

Introduction

How It All Started

About four years ago, I was hanging out at a trial with a group of friends and students, and one of my favorite students approached with a big smile and said, “Hey teach! Did you notice that some of the Ace Dog Sports instructors’ dogs missed a contact today? And many of your students’ dogs too.” She was smiling and meaning no harm. I thought, “Noooo, that couldn’t be,” and then I realized she was right. That fact brought up some serious questions for me about how we were teaching contacts at Ace and sent me back to the drawing board to take a fresh look at the training, proofing, and maintenance of the 2-on/2-off contact performance.

Before I share the program I have created for maintaining the 2-on/2-off contact behavior I teach, I want you to understand why I changed many of the contact training techniques that I have been doing for over 20 years.

The Number One Reason

I wrote an article for *Clean Run* called “Ring Wiser.” It explains that the number one reason handlers don’t get to keep the behaviors they work so hard to train once they start trialing is that most handlers do not answer their dog’s “questions” in the competition ring. That is mainly because handlers do not know how to go about answering these questions (something we will address later on). At some point in competition, the dog makes a mistake, the handler ignores the error, and the dog’s lesson is learned. It is a simple lesson for the dog: in the trial environment, my handler does not care about my performance, so I should do as I see fit.

The learning happened because the dog’s error was not addressed when it occurred. If you are not willing to answer your dog’s questions when you trial, you don’t get to keep your behaviors. It is doubtful that you will be the chosen one who is exempt from this fate. I know it is a bit annoying to be referred back to previous material, but here I go again—read “Ring Wiser.” (The article is included in my book.)

What Changed?

What changed for me was that I no longer believed I could blame everything on reason number one. There had to be more to the dilemma because so many dogs had so many questions early on in their competition careers. The dogs asking questions were *not* just the dogs with all the common holes in their initial training that resulted in behaviors that could not hold up in competition. I also saw well-trained

dogs that started their competition careers with a strong 2-on/2-off performance, but lost the behavior even when it seemed like they shouldn’t have. So I decided to question all aspects of how I trained, proofed, and maintained the 2-on/2-off contact performance.

I have concluded that sequence and course work undermine some of our trained behaviors very quickly and naturally. The proofing of the 2-on/2-off behavior (i.e., doing specific work to make and keep the behavior strong) must be relatively sophisticated and a maintenance program is essential outside of sequence and course work.

How Sequence and Course Work Undermine 2-On/2-Off Training

As you handle sequences and courses, you and your dog are becoming in sync—that is the whole point, right? You are reading each other, and as you do so, conclusions are being made, for better and for worse. As your handling gets more sophisticated, your dog will learn to watch you more so he doesn’t miss your cues. This is a good a thing, except when it comes to weave poles and the contact obstacles. When those obstacles are “in play,” we want our dogs to ignore us and perform the obstacles independently.

Because you are moving or speaking in some fashion at the same time that you are giving the dog your intentional verbal or physical cues, those movements and words will start to become *unintentional* cues. The unintentional cues will then become relevant to the dog’s performance, often undermining it.

Our dogs are brilliant at putting two and two together (pun intended). They draw conclusions routinely throughout their lives, so you must expect this process to happen as you train agility. Much of what you are doing as you handle will raise new questions for the dog—questions that did not come up in the initial stages of the training because the picture is so different during handling than it was during training. So the initial training we did doesn’t hold up on its own.

Think of it like this: You are asking your dog to understand that as you handle a course you want him to pay strict attention to you for a few seconds during a jumping sequence, then you want him to completely ignore you for just a second or two to flawlessly execute a contact or the weave poles. And then, you want him to repeat that challenge over and over until the course is finished. What a tall order!

My maintenance program concentrates on reminding dogs where and when to focus, teaching them they *should* ignore the handler when they are cued to do the contacts (and weaves). As any handling program gets more intricate, this job can get harder for the dog to understand, requiring more maintenance.

Think of a competitive skier. Those folks do plenty of skiing to become skilled, but they are also following a program to maintain each skill and all of the physical strengthening and conditioning needed to be good skiers. They are not trying to do it all just by skiing. I don't think we should be trying to maintain all of the skills our dogs need (us too for that matter) while doing sequence and course work. Sequence and course work are best for getting the agility team in sync, but other training is required to keep the dog's skills sharp.

Rewarding Our Dogs During Sequence and Course Work

For more than two decades, I have taught my students that they can maintain the 2-on/2-off training via sequence and course work. Re-thinking how I had been rewarding the position during sequence and course work became an essential part of my process. The conclusion I reached was painful for me to embrace because I had to tell my students that we needed to make some big changes. I no longer believe that the 2-on/2-off behavior can be maintained just by rewarding it during sequence and course work.

Let me be clear before I continue here. If you can only train in a class that focuses on sequence and course work (as most higher-level handling classes must), and you can't find the time to do any isolated contact maintenance training, then you absolutely *must* continue to reward your dog's 2-on/2-off performance during sequence and course work, although, I can help you reward more effectively. But, if you can embrace this idea of separate on-going maintenance work, you may be able to get your behavior strong enough that you do not have to reward during sequence and course work nearly as much as before, if at all.

Here is what I believe happens when we are handling a sequence and stop to run in to reward the dog while he is in a 2-on/2-off position on the contacts:

- If we are trying to persuade the dog that we are irrelevant so we can achieve independent contacts, how can we convince him of that while we are running toward him bearing gifts of food and toys? Sometimes we are even digging in our pockets as we are running in toward him before, during, or after he has performed the behavior. For many dogs that is distracting, if nothing else, but it also creates handler focus instead of the obstacle focus that we desire. Since the dog is expecting his reinforcement to be delivered, he is unintentionally being encouraged to keep an eye out for the delivery boy or girl to arrive.

- The other “biggie” to consider is that this process of coming in with the goods is also providing an “adrenaline break” in the action for both of you (see my *Clean Run* article “Adrenaline, Friend or Foe?”). These mini adrenaline breaks at each contact obstacle with a 2-on/2-off performance requirement prevent the dog and handler from getting in sync completely and from practicing how to perform full courses without these adrenaline breaks. This is why some dogs (and handlers) melt down in competition. They can't think with full throttle, nonstop adrenaline happening for a full course; they have not had enough practice doing it.

My maintenance program teaches the dogs not to expect room service from the handler, but to look ahead for reinforcement, which is a critical element to contact success. Once dogs have acquired the basic 2-on/2-off skill, I stop rewarding the dogs while they are in position on the board, and I start rewarding the release. Once this happens, a beautiful thing can occur. As we begin to reward the release, instead of the position, we are building so much value in the release behavior that the verbal release command becomes a reinforcer in itself. When the dog is working to receive the release command, because the release command has been, and continues to be, so heavily reinforced, we have a dog that is eager to stop! How sweet does that sound? Once we have that, we will also reap the other rewards of clarity, like speed and consistency.

What the Program Can Achieve

All of the training games in this maintenance program are designed to proof the 2-on/2-off behavior and help the dog understand his job amid the variety of challenges that come up in sequence and course work and trial situations. These challenges left unaddressed will erode your initial training over time because the dog will draw unwanted conclusions while normal handling is happening.

What is this program designed to achieve?

- The dog stays focused ahead until his paws hit the ground. He understands when to look and when *not* to look at his handler.
- The dog understands that his job is not dependent on his handler's movement or position. He will stop even if the handler accelerates past the end of the obstacle and he will drive ahead to the position even if his handler is behind. The handler can also “peel off” (move away from the contact obstacle) and handle from a distance.
- The dog is reminded on a regular basis that his permission to go (release cue) is always and only a verbal cue—never a physical cue. The verbal cue is most often a single word (okay, break, release) but can also be an obstacle or directional verbal cue (for the higher-level courses that need this skill). The program creates opportunities for the

dog to enhance his comprehension that he can't self-release on handler movement (silly stuff and actual handling), on different periods of time (quick releases vs. "sticks" or "holds"), on praise (many dogs learn to go on "gooooood dooog" or "good dog!"), or on tossed or planted reinforcement (toys and food).

The idea is that you perfect and preserve your dog's 2-on/2-off performance via these maintenance games, instead of trying to accomplish that while you are handling sequences and courses. If you can't do these maintenance games, you *will* have to incorporate contact behavior maintenance into your sequence and course work.

All of the training games have "back-to-kindergarten" steps. The idea is not to create a dog that never asks questions; the idea is to know how to answer your dog's questions!



Handler focus during a 2-on/2-off performance rather than the obstacle focus we desire.



Obstacle focus during a 2-on/2-off performance.