

WHAT TO DO WHEN THINGS GO WRONG IN TRAINING OR COMPETITION

By Moe Strenfel



*"It's not what happens to you;
it's what you do about it."*

—W. Mitchell

Trying to list everything that could go wrong in either training or trialing would be like trying to list all the different types of bacteria found on the face of our planet (which is something like 5 nonillion or 5×10^{30}). When something goes wrong, it often happens in the blink of an eye; too quickly for most of us to react to "save" the off-course, the missed contact, the knocked bar, or any other myriad of problems. But we can focus on things you can do before and after things go wrong, thus increasing the likelihood that more things go right, more often.

BEFORE THINGS GO “WRONG”

Educate Yourself

If dogs were like bicycles, training would be much easier. A bicycle doesn't have emotional issues; it doesn't get afraid of a busy highway. It pretty much steers where you want it to go as long as you lean correctly and turn the handlebars. It stops when you apply the brakes and goes when you pedal.

But dogs are not like bicycles. They are living, breathing, and feeling creatures. Bicycles come with the gas, brakes, and steering already installed, while our agility dogs don't. Agility training should teach teams how to install brakes, steering, and a gas pedal so that we can get around a course or simple exercise. But that means we must have a true understanding of how our dogs learn. They learn according to the principles of operant conditioning and classical conditioning. Understanding what these principles are and how to apply them can help you become a much more successful trainer. Operant conditioning gives you tools to set up contingency plans so that you can fix things before they even have a chance to go wrong, or so that you can formulate a plan to fix an error after it has occurred.

Invest in some operant training education materials such as Bob Bailey's DVD *Fundamentals of Animal Training* or the book *How Dogs Learn* by Mary Burch and Jon Bailey. Attend some operant conditioning seminars or workshops, or take some private lessons with an operant agility trainer. Fill your mind with science, not witchcraft recipes gathered from traditional trainers who rely on fear, force, or intimidation to train dogs.

Change Your Mindset

“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”

—Winston Churchill

Before things go wrong, realize that a mistake is a learning opportunity for your team. Don't look at mistakes as something unforgivable; realize they can be starting points from which you can really put your team together. When disappointment, stress, or frustration rises, immediately replace that feeling with something else. When I feel frustration rising up in me I immediately tell myself, “Problem solve!” I envision myself in a Sherlock Holmes outfit, sleuthing my way to the answer. The image relaxes me, and thus my dogs, so we can work together to solve the “wrong.” I preplan this response so that when an error does occur I react appropriately.



There are many books and tapes available to help you deal with changing your mindset and working through disappointment and stress. I have read books by Jane Savoie as well as Lanny Bassham, and I use many of their tips. There is a huge array of free articles on the web that are available as well. Whatever avenue you choose to start your

new journey, stick to it and make the changes needed so you do indeed become the trainer your dog wants you to be.

Change Your Behavior

“Move out of your comfort zone. You can only grow if you are willing to feel awkward and uncomfortable when you try something new.”

—Brian Tracy

To change your dog's behavior, you must change yours. That process starts with education and changing your mindset, but it also requires that you develop better mechanical skills. Working in front of a mirror, practice being quiet and still with your body until after you have marked or clicked a behavior from an imaginary dog. Before you get your dog out to train, practice throwing reinforcers accurately to precise locations. Learn to control your body more precisely to cue your dog on course by practicing without your dog until all your handling steps are fluent. You can also work on your timing when doing this nondog work. Try to imagine where your dog will be when you execute that perfect front cross or when you start to cue your rear cross.

There are many articles and books about mental imagery, also called visualization or mental rehearsal, as it applies to sports. Applying the principles of mental imagery has been proven to increase your physical skills. Watch lots of video footage of smooth agility handlers to ingrain in your mind how it is suppose to look. Eric Larson has a wonderful free website at www.agilityvideoservice.com, where you can watch agility videos. Invest in a simple camcorder and start to tape not only your trial runs but your training as well. Watch your clips in regular speed several times, then at

decreasing speeds, 50% and 20%, to really start to analyze your behavior and how it affects your dog in training or trialing. If you don't know what you are looking for when you watch the clips, find someone knowledgeable who can help you analyze them.

Training Essentials

When things go wrong, it often means that your dog is not meeting your performance criteria. If you are disappointed, angry, or frustrated when your dog does something other than what you expected, you have just experienced a failure to communicate. Here are some ideas to help you make your communications with your dog crystal clear.

Use an Event Marker

A marker (often called a bridge) can be a particular spoken sound such as the word "yes," or it can be produced by a tool such as a clicker. A marker is a crucial tool. By being very consistent you will teach your dog that he must always *hear* his marker first, in correlation to some behavior that he is performing, and then second, he will have access to his reinforcer. This in particular helps the dog that mugs the trainer continually for food or toys or rushes from the ring to grab his toy or treat bag. The hardest part is being consistent about giving a marker before starting your behavior of delivering the reinforcer. Hand movement, leaning, or stepping before an auditory marker is given, can all become physical markers for the dog about when the reinforcer is coming. You don't want your physical movement to become the event marker for the dog. For instance, your dog leaping off a contact to grab the toy or cookie in your hand is not just a contact problem. It can mean the dog does not understand the criteria for

contacts in the face of a distraction, but it can also mean that your dog does not understand when he has access to the reinforcer due to an inconsistency in your behavior.



Split Criteria Apart, Not Your Head Open

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

—Albert Einstein

When working with your dog, know ahead of time exactly what standard will be reinforced and what will not. Splitting behavior into small components will bring greater understanding to your dog.

The most common error in dog training is not reinforcing the dog enough when training new behaviors. Rate of reinforcement is directly tied to splitting criteria. Break criteria down into small increments so the dog gets paid a lot in the beginning (always after your marker is sounded). This concept is very foreign to us. Our human payment system (we use a secondary reinforcer, which is money) is based on a person getting paid more as his or her experience increases. The reverse is true for your dog. Reinforce (pay) your dog a lot when learning and building any new behaviors. When your dog demonstrates he understands the

basic criteria you should become more selective with criteria (raise the standards slightly). So, for example, he won't get paid for every sit, but only the faster sits or the straighter ones or the ones where he is better balanced. You get to carefully select the criteria that encourage your dog to give you more.

Reinforcement is something that your dog values at that very moment. Petting and praising your dog are not reinforcing enough to build or maintain behaviors. If your dog does not find tugging reinforcing, then you cannot build or maintain behaviors by offering a game of tug. You could work on building value in that activity in separate training sessions, in other words teaching play, but you could not use it to reinforce other behaviors.



Devise an Emergency Plan

"Lack of planning on your part, does not justify an emergency on your dog's part."

—Moe Strenfel

Have a default behavior that you will immediately cue when things go wrong or if your dog has lost focus. Ah, yes, this has to be preplanned, doesn't it? And trained ahead of time! That means your dog looks at you (mental focus) and then moves toward you to a specific position in relationship to your body (physical linkup). The cue can be as uncomplicated as standing still for a moment to initiate a recall to an indicated side. Practice this default behavior away from agility until it becomes second nature to

you. Gradually select and reinforce only the fastest responses to the cue. Hopefully you won't have to use this emergency plan once you are skilled in splitting criteria, using a marker, and then reinforcing behavior so your dog never loses his focus and desire to work with you.

DURING THE "WRONG"

What Do I Do?

"Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to the error that counts."
—Nikki Giovanni

Always attend to your dog first when a mistake occurs, whether it is in training or trialing. Don't try to figure out where to go next, don't chat with your instructor or friend, don't rant and rave or jump up and down, and certainly don't turn and walk away from your partner. Your teammate deserves your full attention when an error occurs. Sync back up with your dog both mentally and physically, using your emergency plan. Decide what you should do after you have attended to your dog. It may mean that you take a break from training for a moment to plan what to do next, or it may mean that you continue the exercise without so much as a skipped heartbeat. Each team will need a different outcome to an error; it is up to you to know what your team needs or enlist the help of someone who has a comprehensive understanding of operant conditioning.

When Errors Keep Occurring

If two consecutive errors occur during training, make the exercise slightly easier so that reinforcement can be earned. You probably increased criteria too quickly and your dog's understanding of the behavior was compromised, resulting in an



increased number of errors. Split the criteria smaller, mark it in a timely fashion, and then reinforce. Gradually, over several repetitions, increase criteria. If you don't know what or how criteria should be increased, then enlist the help of an experienced, operant trainer, and start videotaping your training sessions.

AFTER THE "WRONG"

Get It in Writing

"Face your deficiencies and acknowledge them; but do not let them master you."
—Helen Keller

Put together a plan to make your team smoother, stronger and more communicative. Sit down and make a short list of what seems to be causing you difficulty. Then think about the items on your list and spend time planning how to address the problems and less time trying to fix them "on the fly." You want to train your dog to understanding, but you do not want to physically and mentally overwork him.

Each day that you train, write down whether you are making progress or not. If you are not, enlist help from an operant conditioning trainer and start consistently videotaping your training sessions, looking at your timing (use of your event marker), criteria (is it split small enough?), and rate of reinforcement (tied to criteria).

Keep in mind that many training issues come from one of four general categories:

- Emotional issues such as stress or fear, including over-the-top or high-arousal excitement (dog can't seem to focus on task).
- A physical problem with the dog, or the dog can't deliver the performance desired due to structure.
- The handler is not conscious of body cues given or not given (timing of cues is included in this category).
- The most common one: the dog is just not trained—he doesn't understand his job. The trainer has not clearly defined the expected criteria in a way that the dog understands.



Rehearse for Real Life (Before it Becomes a Real Disaster)

Since I can only affect my dog's behavior by changing mine, and now I have a log of the kinds of problems my team has, I can rehearse my own behavior if my dog does not meet my criteria. Mental rehearsal comes first; then, when I have my brain wrapped around it, I apply a physical rehearsal. An easy exercise to set up is to jog around a short numbered sequence without your dog. As you approach a "practice handler behavior point," have a helper shout out information,

such as, “He stopped short of his contact!” Or, “He left the contact early,” or, “He left the start line early,” or, “He ran off course into the tunnel.” Use whatever scenario your team needs to practice. You then have to practice your behavior immediately upon hearing the scenario. You may need to start your emergency plan or you may need to do absolutely nothing except continue running and smiling.

Check for Physical Problems

Dogs that are slow, refuse equipment, or hurry so fast they wipe out could have an underlying physical problem that cannot be solved with further training. Always monitor the physical condition of your dog. I encourage all my students to have regular veterinarian and chiropractic care for their dogs and to keep them at the correct body weight.



Next, consider whether your dog is fit enough to deliver the performance you desire. Balance, strength, and coordination are needed for both speed and accuracy. Regular regimens of work on a balance disc or theraball, along with cross-conditioning, such as



swimming and hiking are essential. But go even further than that. After a clean bill of health from a knowledgeable sports performance veterinarian, enlist the help of a qualified canine physical therapist to help target your dog’s physically weak areas with specific exercises. If all of this has been continually monitored and the dog is fine, then address the issues with the proper application of operant conditioning.

A WORD ABOUT TRIALING

“The trouble with not having a goal is that you can spend your life running up and down the field and never score.”

—Bill Copeland

Trialing gives you an opportunity to test your team’s carefully executed training plans and all that mental and physical rehearsal you did. It gives you a measuring stick of where you stand in regards to your goals. Even if your goal is to have fun with your dog, your dog will have more enjoyment by having a human teammate who is a skilled trainer and handler, so there is less confusion.

Many people believe that some sort of correction should be administered when the dog does something “wrong” when trialing. Unless your dog understands why he is being walked or carried out of the ring, any type of correction should be left out

in the wood shed, in Egypt. I find that most people have not fully trained their dogs before entering them in their first trial. That is okay, as long as they keep their expectations low and don’t take their frustration out on their dogs.

Any type of negative punishment (removal of an anticipated reinforcer) should be first administered in training, not at an actual trial. Removing a dog from the course when he finds the next obstacle reinforcing is like denying a crack addict a hit. Unless he understands why he is being removed and he understands *what* behavior he must perform to have access to the rest of the course (the hit of crack), you will only create more frustration and confusion in your dog.

If a dog is not addicted to agility, maybe because he wasn’t reinforced enough for each individual part of the behavior chain we call a course, I would never consider removing the dog for any “wrongdoing.” For dogs with emotional issues, such as fear or stress, not even a disapproving look from the human team member should be administered during trialing or even in training.

Do remember that if your team is making the same mistakes over and over again in trialing you should address the problems with proper application of operant conditioning in training, with you doing more mental and physical rehearsal than actual training with your dog.

“There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.”

—Colin Powell 🐾

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