



©JEAN TUTTLE

## How the TipAssist Can Help You Teach the Seesaw

By Lynne Stephens, KPA CTP

So many trainers! So many ideas! Where to start?

As with pretty much any training, and teaching the seesaw is no exception, there will certainly be more than one opinion about *the way* to approach the challenge. Your trainer's favorite method will likely differ from that of your friend's trainer. Your own experiences will likely be different from those of your friends. The many and varied methods are sure to promote much animated discussion at the end of the agility day and trainers will be keen to impress upon you the advantages of *their way*. Of course, this phenomenon is not just restricted to dog training! In any walk of life there will always be different ways to do things and many, varied opinions. This is how it should be and is what makes life so interesting and wonderful for me.

So, onto the great seesaw debate! I have taught the seesaw in a number of ways since I began training for agility over 30 years ago. If you have been training for some time you might also recognize some of these methods from the past: at first you may have been taught the "Coax the dog up the plank and lower it gently" method; then perhaps the "Run the dog up the plank and gently, or not so gently, lower it" method; and maybe you even tried the "Let the dog run up the plank to discover the joy of flying through the air" method, which may have led to the "Oh my, how do I get my dog to go near this thing!" dilemma.

Thankfully, agility has moved with the times and if you are just beginning your agility journey, these methods should all be unfamiliar to you. With the many advances in understanding how dogs learn and advances in agility training, you will undoubtedly be working on a far less intimidating and safer method of teaching the seesaw.

In addition, the concept of giving our puppies a thorough, fun, and really broad foundation before introducing *any* obstacle is finally catching on. Building a firm foundation is essential when teaching the seesaw. The use of wobble boards and other unstable surfaces, and popular games such as the "Bang Game" (and, in the case of my baby Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, the "jump on the rocking chair and into the dishwasher game!") are widely taught.\* By the time you are ready to introduce actual seesaw training, your pup will already be very happy to step onto strange surfaces and make them move.

(\*There are many brilliant resources available that explain these foundation training techniques in detail and it is not my intention to duplicate them here.)

However, eventually the time will come to take the bull by the horns and introduce the actual obstacle. Although nowadays most trainers agree that the seesaw needs to be trained carefully and in small increments in order to maintain the dog's

confidence, there are still a variety of ideas as to the best way to accomplish this.

## Well-known and Great Methods for Introducing the Seesaw

Here are several examples of current, well-known, and reliable methods of teaching the seesaw:

- “Two-table” method (using two tables to hold up the seesaw)
- “Wooden pallet” method (using pallets to hold up the seesaw)

Or maybe you have been taught another “suspend the seesaw” method, such as with poles, chairs, or even an instructor’s foot.

The basic premise of these methods is that the dog gets to do an adjustable seesaw even though the seesaw is at full height; for example, in the two-table method, the table height gets adjusted to change the tip of the teeter. Once again, there are excellent DVDs and other resources available that describe these methods in detail.

## So Why Do We Need Something New?

I have thought of myself in many ways over the years: wife, mother, grade school teacher, school principal, and most recently full-time dog trainer, instructor, and coach. But inventor? Never! However, little did I know that things were about to change. It was in this last role of dog trainer, instructor, and coach that I regularly experienced the challenge of helping multiple dogs and handlers achieve a fast, confident, and independent seesaw performance.

With over 30 years of agility training, teaching, and competition experience, I feel that I am very familiar with the challenges posed when teaching mixed-ability classes. Despite this comprehensive training and teaching background, however, I have often been frustrated when trying to help a large number of students, all at different stages, to master the seesaw in my classes. In fact, when analyzing some of those classes, I realized that teaching the seesaw was becoming something of a rarity! I was actually subconsciously avoiding teaching the obstacle! This revelation began to make me increasingly uncomfortable—especially as I was also starting to encounter more and more new students asking for help with dogs that had already become tentative or fearful when performing the seesaw.

While questioning the reason for this, I became increasingly aware of how much the instability and unpredictability of the seesaw adds a whole new dimension of challenge to this obstacle. This challenge is very real for the dogs, for individual handlers, and for trainers aiming to successfully accommodate all levels of students within their classes.

If you are an instructor, you may identify with some of the following scenarios that I realized I was encountering in class on a regular basis. If you are an individual handler, trainer, or student you may recognize your own dog.

*You are teaching a class of beginner dogs how to perform the seesaw. There are all kinds of dogs in the class—big dogs and small dogs; bold dogs and timid dogs—all progressing at different rates. Some of the dogs have been through your own foundation classes and are ready to progress quite quickly, but others have recently moved into your area without such a thorough foundation. Using the traditional methods of adjusting the seesaw tip, a great deal of class time is taken up with just moving the equipment needed to accommodate all the different levels. Tables, chairs, and the like are moved around to adjust the seesaw tip in fairly small increments—and still the seesaw tips too much for some of the more hesitant dogs.*

*A client brings you a dog that is already afraid of the seesaw. In order to rebuild the dog’s confidence, you need the seesaw to tip in very, very small increments. But, once again, such tiny adjustments are difficult to make using tables or chairs. Too much movement will delay the dog’s progress and so you resort to using telephone books and the like to adjust the seesaw by the smallest degree possible.*

Hence, with “Necessity being the mother of invention,” my idea for the TipAssist was born.

## So What Is the TipAssist?

The TipAssist is *not*

- A new method of teaching the seesaw.
- Limited to use in only one place.
- A magic pill! Time, patience, and plenty of reinforcement will still be necessary!

The TipAssist is

- A convenient, portable, and lightweight tool that replaces the need for tables, chairs, poles, jump standards, phone books, or any other equipment to support and elevate the seesaw during training.
- A tool that allows you to take complete control of the seesaw’s motion when teaching the dog to drive to the end of the plank and stop at the bottom of the obstacle.



Here the TipAssist is in position for playing the Bang Game. The end of the board is close enough to the ground that the dog can easily jump onto it.



The TipAssist is positioned so that it holds one end of the plank in an elevated position where it can't move.



As you increase the amount of the tip by 1"-2" at a time, you will reach a point where you also need to change the height of the table you are using in front of the TipAssist.

- A tool that allows you to change the degree of tip quickly and easily when working with multiple dogs (either your own, your friends', or in a class situation.) Each dog is able to progress at its own pace
- A tool that allows individual handlers and trainers to easily work on any number of different seesaws, ensuring that confidence on the obstacle is generalized.
- A tool that allows you to increase the amount of tip in extremely small increments for beginner dogs or fearful dogs.
- A tool that encourages independent obstacle performance right from the start of the training.
- A tool that is easy to transport, allowing individuals, seminar presenters, and instructors to take it along to any venue to practice.

I personally identify closely with this quote from top American trainer and competitor Tori Self: "I was very pleased to hear of the TipAssist's existence. For me, training the teeter generally turns into a game of finding chairs and other knickknacks tall enough or short enough or medium-height enough to support the teeter board at various heights. It was nice to work with a product that was so easily and readily adjustable, and that was designed specifically for training the teeter—no creative stacking necessary."

I have been using the TipAssist in my classes and for teaching my own dogs for about three years, and I cannot imagine life without it now. In fact, it was the encouragement of my students that led to the launch of this product as a valuable tool to other individuals and trainers. 🐾

---

*Originally from England, Lynne Stephens has been living in North Carolina since 2004. Her passion for dogs and dog training has spanned more than three decades, during which time she has achieved the highest levels of competition both in the U.S. and U.K. The highlight of her agility career in England was being picked as a member of the British team for the 2003 and 2004 FCI Agility World Championships. In the U.S., she has competed at the USDAA Cynosport Games four times (reaching the Grand Prix semifinals twice) with three Border Collies (Chess, Tag, and Turbo) and a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Quiz, who also has his MACH and finished 23rd overall in the 12" class at AKC Nationals. Lynne is the agility specialist, trainer, and co-owner at DogLogic in Statesville, North Carolina, and is now a Karen Pryor Academy Certified Training Partner. She can be contacted by email: [lynne@doglogictraining.com](mailto:lynne@doglogictraining.com).*