Contents

Acknowledgments

So many people have contributed to this book it is impossible to thank everyone individually. Most will not even be aware of their contribution, yet every agility handler I've observed over the last twenty years in some way influenced these pages.

Special thanks are due to Lisa Baird for her meticulous work making sure each and every diagram in this book was accurate (a monumental task). I also wish to thank Giuliana Lund, who offered her expertise, provided valuable insight, and reviewed many chapters for me, making certain that I kept my thoughts logical, organized and consistent (another challenging task).

Thank you to Marianne Harris, Marcy Rauch, Marcille Ripperton, and Mary Ellen Barry who all contributed to the book in some way, as well as Blake Stafford. Thank you to Sue Klar whose dog Zesta appears in several photos.

I want to particularly express my appreciation to Lisa Kucharski, who really stepped up to the plate when I needed her. She helped review new material, proofread, renumber figures, and organize the glossary. Whatever was needed, she did it. Moreover, Lisa helped me keep my sanity as I struggled to bring this project to a timely conclusion.

I owe many thanks to John Spivey, who literally took thousands of photographs for this project. Whenever I needed a photo, I would go to the collection and search for a suitable image. Lynne Brubaker, who deserves special recognition for her efforts, shot the cover photo. Lynne generously traveled to my facility, and, despite the fact that I was injured the morning of the photo shoot, she was still able to magically capture the essence of teamwork in agility that I had hoped to convey.

This book was not an easy project to take on and it would not have come to be if it weren't for my editor at *Clean Run,* Monica Percival. Although she knew it would be an overwhelming and time-consuming endeavor, Monica embraced the challenge of publishing this book. She personally devoted many hours to making this book as reader-friendly as possible. Monica went out of her way to see that my vision materialized on the pages, for which I am very grateful.

Thank you to the members of my online discussion forum. Their input and feedback proved to be very valuable in helping me determine the best way to convey the handling concepts in print. Gold stars for each of them!

Of course, I must also thank my students, many of whom unknowingly served as test subjects over the years. In the early days, some of my handling concepts were considered a bit unconventional; yet so many of my students trusted my judgment regardless, remaining loyal and supportive. To those students I owe a debt of gratitude since they inspired me to persevere and to pursue my dream, which was to devise an approach to handling that would be successful for all teams.

Finally, I would like to thank the dogs. Obviously my own dogs were deeply involved in the development of this book and I could go on and on about their specific contributions. Years from now, when I reflect back about this project, I'm sure that fond memories of Honey, Doodle, Nifty, Spiffy, Awesome, Stellar, Neat, Super, Wonder, Special, and Scopey will bring a smile to my face. Each of my dogs played a role, either directly or indirectly, in the writing of this book. The three that probably had the greatest influence on the pages that follow are:

- Doodle, whose exuberance for the sport got me hooked.

- Nifty, who seemed to read my mind and know where we were going before I cued her. She is responsible for making me aware of motion and the natural cues.

- Awesome, with whom I have shared some of the most treasured moments of my life both on and off the agility course.

In reality, though, ALL dogs in agility deserve credit for making this book what it is. And all they had to do was what comes naturally.

Foreword

I got my first Border Collie in 1994 and stumbled upon dog agility at a local park shortly thereafter. I was fascinated, and enrolled in classes immediately. My first beginner's class consisted of five weeks of obstacle training, but not much handling instruction. So I learned to get around the course by racing my dog and shouting *Come.* I had no knowledge of the impact of my physical cues on my dog.

I had no idea at that time how much my life would be changed by my newfound hobby. Today, I teach agility full-time and I have accomplished a lot with my dogs, earning six medals (including three gold medals) at the IFCS World Agility Championships and dozens of placements and podium spots at the USDAA Cynosport World Games. I am grateful to the many people who have helped me along the way; but, in the last several years, Linda Mecklenburg has helped my handling reach a new level.

I have always admired Linda's smooth, fluid handling style and I loved to watch her. I was impressed by her ability to read her dogs and handle them as individuals. I attended my first seminar with Linda in the summer of 1996, but it wasn't until 2006 that I had an epiphany thanks to her ideas about motion.

That year, at the USDAA Cynosport World Games, we had a discussion about her handling concepts. She told me about using *motion* as the primary cue in her handling. At that moment, I didn't understand exactly what she meant. But she told me to start watching dogs' responses to handler motion. So I spent the next several months reviewing courses, and watching handlers and the direction they were moving. I was awed by what I saw, and I started to appreciate how the dogs read the direction of our motion. This led to a whole new understanding of my dogs, my students' dogs, and what they need from us as their handlers in terms of how and when to move on course.

Linda's ideas about motion are truly brilliant. From her, I've learned how to use motion *as a cue,* instead of running from place to place without much regard to what's being cued along the way to get there. Understanding the impact of motion on my dogs' jumping was another light-bulb moment. I learned to use my recall presentation on the landing side of a jump to help my dogs organize themselves to jump in the direction they need to go next. I have also learned to use motion for the contacts and weaves to help my dogs' approach to the obstacle and to maximize their speed.

Not only has the knowledge I have gained from Linda helped me to refine my own handling, it has allowed me to help my students with dogs of many different breeds, sizes, stride lengths, and levels of athleticism and motivation.

This book goes beyond understanding motion. You will also learn about the other natural and trained cues, and how to use variations of these cues as forward or turning cues. You will learn how to balance these cues effectively to guide your dog on course. And you will learn the difference between your forward motion and lateral motion and how it relates to the dog's path. This book covers fundamental skills (including flatwork, sends, and recalls) plus advanced-level handling concepts for challenges such as threadles and 270s.

Linda has spent many years studying what dogs naturally understand. I have heard comments from countless people who now handle more proactively due to the clarity that Linda's instruction has brought them. If you have ever been puzzled about why your dog is not responding as you expect in some circumstances, it may be because your cues are not telling him what you think they are.

This book will teach you what your dog already knows and wants *you* to learn. It does not dictate one way to handle; rather, it will guide you toward determining the best way to communicate with your dog. Whether you are new to agility or have been in the sport for years, every handler and instructor will benefit from the information in this book. Through Linda's seminars, articles, books, and her discussion forum she has already helped me and thousands of other handlers; she can help you, too.

Mary Ellen Barry

3-time IFCS World Agility Champion, agility instructor and seminar presenter, writer for **Clean Run,** *and author of* **Foundation Fundamentals** *and* **The Long Jump**.

Preface

Dog agility is a sport that appeals to dogs and handlers around the world. No matter what your expectations or goals in this sport, we all have a common desire to improve our performance and become better teammates for our dogs. *Developing Handling Skills for Awesome Agility Teams* endeavors to provide you with the knowledge to do just that, so you can achieve your dreams and *be the best you can be.*

After many years of observation, study, experimentation, and practical application, I've arrived at a simple but comprehensive approach to agility handling that is appropriate for all dogs and handlers, from the beginner to the most accomplished competitor. *Developing Handling Skills* outlines how to communicate with your dog and effectively cue him to perform the challenges he will encounter on course. This is what handling is all about. Although it is not intended to be a "how to" instruction manual, this book will provide you with the foundation knowledge necessary for successful handling in agility.

Developing Handling Skills will help improve the teamwork between you and your dog by improving your handling skills. Handling skills start at a much more basic level than just learning the "moves," such as a front cross, rear cross, and so on. As a handler or instructor, you should think in terms of how to give your dog the information he needs, not how to perform maneuvers. In this book I've tried to avoid putting too much emphasis on specific names for various handling moves, because it is how you achieve the response from your dog that is important. Handling skills depend on a solid understanding of how your dog relates to you, and using that knowledge to effectively communicate with him.

Developing Handling Skills is designed to be a resource for handlers of all skill levels. It is not a book that's intended to be read in one sitting; rather, it should be used as a reference that agility handlers and instructors consult as needed, perhaps repeatedly!

Understanding the Effects of the Cues You Give Your Dog—To communicate with your dog successfully, you need to understand how dogs relate to us as handlers when we run an agility course. *Developing Handling Skills* will build your understanding of how to effectively and consistently handle a dog in agility, starting with the basics of communication and progressing to execution of complex courses. Each cue that you use in agility, and how your dogs will respond to that cue, is discussed. Understanding the effect of each cue will help you master the ability to combine the cues. The six basic cues can be combined in an infinite number of ways; it is your job to balance the cues in a manner that is appropriate for your individual dog. Ultimately, this is how you will communicate the desired performance to your dog.

Using Motion Appropriately and Effectively—Agility handling is not about verbal commands; *motion* is the primary cue. *Developing Handling Skills* is dedicated to educating agility handlers and instructors about the importance of motion. Understanding how to use motion appropriately and in a timely manner is the most important handling skill that you can master. This book describes various ways in which motion cues, when balanced appropriately with other cues, can create different responses from your dog. Your goal should be to determine the best way to use motion to guide your dog on course, and *Developing Handling Skills* will help you determine what your strategy needs to be in order to show that motion. You will learn how to "run in the right direction" as a handler. This seems like a simple concept, but inappropriate motion is responsible for the majority of handling mistakes on the agility course; knowledgeable use of this cue is critical to successful agility handling.

Mastering Fundamental Skills Needed for Success in Agility—In order for you to focus and develop your skills as a handler, your dog needs to master some fundamental skills. *Developing Handling Skills* describes fundamental skills that are specifically used in the application of the handling skills presented here. But it is important to understand that the concepts presented here are *not* intended as a complete agility training program for your dog; the material presented assumes that your dog has a basic understanding of agility. He should be capable of safe, confident, and accurate obstacle performance, understand basic obedience commands, and have a solid foundation in the mechanics of jumping in place.

Balancing Cues for Your Individual Dog—The art of balancing cues depends not only on predicting what would be best for your dog, but also on your ability to read your dog on course and adjust your handling during the actual run. *Developing Handling Skills* illustrates how to balance the cues for multiple handling strategies on the same sequence. It is important to understand that the cue combinations described are flexible and can be modified depending on what is best for your individual dog. They are not intended to be "recipes." A cue combination that is appropriate for one dog may not be a suitable choice for another.

Using Cues Consistently to Improve Your Dog's Speed and Accuracy—Common sequences as well as specialized course situations are used to demonstrate how to combine the cues for different handling strategies while still continuing to maintain consistency. Consistent use of the cues results in trust and confidence in those cues, which in turn helps your dog respond and perform with more accuracy and speed. No matter what level you aspire to compete at, you should strive to maintain consistency and bolster your dog's confidence with your cues. A confident dog will deliver his utmost performance. Understanding and applying the concepts outlined in *Developing Handling Skills* will help you maintain consistency.

Applying the Concepts on Actual Courses—Without a doubt, to be a successful handler you must be able to walk a course and determine the best strategy. Whether you will opt for slower but tighter turns or faster but wider turns, whether to change sides, whether to take a risk or not, these are all decisions you must make. However, handling skill is not just about the choice of strategy, it is about deciding how to effectively combine cues to communicate the chosen strategy to your dog and execute the plan. *Developing Handling Skills* concludes with several course analyses discussing how the concepts in the book are applied on actual courses.

Developing Handling Skills is structured with the intent that you can take the information, develop a thorough understanding of the concepts presented, and use it as a framework to personalize your handling to suit your individual team's needs if needed. Your mobility, your dog's size, his level of drive and speed, the venue that you compete in (with the unique challenges posed by each organization) and other factors, all determine how you should prioritize your cues. Knowledge of how your dog will respond to motion and the balance of cues will always be valuable, no matter how you prioritize your cues. The key is to take your knowledge of the six basic cues and evaluate how to appropriately adapt the cues for your situation, while also maintaining consistency.

While I will always continue to look for ways to improve *Developing Handling Skills* and explore more innovative ways to apply the concepts, I don't expect major revisions because the book is based primarily on our dogs' responses to natural cues. The sport will continue to evolve, but our dogs' responses to the natural cues will not change, and motion will remain the primary cue. As courses grow more complex, we may need to seek more creative ways to balance cues. But the handling concepts presented here are intended to be flexible so that as new challenges are encountered, minor adjustments can be made to adapt to current course design trends.

More advanced handlers will no doubt recognize the potential for expansion and continue to devise clever ways to combine the cues to elicit different responses, while still remaining cognizant of the need to maintain consistency. The program is not intended to be static. I want it to be adaptable over time and still be useful in the future.

I am proud to share the body of knowledge contained within this book. I sincerely hope that many dogs and handlers benefit from the material presented in *Developing Handling Skills*, and that my work serves to help handlers realize their dreams in agility for many years to come.

Linda Mecklenburg

Tips for Using This Book

Diagrams

The figures in *Developing Handling Skills* have been provided to illustrate examples of the different concepts. Following are some tips to help you interpret these diagrams.

- For any course, shown at any size, 1 square always represents 10'.

- The handler and dog icons are color coded to show how the handler and dog would be positioned relative to each other at a given moment on course. For example, the green handler shows the handler location corresponding to the green dog's position on course.

- The obstacle numbering reflects the sequence of the obstacles in the diagram, not necessarily how the obstacles would be numbered on an actual course. Do *not* assume that every sequence shown is an opening sequence simply because the diagram starts with obstacle #1.

- The diagrams represent approximations of actual dog and handler interaction. It is impossible to depict precise relationships between the dog and handler with complete accuracy in a two-dimensional image. The diagrams are intended to convey the concepts presented in the text.

- In most cases, dogs described as "committed" are shown to be engaged with the obstacle. But this does not imply that commitment must be physical unless it is specifically stated.

- Most diagrams use jumps in the sequences. Usually the handling described for jumps applies to all turning obstacles, which include chutes and straight tunnels as well.

Diagram Key

Symbol	Description
	Winged bar jump
	Nonwinged bar jump
	Winged one-bar jump
	Nonwinged one-bar jump
	Broad/long jump
	Winged double-bar jump
	Nonwinged double-bar jump
	Panel jump
	Winged triple-bar jump
	Nonwinged triple-bar jump
	Tire jump
	Wall jump
	A-frame
	Seesaw/teeter
	Chute/collapsed/closed tunnel
	Open/pipe tunnel
	Table
	Dogwalk
	Weave poles
	Handler
	Dog
	Dog's path
	Handler's path
	Obstacle plane & other imaginary lines

Introduction

Twenty years ago, I ran my first dog in agility. I handled her with a lot of distance and my primary cues were verbal commands. Doodle was crowd-pleaser because she was wild and fast, but she didn't run clean very often. She had a very extensive vocabulary, and I spent hours training all sorts of handling "tricks" based on verbal cues (*Right, Left, Get Out, Turn, Look Back*). Doodle was an expert in the nontraditional classes! On Standard courses, however, it was very difficult to give her direction information in a timely manner using verbal cues. In addition, training verbal cues created an obstacle-focused dog. I handled Doodle reactively by running to each obstacle and, after she was committed, using my verbal cues to turn her. It was very challenging to time verbal directional cues early enough to get a good turn without calling my dog off an obstacle or causing a knocked bar.

When I realized that my dog needed direction information sooner, I attempted to solve the problem by expanding her vocabulary. Instead of a verbal directional command that meant "turn now," the cue was modified to mean "do the jump, then turn." This strategy was only moderately successful because it still required such precise timing. It was also a very difficult strategy to execute over the span of twenty obstacles where my dog was sometimes performing one obstacle per second.

I continued to look for alternative ways to communicate with my dog and began using my shoulder direction as my primary cue. However, this still required me to run to each obstacle and attempt to cue turns after commitment, as the obstacle was completed. Once I cued the turning obstacle, I decelerated and distinctly rotated my shoulders in the direction I wanted my dog to go. Sometimes this worked and sometimes it didn't. By running toward each obstacle, I was unknowingly and unintentionally cueing extension (it seems so obvious to me now!) Looking back on it today, I realize my dogs were probably turning because of my deceleration and lack of motion rather than my shoulder cues, which were actually cueing extension!

My second dog, Nifty, was a much more consistent performer. This was partly due to improved methods of training the contact obstacles, but it was also because of improved communication. When I started to really obsess on handling and the best way of communicating with my dog, I studied video footage of Nifty. The light bulb began to come on when I realized she knew where we were going before I did. I *thought* I was cueing her with my shoulder and verbal cues, yet it was clear she knew where we were going before I used those cues. She was reading my motion even though I was not consciously using it as a cue.

Once I realized that my dog was reading cues I was not even aware of, I set about identifying those cues and learning to use them to my advantage. I spent a lot of time observing dogs. The best class to learn about motion and natural cues is an intermediate-level class. These dogs are not yet well versed in the trained cues, and they tend to respond instinctively to natural cues. I also began testing my own dogs' responses to various cues when used in isolation. I conducted lots of fun experiments, including wearing a collapsed tunnel barrel around my torso so that I could eliminate my shoulder cues while I observed my dog's responses to motion and eye contact.

Once I identified the cues dogs responded to most reliably, I began to use this information in a systematic manner to handle my dogs more effectively. In May 2005 my first article on balancing cues, "Achieving a Balance," was published in *Clean Run*. In that article I shared what were, at that time, novel ideas about motion and the concept of balancing cues. "Achieving a Balance" was a stepping stone to this book.

Using motion as my primary cue, I was able to begin handling proactively as I learned to creatively combine cues to communicate with my dog. Rather than using motion to cue an obstacle followed by a verbal directional command to cue a turn, I learned to use motion to cue turns when combined with a verbal cue for the obstacle. Using a balance of cues allowed me to run in the direction I wanted my dog to go following an obstacle as he approached it. Being able to give my dog early direction information is a key element of handling success.

This book describes how I use motion and balance my cues to communicate with my dog, as well as how I run in the right direction.