

When I ask agility competitors what they are least satisfied with, more often than not they answer contacts. Clearly, we all seek faster and more accurate contacts. Still the work of achieving, improving, and maintaining contact excellence can be daunting, leaving many stuck at a “good enough” performance level.

How do you know if you’re stuck at good enough? Start by writing down a detailed description of your ideal contact performance and comparing it, objectively, to your dog’s current performance.

Except for the possibility of physical problems, I believe that the dog’s understanding of the behavior you want on the contacts, your timely and exciting reinforcement of the behavior, and a program for routine maintenance are the keys to improving the speed of your dog’s contact performance.

A white fluffy dog, possibly a Samoyed, is captured in motion running on a blue teeter bar. The dog's fur is blowing in the wind, and its mouth is open, showing its teeth. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green grass and colorful structures.

Speeding Up Your Two-on/Two-off Contacts

By Rachel Sanders

The Ideal Contact Performance

Here’s my ideal performance for the teeter and dogwalk: I want an independent obstacle performance from my dog, which means that *regardless of my movements*—stopping short, running past to the next obstacle, doing a front cross, moving laterally, or layering another obstacle—my dog is not distracted from his task of driving into the two-on/two-off position and maintaining that position until he hears my *verbal* release cue. For speed, I expect my Border Collies to complete a dogwalk in less than 2 seconds and the teeter in about 1 second. For my Jack Russell I expect a dogwalk time under 2.5 seconds and for the teeter under 1.8 seconds.

Ideal Body Position

Body position is also critical. I define two-on/two-off position as two front paws straight on the ground off the end of the board with two hind legs on the board and the dog's weight transferred onto the rear end. Weight transfer to the rear assembly prevents stretching and losing control of the teeter board. Transferring weight also helps to lessen the impact on the shoulders and back when descending the A-frame and helps the dog to maintain contact with the dogwalk down ramp if he descends rapidly. As my dog drives into the two-on/two-off position, his focus should be straight and low.

The ideal contact position



Note: This article is most concerned with two-on/two-off contact performance and improving the speed of the dogwalk and teeter. If, however, the A-frame is performed slowly while the dogwalk and teeter are executed with good speed, try adjusting your dog's end position on the A-frame to make the position more comfortable. I have worked with some dogs that are reaching so far forward on the A-frame or have their rear feet so high up on the ramp that their backs are in a concave position. By teaching these dogs to bring their rear feet lower on the board, their weight is more evenly distributed from front to back and the spine is in a more relaxed position. If you cannot make your dog more comfortable in this position you may need to find an alternative contact behavior for this obstacle. I am not a fan of two-on/two-off for the A-frame although I do teach it, if I believe I have no alternative.

The Release

Just like a dog learning to stay in a sit position must know what gives him permission to release from that position, a dog that is expected to hold a two-on/two-off position on a contact must understand what releases him from that position. Understanding of the release cue is an integral part of my dogs' contact behavior.

Once the dog drives into the two-on/two-off position, he waits for my *verbal* release cue. When I give the release cue I may be standing still or I may be moving. Regardless, I want the dog to release *only on a verbal cue*. Therefore, I stagger the timing of my motion and the release cue—I *never* give the release cue *with the start* of any physical motion or action. If I am standing still, for example, I will either give the release cue and *then* start to move afterward; or I will start to move, and then once I am in motion, I will give the release cue.

In addition, I isolate any arm cues or head turns either before or after my release cue. So, for example, if I am moving and need to raise my arm to indicate the next obstacle in sequence, I give the arm signal either before my verbal release or after it. I do *not* want to be raising my arm and giving my release cue simultaneously.

How I Train the Contacts

If I am training two-on/two-off contacts for all three contact obstacles, I teach the motion part of the teeter at the same time I teach the two-on/two-off position on a board. I do include a nose touch with the initial training of two-on/two-off. (Nose touches are always done between the front paws.) In training I support the nose touch as a secondary behavior to two-on/two-off to reinforce the dog's head remaining straight and low. Without the nose touch there is a tendency to reinforce the dog's looking at the handler, which can lead to the dog turning and exiting the board sideways. I do not ask for a nose touch in competition. I then backchain the dogwalk to completion before I start the dog on the A-frame. This keeps the amount of repetitive A-frame training to a minimum. The teeter training may be completed around the same time as the dogwalk as long as I don't encounter any evidence of fear of the moving board.



A nose touch should be done between the dog's front paws.

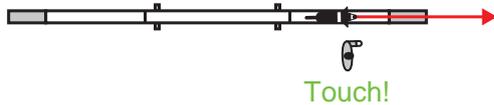
I use *Touch* as the cue for two-on/two-off. For some dogs the two-on/two-off position is implied with the dogwalk or teeter cue; however, I prefer to have both a cue for the obstacle and a cue for the contact position so that I can focus my training on the two-on/two-off behavior. Because of these separate cues, if I do not give the two-on/two-off cue, my dogs are unlikely to stop.

Does Your Dog Understand the Contact Behavior You Want?

Before starting a training program to speed up your contacts, you should be comfortable that your dog has no physical issues impeding his performance.

Here are some tests for you to do with your dog so that you can determine if he really understands your required contact behavior. I have added some examples of possible responses from your dog.

Note: If you are unable to get your dog onto the exit ramp of the dogwalk, you can do the tests with the dog running over the full obstacle as long as you can leave the dog in a stay or have someone hold the dog. For each test you will need to leave your dog in front of the up ramp while you lead out to a position halfway along the *exit* ramp.



Test 1

Start your dog halfway down the exit ramp of the dogwalk. Stand to the side of your dog, and without moving forward yourself, give your dog his two-on/two-off cue and observe what happens.

Dog moves hesitantly forward but does not reach the two-on/two-off position

Dog doesn't move at all

Dog moves into the two-on/two-off position but is curled toward you

Dog moves into the ideal two-on/two-off position: two front paws straight on the ground off the end of the board with two hind legs on the board and the dog's weight transferred onto the rear end

Other

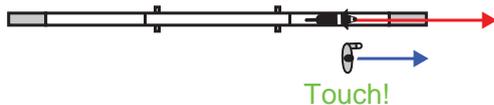


Test 2

Start your dog halfway down the exit ramp of the dogwalk. Next, stand a few feet behind your dog. And again, without moving forward give your dog his two-on/two-off cue and observe what happens.

Dog moves backward up the board and stands slightly behind you

Dog reacts in any of the ways listed above for the first test

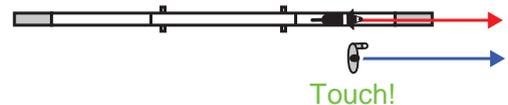


Test 3

Start your dog halfway down the exit ramp of the dogwalk. Stand to the side of your dog, give your dog his two-on/two-off cue, and run with your dog. Stop with your toes just at the edge of the end of the dogwalk plank and observe what happens.

Dog moves with you but stops a little short and has four feet on the board

Dog reacts as in any of the previous examples



Test 4

Start your dog halfway down the exit ramp of the dogwalk. Stand to the side of your dog, give your dog his two-on/two-off cue, and move with your dog. But stop a few feet beyond the end of the dogwalk and observe what happens.

Dog moves with you and stops in a perfect two-on/two-off position

Dog reacts as in any of the previous examples

To underscore the results of what can happen without comprehension, try this test with an unsuspecting human friend. Ask your friend to walk away from you and then observe what happens. This request should be deliberately vague, for example say, "Go in that direction away from me." Most people walk several feet forward and then hesitate and turn back seeking more clarity. They often ask: "How far? This way? Can I stop now?"

Now ask your friend to walk away from you and tell her specifically where she should go. For example tell her, "Move forward and touch the left upright of the green jump with your right hand," and observe what happens. Your friend will probably move quickly to the green jump and touch the correct upright with the correct hand. Most likely, she will not hesitate or look back until the task is completed.

Occasionally I have had clients run ahead quickly when I give them this test, although I had never specified the speed of travel. When I ask them, “Why did you run?” I get answers ranging from “We only have an hour and I want to work my dog” to “I knew where to go so it just seemed the best way to get there.” Whatever their answer, I believe that clearly understanding the task as well as the reinforcement of getting my stupid game over with contributed to a speedy completion.

If your dog is unsure of his task, your training must start there. You need to work on a step-by-step training program to backchain the two-on/two-off position. There is much literature and video available on this subject, covering many successful methods. Once your dog fully understands his job, come back to this article so that you can learn how to maintain your newly trained contacts for the rest of his agility career.

Does Your Dog Understand the Release?

The dog must understand the release cue if he is to be expected to remain in the two-on/two-off position until he hears the verbal release cue. To test this understanding, do the following tests with your dog.

Test 1

Sit your dog by your side. Without moving, give your verbal release cue. Does your dog get up?

Test 2

Sit your dog by your side and give him two or three treats. Without moving, give your verbal release cue. Does your dog get up?

Test 3

Sit your dog and move 10' away. Walk in a circle around your dog, and while you are walking, give your verbal release cue. Does your dog get up?

Have you muddled your verbal release cue with body language? If you have been moving away from your dog or raising your arm while simultaneously giving your verbal release cue, your dog will be unlikely to release without the additional physical cues.

Work on training yourself and your dog to release without additional motion. Isolate any arm cues, hand signals, or other movement (even turning your head to look for the next obstacle) either before the verbal release cue or after it as discussed earlier in the article.



The advertisement features a central graphic of a large, golden-brown popcorn bucket with a red and white striped top. The text "Fresh Features" is written in a large, red, bubbly font across the top of the bucket. Below this, the slogan "Get 'em while they're hot!" is written in a black, cursive font. At the bottom of the bucket, the "Clean Run" logo is displayed in blue, with a silhouette of a dog jumping above the text, and the website "www.cleanrun.com" is listed below it. To the left of the bucket is a DVD cover titled "RELIABLE RUNNING A-FRAMES" by Rachel Sanders, showing three dogs on a yellow ramp. To the right is another DVD cover titled "CONTACTS Bridging the Gap BETWEEN TRAINING AND COMPETITION" by Rachel Sanders, showing a dog on a ramp.

Finally—a realistic approach to teaching your dog an accurate and consistent running A-frame! Rachel Sanders shares her hugely successful “box method” in this new 2-DVD set.

Did you teach your dog a fast and accurate 2-on/2-off contact only to find it’s now failing you in the ring? Rachel shares her method for bridging the gap between training and competition so you can consistently achieve your ideal contact performance in the ring.

Reinforcing Successful Contact Performances

In addition to reinforcing the dog for getting into the two-on/two-off position, an important part of building speed on the contacts is to make the release exciting for your dog.

The two-on/two-off behavior always ends with a release, and I always reinforce that release. Whatever I use as reinforcement must be worthwhile for my dog. The dog must enjoy and be excited about the reward. The result is that the release becomes part of the reinforcement for the dog getting into position. The faster the dog gets into the two-on/two-off position, the quicker he is released to something that he finds very exciting. Arguably, the best reinforcement for your dog in the ring is permission to move on to the next obstacle.

You need to reinforce your dog for *every successful contact* he performs whether you are in the initial stages of training your dog to do the contact or you are an experienced team practicing complicated sequences that include contacts.

Working the Contact Obstacle by Itself

When rewarding contacts I mix up the reinforcement that I give for the two-on/two-off position as well as the reinforcement that I release the dog to. I use both food and toys. If your dog loves food but doesn't like toys, then you can use food-stuffable toys. I have also used a Greenie, bully stick, and pig's ear for the dog to grab and tug with.

Food can be delivered to the dog from my hand or, if I am away from the dog's side, I will throw the food to the dog (you may need to practice accurate throwing). I expect the dog to remain in position on the board and eat the food; then I will release the dog.

You can throw toy rewards toward the dog, and then immediately release the dog from position to play with the toy. For example, if I'm ahead of the dog, I will throw the toy back to him and release him.

Alternatively, when rewarding with toys, you can tug with the dog while he remains in the two-on/two-off position; then release the dog with a verbal cue and continue to play with him off the board.



Unless I am sequencing to another obstacle, tugging with the dog in the two-on/two-off position, or ahead of the dog and throwing the toy back to him, I usually release my dog to a stationary toy placed several feet forward from the base of the plank. On release, my dog drives straight forward to the toy and then we can engage in a vigorous game of tug, building more excitement into both the two-on/two-off position and the release.

I also sometimes release my dog and run with him to the hose or pool. Other times I may release the dog to a soccer ball to push around. Use something that your dog really likes.

Working the Contact in Sequence

When working the complete contact obstacle in a sequence, my position and handling maneuvers vary depending on how the course needs to be handled. I may release the dog immediately after he is in two-on/two-off and allow him to continue the sequence—the next obstacle is the reinforcement. I may throw a toy toward him and then verbally release him to get the toy. Or, I may run in and have a game of tug while he is still on the board. However I decide to reinforce a good response, I always end the two-on/two-off behavior with a release cue.

Speed and Position Work

The Dogwalk: “Bounce into Position” Game

The “Bounce into Position” game encourages the dog to drive into the two-on/two-off position with more speed. It is easier to motivate a dog if he is on the ground rather than waiting on the board for the cue to move into his contact position. To play this game, however, the dog must already understand how to drive into position from the board.

I restrain my dog on the ground to the side of the dogwalk and give the cue *Touch*. The dog jumps onto the board and into the two-on/two-off position. I either immediately release the dog to a toy on the ground, or I play tug on the board while the dog remains in position and then release. In either case, I play with the dog after the release.

When asking for the bounce into position, I make certain that I myself am not moving when I say *Touch*, thereby insuring that the dog’s response is on my verbal cue and not linked to my body motion.



The Bounce into Position game encourages the dog to drive into the two-on/two-off position with speed. Here the dog is rewarded by throwing the toy to her while she’s still on the board.



With success you can increase your distance from the dogwalk and send the dog to jump on the board from the side.

The Teeter

I use similar methods to build speed on the teeter. Time is lost on the teeter when the dog hesitates or stops when the board starts to move. I want my dogs to enjoy running across a moving board. I place two different height tables under the teeter, for example a 24" table at the start of the plank and a 20" table at the end. Initially I move with my dog, offering the toy as he is close to the end of the teeter board, and we have a game of tug on the lower table. When the dog becomes totally confident running on the board with me next to him, I leave the dog on the first table and lead out to the lower table, facing the direction that the dog is travelling. I call the dog to me while I offer the toy and then we play tug on the lower table.

Note: Ensuring that your dog does not leap for the toy is important. If he starts to leap, offer the toy slightly sooner and pull the dog off the plank and onto the table to tug.

As the dog becomes more confident, I gradually lower the height of both tables, increasing both the pitch of the teeter and the drop of the board to the table. I now run the dog over the teeter in both directions, encouraging the dog to drive through the pivot point and contact zone to the table without leaping off the board for the toy. I continue to allow the dog to leave the board to play tug on the table as long as I have the end table in position. As soon as I remove the end table I ask for the two-on/two-off position. Most dogs weighing over 12 pounds can safely perform two-on/two-off on the teeter if they transfer their weight into their rear end as the board lowers.



Starting on the higher table, move with the dog. Offer the toy as the dog reaches the end of the plank. Play tug on the lower table.

When the dog is confident running with you, lead out and recall the dog. When the dog is in the contact zone offer the toy and tug on the table.

In much the same way as the bounce into position game performed on the dogwalk plank, I prop up the teeter on one end so that the other end is slightly off the ground and ask my dog to get into the two-on/two-off position. I want the front feet to hit the teeter board close to the end, followed immediately by the rear feet as the front feet move off the board into the two-on/two-off position. As the dog gains more confidence I raise the height of the drop. I encourage the weight transfer during this game by tugging with a toy and by delivering food in such a way as to encourage a slight rock back. As an alternative to a toy, I have also used a Greenie, bully stick, and pig's ear for the dog to grab and tug with.

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Prop up the teeter on one end so that the other end is slightly off the ground. Starting the dog from the side of the plank, ask the dog to get into the two-on/two-off position. As the dog gains confidence, gradually raise the height of the drop.

Routine Maintenance Work

Think back to how much training went into building your dog's initial contact performance. Now consider how long it has been since you focused on contact training and how much you may have let your performance criteria slip during competition. It is not so surprising that the initial speed and accuracy we had may have dwindled.

Once you train your ideal contact performance, you need to maintain it. This means that you need to do some back-to-basics contact training with your dog once every two weeks or so. My maintenance work includes:

- Position work
- Release work
- Speed work

In addition, if I have noticed any deviation from my ideal contact performance in competition, then I will focus more on one area than another. Here are some typical examples:

If I notice that my dog is turning in toward me during his contact behavior in the ring, then I will work on some simple backchaining while I stand behind my dog or off to the side. I reward only the responses that meet the contact criteria I have set. In the case of turning toward me, I'm looking for the dog to have two front paws straight at the end of the board, with his head straight and low. I can further reinforce the correct response by releasing my dog forward to a toy on the ground or by asking for nose touches. Since the nose touches must be between the two front paws, the release should occur when my dog is facing straight ahead.

If I notice my dog self-releasing when there is a set of weave poles or a tunnel directly ahead of the contact, I vary my release work to include different obstacles as the reward following the contact. I'll practice this until the response from the dog consistently meets my wait-for-release criteria.

If my dog starts to reach forward on the teeter and is not maintaining the weight transfer, for example, I may go back and encourage the weight shift by playing tug on the teeter before I release.

In Conclusion

To develop and maintain speed and accuracy on contacts we must develop a behavior that is comfortable for our dogs to perform. We must strive to train the behavior so that the performance is clearly understood and build in a history of reinforcement so our dogs enjoy performing the obstacle while meeting the criteria we have set. 🐾

Rachel Sanders has competed in agility since 1994, and with her Border Collie, Whist, and JRT, Trump, has won three USDAA Grand Prix of Dog Agility Championships and a Steeplechase Championship. Rachel and BC Fable are members of the 2008 USDAA World Team and will be among those representing the U.S. at the IFCS Agility World Championships. In addition to seminars she teaches full time at her agility center in Atascadero, California. Contact her at www.fastforwarddogsports.com.