your dog predict what is expected in given course situation without waiting for your cues and react even faster. In every system there must be an understanding between the dog and handler as to who is responsible for what in order for the system to succeed.

Examples of dog responsibilities:

- Your dog should not backjump
- Your dog should not to cross behind your back
- Your dog should come to your right (left) side if your right (left) hand is used
- Your dog should not cross the plane of an obstacle without performing it
- Your dog should be in handler or obstacle focus

Examples of handler responsibilities:

- You should give your cues in a timely manner
- You must be sure your dog sees the intended obstacle

If you expect your dog to be responsible for these behaviors, to avoid inconsistency you should not:

1. Ask your dog to backjump
2. Ask your dog to go around behind you to realign for an obstacle or ask for blind crosses on the flat
3. Use your right hand when you want your dog on your left
4. Heel your dog past an obstacle

To do any of those things would be inconsistent with your dog's responsibilities and you can't expect him to respond reliably if you sometimes expect him to do one thing and sometimes expect him to do another. If you want your dog to reliably respond to your cues, no matter whether they are verbal, location, or motion cues, they must be given well ahead of time. They must also not conflict; for example, you cannot run with your dog directly at a tunnel opening and you cannot expect your dog to perform obstacles in his path if he does not see them.

In every handling system it should be clear to your dog whether he is expected to always drive ahead until told otherwise (priority given to obstacle



focus) or whether he is expected to wait for direction to take an obstacle (priority given to handler focus). If the system does not favor one or the other as the default behavior, you must be able to consistently cue which mode your dog should be in.

Adaptability of a System

A handling system needs to be adaptable to many types of dog and handler teams, and it needs to be flexible enough to be modified as course design trends change and the sport continues to evolve. For example, in an early version of my system, my dogs were not supposed to take an obstacle unless directed to do so. That didn't necessarily mean verbally, but it did mean I had to tell my dogs, in some way, to take each obstacle. They were not to assume they were to take anything. (This is an example of a system with priority given to handler focus.) That put a lot of responsibility on me as the handler, but it did afford me a high degree of accuracy. To keep up with the sport, my system was modified so that my dogs are now trained to assume they are to take what's in front of them and my cues for each obstacle are much more nonspecific. (This is an example of a system with priority given

to obstacle focus.) It stills puts a lot of responsibility on me as a handler because I must always present the dogs with the correct obstacle, but it helps me achieve more speed because I have less obstacle management to do.

Neither of these options are right or wrong, they are just different. Both are effective. But it is important to understand that in fact they are different because it affects how I handle each dog. Current course design is showing a trend toward being more technical in nature, which means it might be time to reassess. I may determine that some modification is appropriate and possibly bring back some of the elements of my system that I used in the past. A handling system ideally is flexible enough so that you can adapt to change without the entire system breaking down.

Why Use a Handling System?

Many handlers get along just fine without making a conscious effort to have a "system." If you are consistent about your cues and have a solid understanding of what each of you is responsible for, you and your dog probably have a system and

don't even know it. Still, most handlers benefit from the structure gained by using an established system. Simply following an established system correctly almost guarantees consistency. Since it can take several years to work out how to maintain consistency of cues within a system, using an established system is often the best option for most handlers.

Adhering to a system facilitates your dog's understanding of each single cue and ultimately of your combinations of cues. You should not use a single cue for different behaviors, whether intentionally or not. If so, you will confuse your dog. Your dog's understanding of your cues and of how to prioritize your cues allows him to confidently perform the desired response. No matter what level you aspire to compete at, whether you compete just for fun or aspire to make the World Team, bolstering your dog's confidence in your cues is of utmost importance. A confident dog is a happy dog. Confidence in your cues yields speed and accuracy. Adhering to a system helps clarify each of your responsibilities so that both you and your dog always know what to expect from

each other. That knowledge leads to trust, which leads to more confidence.

Finally, using a system not only solidifies your dog's understanding of your cues, it helps assure that you know what your cues mean, which is just as important. Using a handling system helps hold you accountable for understanding how to deliver your cues and for being consistent in their use. Consistent delivery of cues results in more trust and confidence in those cues, which in turn helps your dog respond and perform at the absolute best of his ability, which is of course the desired outcome!

Next month I will begin a series that will take an in-depth look at the handling system that I use. 🐾

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