

Which Way to Excellence?

By Kathy Keats

This month, let's compare the speed of your dog through a turn with your dog's straight-line speed, which we determined last month. Look at your yards per second (YPS) from last month and then look at the pinwheel drill in **Figure 1**. What do you think your YPS will be for this new drill? Write it down.

Set up the drill with the jumps 15' apart, measured on geometric straight lines, so that jumps #2 and #4 are 20' apart measured center to center. Position your video camera so that it is right on the start/finish line, but far enough back that you can still see the rest of the drill. Ideally, use electronic timing, marked with a T on the diagram.

Wheel the drill for yardage, preferably in straight lines from center to center of each jump (see the "Measuring Yardage" sidebar).

Run the drill three times, handling it the same way each time. Start with the most simple handling option: staying on the inside of the turn. Using one of the record-keeping sheets provided last month, record the time for each run and any faults. Also, note the number of strides the dog takes between jumps #3 and #4. Your records will look something like **Figure 2**.

How close was your guess of what your YPS would be for this drill? Are you surprised at the difference? Many dogs will drop over 1.5 YPS in this drill compared to running a straight line.

What should your YPS goal be for this drill?

- If your dog can run a straight line at *over* 6.5 YPS, then your goal is to get your YPS for this pinwheel to within 1.25 YPS of your straight-line performance. For example, if your dog did last month's straight-line drill in 6.5 YPS, you want to get him to at least 5.25 YPS in a simple pinwheel like this one.
- If your dog runs a straight line in *under* 6.5 YPS, then your goal is to get your YPS for this pinwheel to within 1 YPS of your straight-line performance. For example, if your dog did last month's straight-line drill in 5 YPS, you want to get him to at least 4 YPS in a simple pinwheel like this one.

You may find that your dog is faster in the pinwheel than dogs that appear to run much faster. This happens because your dog is more efficient. Agility is not about straight lines — it is about turning.

Now, walk the drill again and see how many different ways you can come up with to handle this simple pinwheel. There are at least nine different ways to handle it. These are not necessarily what you would do with your dog, but they are possible choices. The answers are on the next page. Add any others you can think of.

Over the next several weeks, set up this drill exactly the same way and try timing it using all the different handling techniques listed. What is faster for your dog right now? What are the things you don't do well? What do you need to practice? Often, the simplest handling may be the fastest, because the dog can concentrate on his job and not have to keep watching you for information. With other dogs, influencing their path and striding might be better. Remember: the judge can influence handling required based on the direction you are coming from and where you are going next on the course, so you would ideally like to be able to handle this drill equally well several different ways.

Often, I have found that setting a tight line for big dogs from #2 to #3 is not helpful because it sends them flying out over jump #3, away from the direction they need to go next, as shown by the pink path in **Figure 3**. With small dogs this doesn't seem to affect their times, unless they are big jumpers. Allowing the big dogs to land a bit long after #2 gives them an angle to accelerate out of the turn over #3, #4, and #5 (see the red path in Figure 3), rather than forcing them to scramble to get back to #4. Setting a tight line from #2 to #3 may mean your dog is faster from #1 to #3, but not necessarily faster from #1 to #5, because the first part of the sequence influences the speed of the second part.

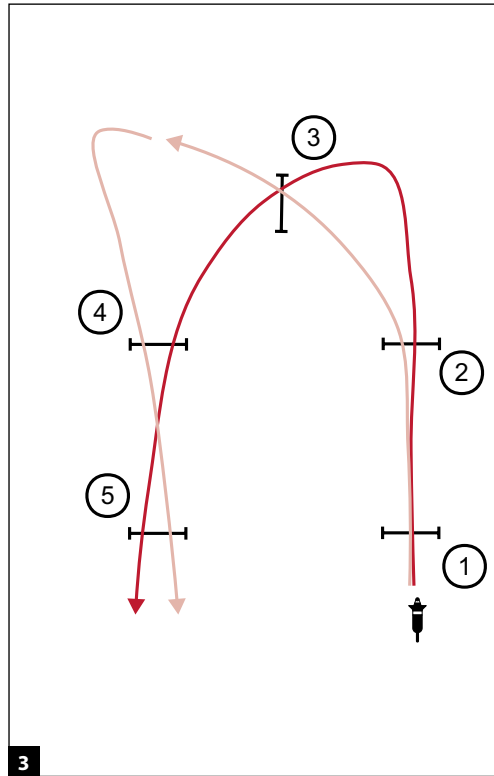
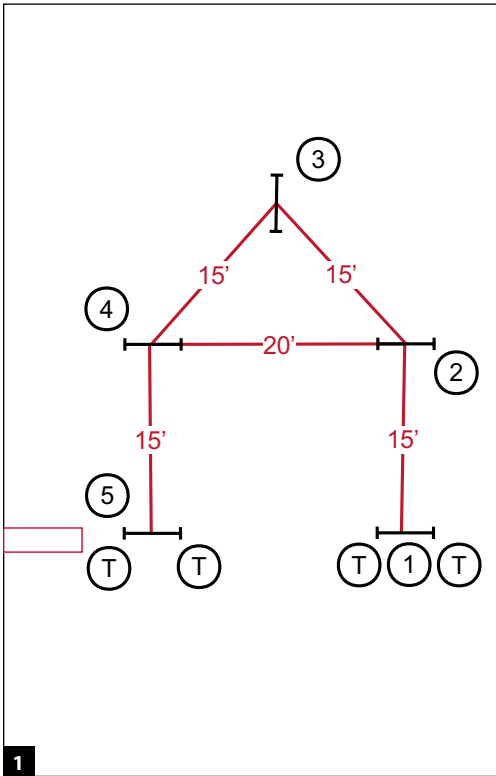
It is not so much the width of the turn that matters, but the efficiency of the striding and the line for that dog. On average, a dog's stride takes 0.3 seconds. Although 0.3 seconds doesn't seem like much, remember this drill is only 20 yards in length. A course might be 180 yards long. Over 180 yards, if your dog adds an unnecessary stride every 20 yards, it means his overall time will be 2.7 seconds slower.

For a dog to confidently drive forward, he needs to be confident about where he's going. By training common patterns and teaching the dog simple cues, the dog can eliminate strides because he is not second-guessing where he is going. You now have a straight line and a pinwheel in your arsenal of patterns and you are starting to understand what your dog's baseline speeds are.

Set up this drill three times each week for the next four weeks and then measure your times again. As you repeat the drill over the next four weeks, your dog will get faster and more confident.

If the drill seems too easy for your current level, add distractions around the outside of the drill, such as a tunnel facing jump #2 or #3, and see if you can do the pinwheel as fast as you can when there are no off-course opportunities.

Next month we will look at the S-shape pattern. 🐾



Measuring Yardage

Unfortunately, the way we measure courses today is not consistent, because it is based on a subjective model – the average dog's path. It would be more consistent if the same person measured the course all the time, but still not ideal. So, I like to measure in straight lines from the center of one obstacle to the center of the next obstacle. I recommend that you measure your drills in straight lines because there is less room for variation. If you are always the one measuring, that adds another element of consistency.

I don't worry about the dog's path because what matters is how fast the dog can do the pattern of obstacles, regardless of the path he takes. For example, if two completely different styles of handlers ran this pinwheel drill – suppose it was Elicia Calhoun and her very tight Australian Shepherd, Suni, versus Chris Parker and her blazingly fast Border Collie, Mayhem – both dogs would take radically different paths. The important thing is not the dog's time relative to the path the dog took, but the dog's time relative to the pattern of the obstacles. Eventually, I hope we'll create a set of geometric rules to make measuring patterns more consistent.

When you wheel these patterns, also walk them for yardage. Learn how many strides you take over four or five yards. Over time you can learn to walk distances fairly accurately, and this will be a useful skill as we advance toward course work.

Dog: *Fido* Date: *April 5, 2004*

Ref: *#1 (first time for drill)*

Comments: *Fido took 4 strides b/t jumps 3 and 4. Want that to be 2 strides. Used a tug. Stayed on inside, no lead-out*

10	20	30	40	50	60	70
90						
80						
70						
60						
50						
40						
30						
20						
10						
10	20	30	40	50	60	70

Yardage: *20 yards* Location: *Back yard*

Time 1: *4.5* YPS: *4.4* Surface: *Grass*

Time 2: *4.0* YPS: *5.0* Weather: *Overcast, 65°*

Time 3: *3.5* YPS: *5.7* # Reinforcers: *3*

Average Time: *4.0 sec* # of Attempts: *3*

Average YPS: *5.0* Success Rate: *100*

Answers to Quiz

The following are nine options for handling the simple pinwheel drill. Can you think of others?

1. Stay on inside and send dog around pinwheel
2. Stay on inside, but go into pocket close to #3
3. Stay on inside, go deep between #2 and #3 and wrap dog around hip
4. Front cross on landing side of #4
5. Front cross on take-off side of #4
6. Rear cross between #1 and #2
7. Rear cross between #2 and #3
8. Front cross between #2 and #3, then immediately rear cross on the take-off side of #3, ala Greg Derrett's run across your feet technique
9. Front cross between #3 and #4, then immediately rear cross on the take-off side of #4