



## Timing of

# FRONT CROSSES

## Part 1: Positional Cues and Deceleration

By Greg Derrett, photos by Susan Garrett

**Having spent the past months conducting seminars in several countries, I was inspired to write an article about front-cross timing. This inspiration was due to the difficulties and confusion I observed many people are having with front crosses, and also I wanted to help people understand the reasons for the common mistakes they are seeing and making due to timing errors.**

Let's start at the beginning with training theory. Whatever your method of training, when thinking of teaching animals we should all agree that when we give a cue the animal should respond instantly. Agility handling is just a form of training, so when you give a cue you should get an instant response from the dog that you then reward instantly. The level of reward should be high enough and repeated often enough that the dog wants to respond immediately.

For example, whatever your method of training, most of us initially spend time teaching the dog the *Sit* cue. When I say *Sit*, my dog will sit and I give him a treat. If my timing of reward and salience of reward is good enough, the sit behavior will continue to exist on cue.

In agility, an arm change is a cue for a dog to turn, and as such, it should get an instant response. There is a certain amount of training to teach a correct response, but with good groundwork (circle work and shadow handling) we can teach this quickly. I have some nice footage of my young dog Detox at seven weeks old, running around with me, turning perfectly on shoulder turns and front crosses. It really is just "follow me if you like me" training!

## Cues for a Front Cross

As we prepare to do a front cross there are lots of subtle cues to inform the dog a turn is going to happen. Let's just revisit the sit. Think of all the subtle cues you give when you are about to ask for that behavior. Set up the dog for a sit indoors and time his response to your cue. Then put the dog out in the yard with other dogs. While he's chasing those dogs, lean out the window and shout *Sit*. Was he as quick to get that butt on the ground? I'm guessing not!

There are lots of subtle cues to indicate a front cross is likely, but the main two we use for the front cross in my handling system are a positional cue and deceleration.

### The Positional Cue

Maintaining a consistent position in relation to your dog when you start to execute your front crosses is an important part of a positional cue. Front crosses should rely on a couple of rules that if followed teach the dog that positional cue.

- *Rule 1: Stay as close as possible to the next obstacle. This enables you to stay on the most efficient line because you do not have to run to each jump with the dog. The faster you get around the course, the faster your dog will.*
- *Rule 2: Only do a front cross where your dog has a change of direction. There are many reasons for this, but the first of the two main reasons is that when you do a front cross, your dog should turn. If you do a front cross on a straight line, the dog will learn **not** to turn when he sees a front cross; I think this is one of the main reasons for wider turning dogs. The second reason is the detrimental effect straight-line front crosses have on the positional cues explained below.*

Handling theory is ever-evolving, and due to our current understanding of positional cues, we now use fewer front crosses than we did four to five years ago. If we cannot get to the correct position in time to decelerate, then we should do a rear cross.

## Let's look at some examples of positional cues.

Figure 1

In this sequence there are several changes of direction: #2-#3, #3-#4, #4-#5, #6-#7, and #7-#8. I can happily run with the dog on my left from #1-#6 with the dog following my body to create the changes of direction. To get from #6 to #8, however, I am going to need a change of side, and therefore, can consider using a front cross. To follow the front-cross rules, I need to find the relevant change of direction. From #1 to #4 the dog can be on my left side. There is a change of direction for the dog between jumps #4 and #5. If I do a front cross there, then the change of side will happen; and the side change allows me to have the dog on my right from #4 to #8. I should be as close as possible to jump #5 when I do the front cross; the handler icon labeled "PC" indicates the desired positional cue.

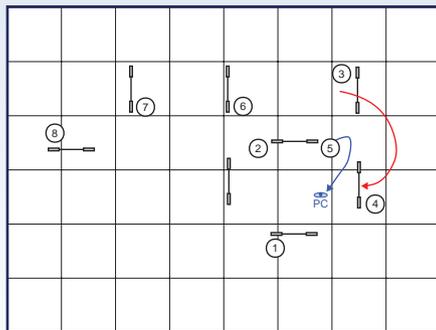
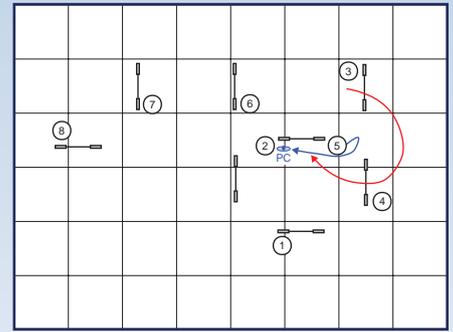


Figure 2

When explaining positional cues, I think it helps to show what handlers may be doing wrong when they perform front crosses. Here, instead of the handler executing the front cross close to jump #5, he moves into the middle of the box. Compare this positional cue to the one in Figure 1 and you can see how different it will look to the dog as he drives to his takeoff spot for the jump.

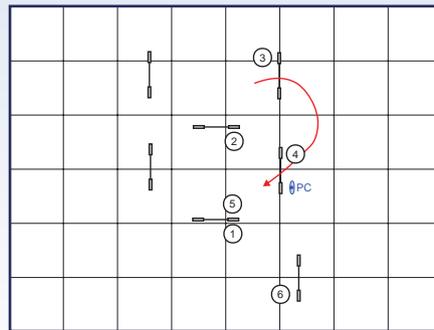


Figure 3

In this sequence, the change of direction that is relevant to a front cross is the 180° turn from jump #3 to #4. The dog's path from jump #4 to jump #5 is a straight line (remember the rules I gave you); therefore, the front cross takes place between #3 and #4, as close to #4 as possible.

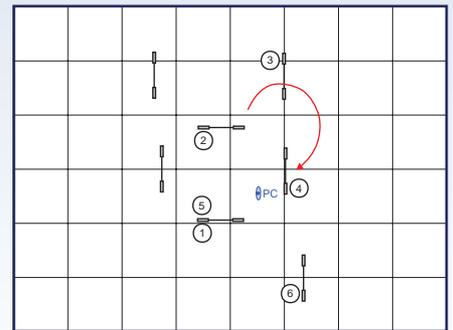


Figure 4

If you were to execute the front cross on the straight line rather than on the turn, as shown in Figure 3, you can see what a very different picture your positional cue presents to the dog on takeoff.

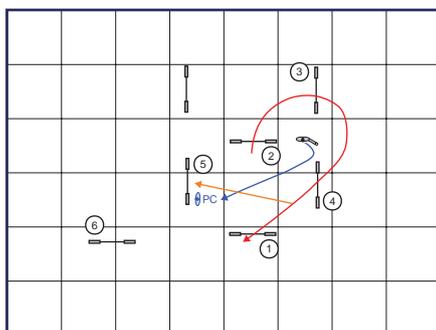


Figure 5

The dog has a change of direction between jumps #3 and #4, and again between jumps #4 and #5. To clarify the change of direction between #4 and #5, look at the red line. This line indicates the dog's natural path after jump #4, which, as you can see, is straight to the back side of #1. The orange line shows you that the dog must turn right to get from #4 to #5. So a change of side from left to right is needed to get the dog from #5 to #6. Now you have established the front cross occurs between jumps #4 and #5. You need to execute the cross as close as possible to the next jump, which in this case is jump #5. This front cross is called a diagonal-line front cross and is the most difficult of the three. This front cross is where handlers try to maintain consistency and where they struggle not to turn early and to keep position. The dog should be on your left arm until he commits to jump #4, and then the front-cross rotation should occur.

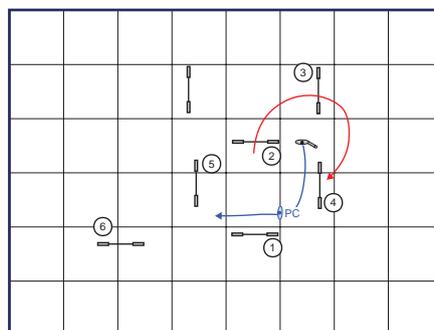


Figure 6

Here you can see the positional cue taught to the dog when the handler drifts off the diagonal-line front cross shown in Figure 5. The handler here is also covering a lot more ground than the handler running the diagonal line in Figure 5.

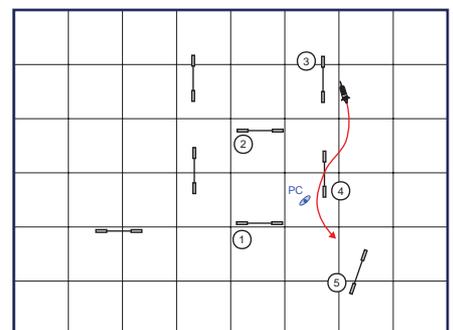


Figure 7

This diagram shows the serpentine positional cue. Serpentine handling can occur when the dog has a right turn followed by a left turn or vice versa. If you decide to handle a sequence with serpentine handling, you will combine two front crosses together where the second turn occurs. Here you can see that the dog has a right turn from jump #3 to #4, and a left turn from jump #4 to #5. Therefore, the serpentine handling occurs on the landing side of #4, in the position of the second turn.

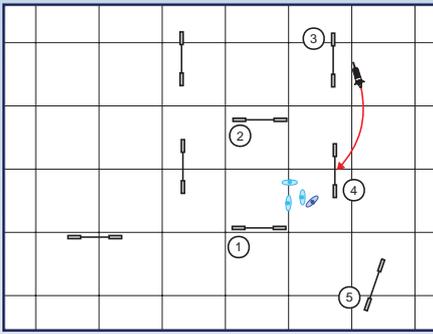


Figure 8

This diagram shows the incorrect positional cues from Figures 2, 4, and 6 (light blue) along with the correct serpentine handling positional cue from Figure 7 (dark blue). Notice that all these positional cues are within the same very small area. The dog is supposed to go to #5 in the bottom right corner of the sequence. But from the dog's perspective, he sees the handler run a nearly identical path and stand in almost the same position when the handler does a front cross and the dog is expected to go to a different obstacle. Therefore, the handler's position does not give the dog any information about the next jump he will be expected to take after #4.

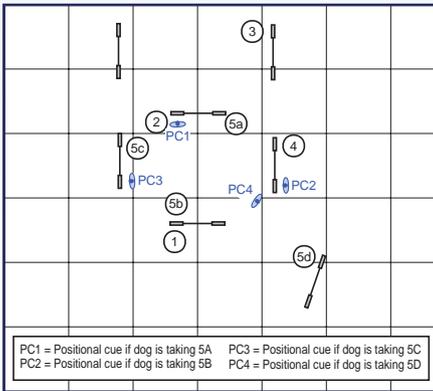


Figure 9

Here I have put the four sequences (Figures 1, 3, 5, and 7) on one diagram with the corresponding correct positional cues. You can see that as the dog drives toward jump #4, the handler's position gives the dog very clear information about which jump to take next, out of the four possible #5 obstacles. As the handler starts to rotate to execute the front cross, the dog has the information that: if the handler is standing at PC1, the next obstacle is #5A; if the handler is at PC2, the next obstacle is #5B; if the handler is at PC3, the next obstacle is #5C; and if the handler is at PC4, the next obstacle is #5D.

## The Deceleration Cue

Cueing of deceleration is a very important skill that needs to be taught to the dog. As you prepare to do a front cross, you have to slow down to rotate. This deceleration should be a *huge* cue to the dog that a turn is likely to happen.

Teaching the dog how to interpret deceleration can be done in several simple steps. First, on flat ground with no equipment, begin with some simple running

drills. Run forward with the dog and stop. If the dog stops with you, reward him. The young pup is taught that when the person he likes stops running, and he stops too, he gets fed or gets that tug toy or gets affection. He soon learns that your stopping means that he should start to brake; so you both stop in the same place, and he will get his reward.

I hope you can see that this isn't rocket science; it's quick and easy to teach. Using recalls and distractions strengthens the behavior so that the behavior is easily understood and the dog also finds it rewarding to stop. By using basically the same method, this skill can then be transferred to a jump.

## Putting the Cues Together

If you combine an understanding of deceleration with an understanding of positional cues, you will have a dog that will turn tightly on the front cross. These tight-turning dogs are not exceptional dogs; they are just dogs trained with consistency.

The timing of my front cross is on takeoff. I run to position, decelerate as my dog gets near his takeoff spot, and I execute the front cross as my dog's front feet come up. I believe that is the key to my success over the last few years. I know where to go and where to stop, and my dogs know exactly what this means because they don't see anything else.

## The Blind Cross Body Line

One other simple concept that affects the dog's understanding of positional cues and that I teach my dogs in this handling system is the blind-cross body line (BCBL). This is an imaginary line that runs laterally from both sides of my body. In front of me is the place where I reinforce the dog, called the reinforcement zone or RZ as in Figure 10. I teach my dogs that they should always be heading toward the reinforcement zone because that's where their payoff is! If I handle correctly, according to the system I use, the dog is always trying to respect the BCBL and to find the RZ. Later, when agility equipment becomes involved, this theory gets slightly more complicated, but we won't get into that until subsequent articles.

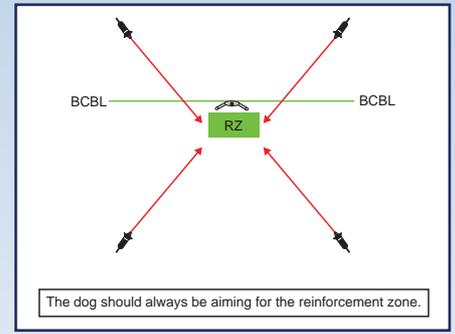


Figure 10

Our dogs' errors, such as wide turns and off-courses, often can be explained in relation to the BCBL. For example, a blind cross is a handling maneuver that I believe causes many problems, one of which is wide turns. In Figure 11, the dog on the red path is completing what most people consider a blind cross; he has run past the handler and behind his back. The dog on the orange path is beginning a blind cross by running toward the BCBL rather than toward the RZ. When we relate this to the handling in next month's article, you'll see why the blind-cross behavior causes wide turns.

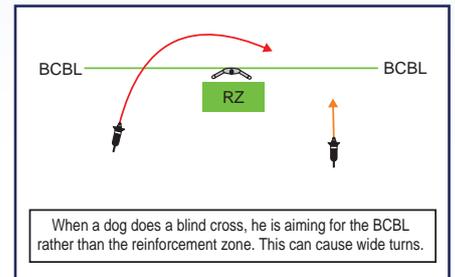


Figure 11

Another behavior I work hard to avoid is called a "flick-away." This is when a dog turns away from the handler's RZ, as seen in Figure 12. The dogs on both the red and orange paths are flicking away from the handler's reinforcement zone. If you're not sure why this is such a problem, just watch all the off-course eliminations at the next local trial and see how many are the result of flick-aways from the reinforcement zone.

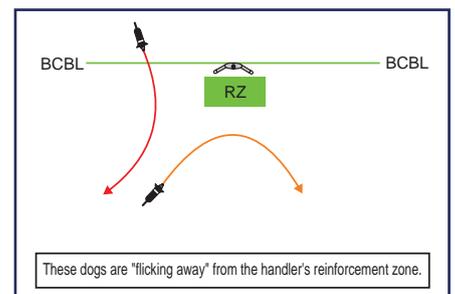


Figure 12

*Handling theory is ever-evolving, and due to our current understanding of positional cues, we now use fewer front crosses than we would have four to five years ago. If we cannot get to a positional cue in time to decelerate then we should do a rear cross. You don't try to use a front cross if you can't make it to the correct position.*

## In Conclusion

It's easy to say when to do a front cross, but it's hard to execute correctly. You need to develop proper timing. Timing is something you have to work at often. You also need to stick to rules. Handling is a science, not an art. Art doesn't have rules, but science does. Animal training is also a science. Handling is an integral part of dog training and to pretend that there should be no rules and that

timing does not matter is absurd. Can you imagine the confused dog I would own if while teaching the sit I randomly used all four quadrants of operant conditioning to teach the behavior? And what if I varied the timing of reward or punishment within a period of 10 seconds?

But, even when you practice honing your timing and you follow the rules of a system, you will still make some mistakes in your handling. And when you get it wrong, your dog will show you very clearly. I know this only too well. At the 2007 FCI Agility World Championships, I did a simple front cross in the Individual Jumping class and my dog was called for a refusal. You can find the run on lots of web pages and see that the front-cross timing is great; GT picks up the turn nicely and then accelerates hard to the RZ. But when the handler is 6' away from the correct positional cue and the dog is trained to drive to the RZ, you will get a refusal call. Great dog... you know the rest! It would be easy for me to say that the handling system wasn't working and look to change things to suit rather than realizing my error and working to make sure that next time I do not make such a basic mistake in execution.

As the speed of dogs increases and competing countries look to catch up with one another, it is likely we will see more wide-turning dogs. This is because the faster the dogs go, the harder it is to get the tight lines we all desire. One of the current solutions is for the handler to start turning very early on the front cross. There is a definite short-term gain with this strategy, but in the next article I will discuss the fallout we're seeing from early front crosses to try to help to prevent (or at least explain) some of the problems you and your dog may be having. I'll also offer some drills for how to improve your timing and proof your dog's understanding. 🐾

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*Greg Derrett has been competing in agility since the late 1980s and has won a national final in Great Britain in 15 of the last 16 years. He has an advanced studies diploma in animal behavior and his proven methods of training have helped him stay at the top of British agility. Several of his clients have won national finals in several different countries and gold medals in international competitions. Greg has three videos on agility training for sale and he also offers online lessons. Greg lives in the U.K. with his wife, Laura, and their seven Border Collies. Visit his website at [www.gtagility.com](http://www.gtagility.com).*



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## Timing of

# FRONT CROSSES

## Part 2: Early Front Crosses

By Greg Derrett, photos by Susan Garrett

**In CR November 2008, I discussed how to do front crosses in the handling system that I use. The timing of the front cross is on the dog's commitment point, and deceleration and positional cues help us to achieve the turns we require.**

Cueing front crosses earlier than I advocate (using early rotation of the shoulders or the outside arm) is a technique that many handlers are trying throughout the world. It's not unique to a particular handling system, but rather a maneuver that people are attempting to incorporate into whatever system they use because it appears to produce quick benefits. Despite short-term gains, what I have observed by watching hundreds of videotaped runs (I compare the handler's path and timing for different handler choices and document the performance outcome), and also by working with students of my system who have tried the technique, is that there is long-term fallout caused by early front crosses. The problems might not be seen for several weeks or even months, and handlers may not even realize these problems could be caused by the early front cross. This month I'll explain some of the fallout.

Next month I'll focus on lack of attention to timing the front cross and how to improve your skills. Some handlers are not doing early front crosses deliberately, but are simply having difficulty with the timing of their crosses and they need to be more precise.

### Short-term Gains

With any training or handling method, there is a reason it has come to exist and that people

continue to use it. The main reason I see for using early front crosses is that the *short-term* benefit is very striking.

Let's say your dog isn't reading your front-cross cues well because you haven't taught him deceleration and positional cues. In **Figure 1**, the handler starts the front cross as the dog commits to jump #4. The dog turns wide, as shown by the red line, and a 24' turn is this untrained dog's natural response to a front cross. (I measure the turn from the dog's position when the handler executes the front cross to the dog's position at the end of the turn.)

The handler runs the sequence again, but this time starts the front cross when the dog is halfway between jumps #3 and #4 as shown in **Figure 2**. The dog still has a 24' turn, but now this turn is starting to look more like what the handler wants.

The handler runs the sequence once more. This time though, he starts the front cross when the dog lands after jump #3 as shown in **Figure 3**. Again, the response is a 24' turn, but look at the immediate outcome on course.

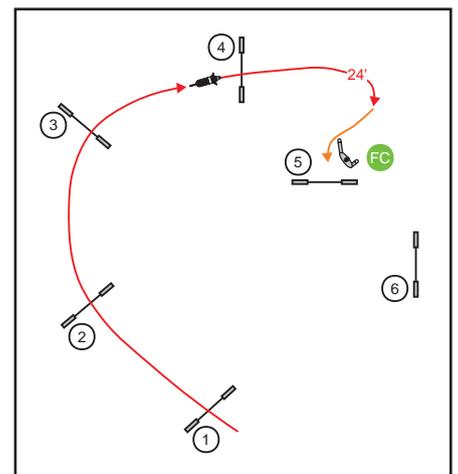


Figure 1



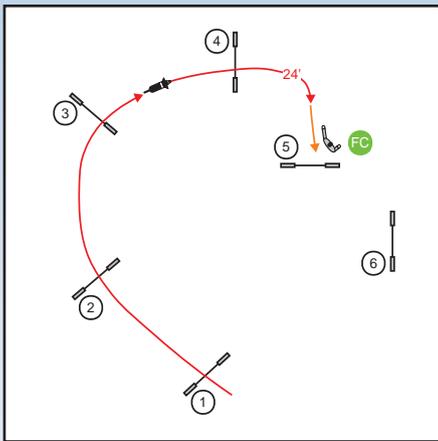


Figure 2

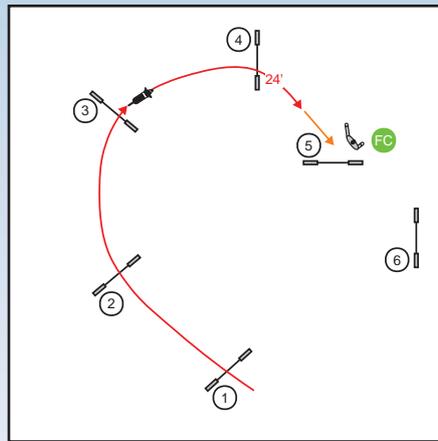


Figure 3

The handler's reinforcement for starting the front cross earlier and earlier is extremely high, but the dog still has a lack of fundamental skills and is taking 24' to respond. The benefit is that the handler didn't have to spend time training his dog to respond to his deceleration and position cues and he got the appearance of far tighter turns on course.

But if it was really this simple, I wouldn't be writing an article.

## The Fallout

Agility instructors who get to conduct seminars worldwide are very privileged in many ways. Not only do we get to see the world and get paid for what we love doing, but we also get the added benefit of seeing new methods and the good results these methods produce. But we also see the fallout they can cause. Here we get to the crux of this article series. I can break down the problems I've

seen with people doing their front crosses early to get tight turns into three categories:

- Handler efficiency (or inefficiency)
- Incorrect learning for the dog
- Fallout on course

I'm going to focus mainly on the first two.

## Handler Efficiency

When you cue your dog for an early front cross, you must get to the front-cross position earlier than with the timing I use to cue the front cross. Look at the handler in Figures 1 through 3. How much earlier did the handler have to get to the front-cross position at jump #4 in Figure 3 than in Figure 1? It's not surprising that the handlers in Great Britain who are most successful using the early front cross are men under the age of 25 who can run *fast!*

Handlers using an early front cross tend to run sideways or backward a lot so they can signal the arm change early. This can have a detrimental effect on running coordination and speed, which makes getting to the correct positions even harder (and less efficient), especially if you are not particularly fast on your feet or your dog is much faster than you are.

In addition, the distance covered on some courses by a number of the handlers I observe using early front crosses in Great Britain is much greater because the handlers are often unable to stay as close as possible to the next obstacle when executing the front cross.

The reason for this is shown in the next two diagrams. In **Figure 4**, the handler using a positional cue can support jump #4 with the left arm until the dog commits to the jump. The dog knows the turn is going to happen and starts preparing because of the handler's deceleration and positional cue. Therefore, as the dog commits to jump #4, the front cross occurs and the tight turn is achieved.

In **Figure 5**, if the handler tries to maintain this same positional cue and also do an early front cross, it would be difficult for the dog not to question the handler's moves. Therefore, the handler has to have extra forward motion to take the dog to jump #4 and cover the farther distance. Follow this rationale through the rest of the course and, hopefully, you can start to see the potential problem.

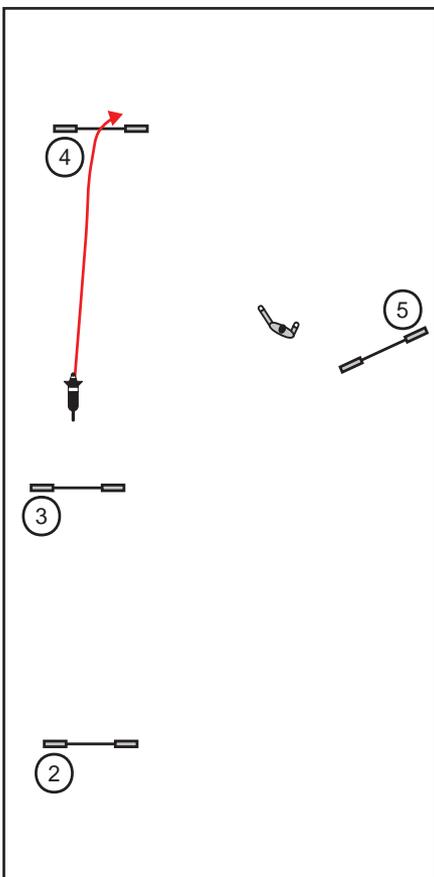


Figure 4

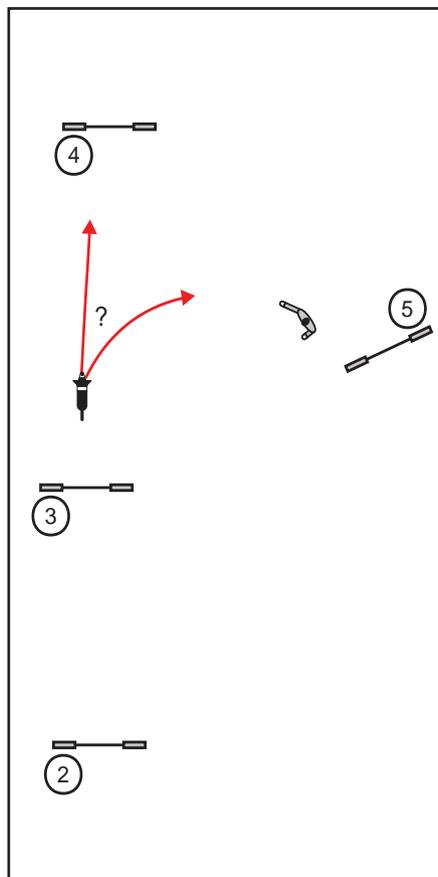


Figure 5

## Incorrect Learning for the Dog

### *Dogs might learn to go slower on course*

We should all agree that most dogs are faster than their handlers. When handlers continuously use early front crosses, you will likely see the dog start to slow down to allow the handler to stay in front and make it to the proper position for the cross. From the dog's perspective, it is better to slow down and allow the handler to stay ahead for an early front cross because the dog only gets rewarded (or not punished) for tight turns when the handler is ahead. The dog often turns wide when the handler *can't* get into position for an early front cross, which also encourages the dog to slow down. As the dog goes slower, he can turn tighter, which again gets more reward (or less punishment) so he backchains the behavior to *slow = good*.

### *Dogs might learn to ignore arm changes*

Over time, the dog's response to arm changes appears to get weaker and weaker. Because most often, when a dog sees an arm change, it does not mean turn in to the reinforcement zone (as shown in my article in *CR* November 2008). It means take an obstacle and *then* turn back to the handler. The

short-term solution for the handler when the dog starts to get a little bit unresponsive is to do a front cross even earlier. Remember the example in Figures 1 through 3. This can be the start of a vicious cycle.

Signaling early can lead to extra problems on very technical courses because you can end up with several handling maneuvers compressed within a few obstacles. Look at some of the trickier FCI Agility World Championship courses and think about changing arms one or two obstacles early. Choosing which arm you should use starts to get confusing. Think about the picture the dog sees.

### *Dogs might learn to do a blind cross*

By using early front crosses you are teaching the dog the first part of a blind cross. **Figure 6** is from my last article's discussion about blind-cross-body-line theory. Remember, both of these dogs are demonstrating blind-cross behavior. The difference is that the dog on the orange path has not completed the behavior, but is still driving toward the no-go zone.

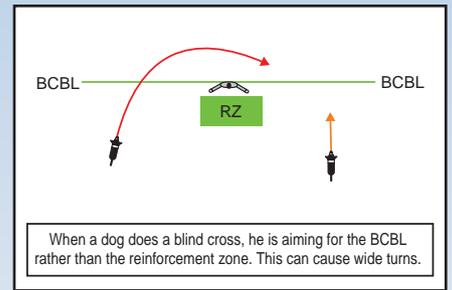


Figure 6

To see why this can encourage blind crosses, let's add jumps to this scenario as shown in **Figure 7**. The dog must go behind you to make the turn. It won't take long before he might start to do a blind cross when you don't want him to.

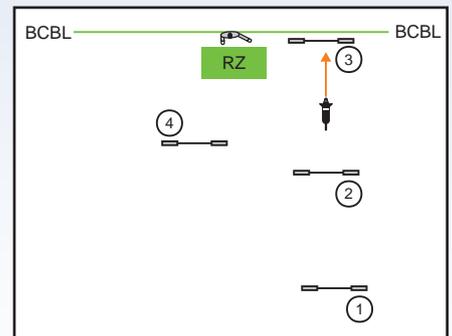


Figure 7

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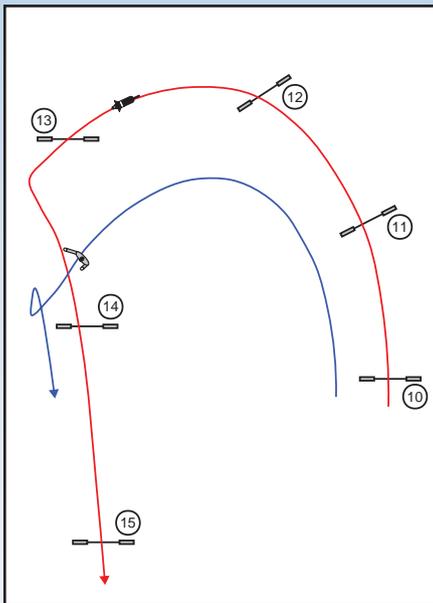


Figure 8

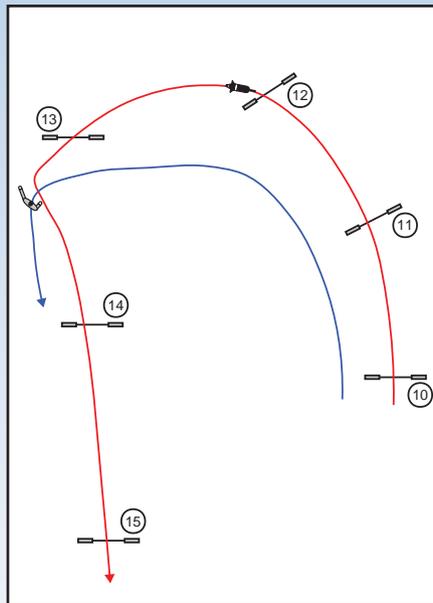


Figure 9

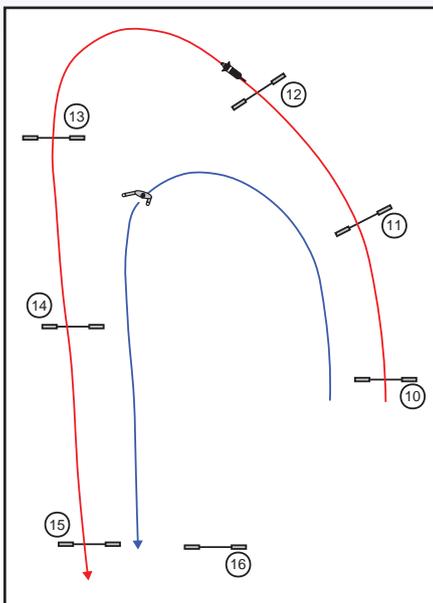


Figure 10

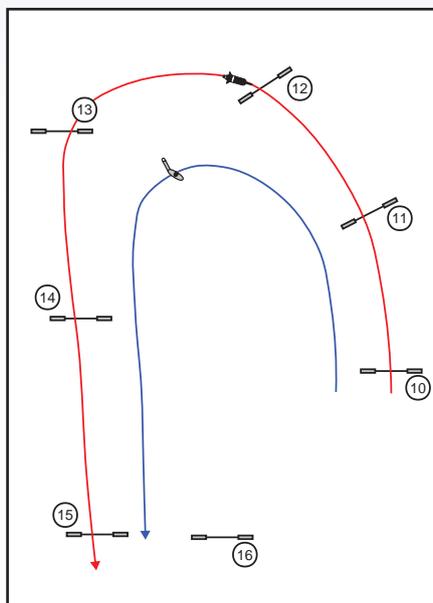


Figure 11

## Dogs might learn there must be an arm change to turn

I observed that some dogs seem to become reliant on an arm change to turn; other turning cues appear weakened or fade out. Therefore, when a dog does not see an arm change, he does not turn well, and handlers have to use arm changes on every turn.

**Figure 8** shows how I would do the front cross using a positional cue. (I have exaggerated the dog's turn slightly between jumps #13 and #14 to show the left turn.) The turn from jump #12 to #13 is controlled with a simple shoulder turn and deceleration in to #12, and my moving away to #13. (In my basic training, I always reward the dog for responding to this basic handling. When following my system, handlers often miss reinforcing this training step.) The dog commits to #13 on a right arm and the front cross controls the turn from #13 to #14. Deceleration and positional cues at #14 alert the dog that the front cross is about to happen.

**Figure 9** shows a handler using an early front cross. This time, the turn from jump #12 to #13 is controlled by the front cross/change of arm and jump #13 to #14 just follows on. Therefore, the dog is constantly rewarded on this kind of sequence for turning, due to the arm change between #12 and #13.

In **Figure 10**, there is no front cross required for this sequence. But because the dog has become reliant on arm changes for turns, the dog goes wide from #12 to #13 when the handler uses only a shoulder turn to cue the turn. To get a tight turn, the handler must now use a reverse flow pivot (RFP) or false turn to get the tight turn seen in **Figure 11**.

In the next article we will discuss how to improve your front-cross timing as well as how to proof your dog's response to the front cross. 🐾



Greg Derrett has been competing in agility since the late 1980s and has won a national final in Great Britain in 15 of the last 16 years. He has an advanced studies diploma in animal behavior and his proven methods of training have helped him stay at the top of British agility. Several of his clients have won national finals in several different countries and gold medals in international competitions. Greg has four videos on agility training for sale and he also offers online lessons. Greg lives in the U.K. with his wife, Laura, and their seven Border Collies. Visit his website at [www.gttagility.com](http://www.gttagility.com).

## Timing of

# FRONT CROSSES

## Part 3: Proofing Front-cross Cues and Improving Timing

By Greg Derrett, photos by Susan Garrett

In the previous articles we discussed cues for the front cross in my handling system and the blind-cross body line (BCBL). We also talked about the potential fallout of performing front crosses “early.” Now we’ll discuss proofing your dog’s response to a front cross, deceleration cue, and positional cue, as well as how to practice improving your timing.

### Proofing Your Team’s Front-cross Skills

First, to help solve any handling problems, sit down and be brutally honest about your dog’s performances. No one likes to admit faults; but if you can identify problems, then you can work toward solving them.

Does your dog take extra strides on course because he has a question about what comes next? Are your times competitive and your runs consistent with dogs of similar breed and age? Are there turns you know are going to be wide because you can’t get to that perfect position? Does the dog cut across your path to take equipment or veer away from your reinforcement zone and the course to take equipment? Does the dog launch behind you on a lead-out? Does your dog sometimes ignore arm changes? Does your dog ever go behind you to take an obstacle?

I’m a great believer in testing the dog and I’m constantly checking to see if my dogs respond to arm change, deceleration, and positional cues. The following three simple tests may help you to identify your weaknesses and may help you to identify why mistakes occur.

### Front-cross Test

In the sequence shown in **Figure 1**, do a front cross at #2-#3, #3-#4, #6-#7, and #7-#8. This test shows how quickly the dog responds to your front cross. It is a proofing exercise and should be run as such. This is not a training drill.

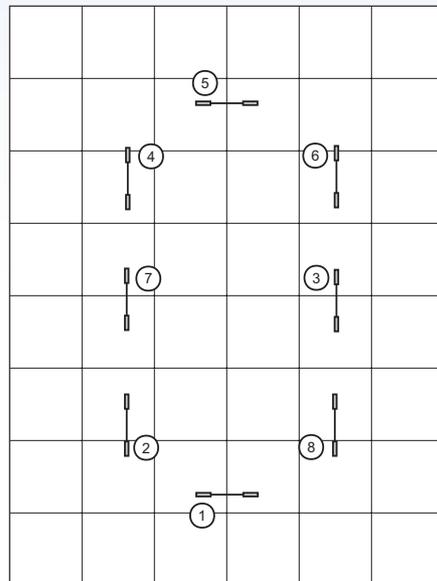


Figure 1

Do each front cross as the dog commits to the jump and then *run!* For example, as the dog plants to take off at #2, do a front cross and *run* to #3. Don’t try to give the dog any additional cues or stand still and wait for the dog—*run* to the next jump. The dog should land, turn as tightly as possible, and drive after you as seen in **Figure 2**.

If your dog takes a jump behind your back (as shown by the orange line in Figure 2), it indicates that your dog is turning wide and takes a few more strides to respond to a front cross.

I return to this sequence every five to six weeks to test my dog’s response to a front cross and to see



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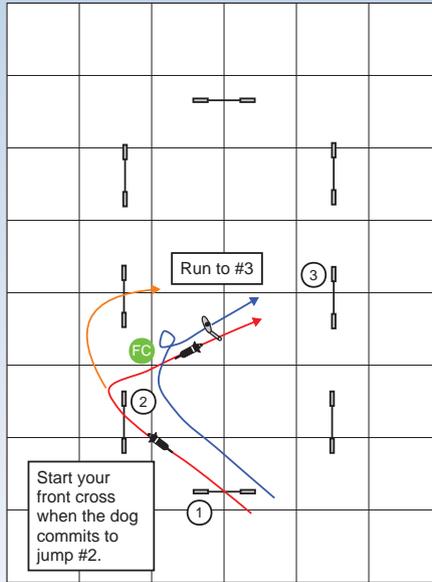


Figure 2

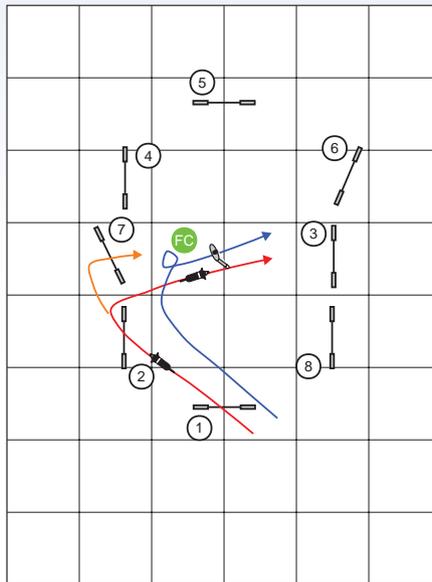


Figure 3

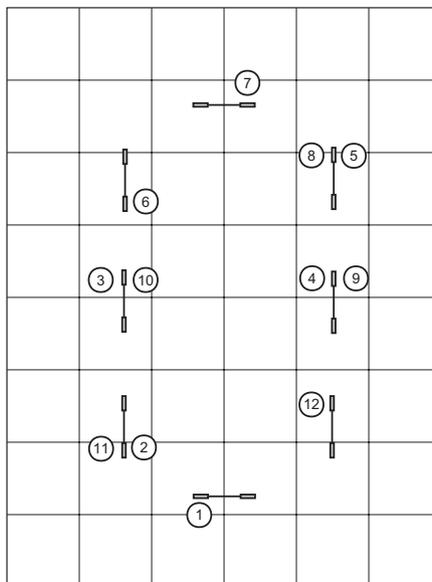


Figure 4

if my timing remains true. I make the challenge as difficult as possible, using just 12" between the wings of the middle jumps and angling two of the jumps to make the off-course possibilities even more inviting as shown in **Figure 3**. A further challenge is to run **Figure 4** before you run Figure 1. Here you are executing diagonal-line front crosses between # 3-#4, #5-#6, #9-#10, and #11-#12.

**No one likes to admit faults; but if you can identify problems, then you can work toward solving them.**

## Deceleration Test

Do this test without equipment as shown in **Figure 5**.

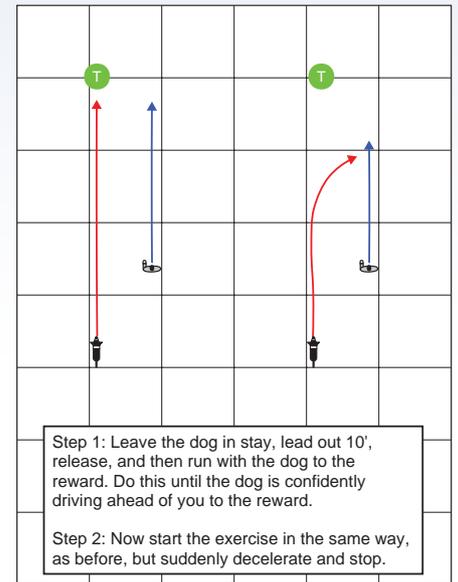


Figure 5

**Step 1:** Leave the dog in stay, lead out 10', release, and then run with the dog to the reward. Do this until the dog is confidently driving ahead of you to the reward.

**Step 2:** Now start the exercise in the same way, as before, but suddenly decelerate and stop.

**Step 1:** Leave your dog in a stay while you lead out about 10'. Throw your toy or bait bag out ahead of the dog, release the dog, and run together to the reward. Hopefully, your dog beats you and grabs the reward. Do this several times until the dog is really powering past you to get his reward. (If the dog lacks interest in the offered reward then this will not be much of a proof.)

**Step 2:** Now start the exercise in the same way, but suddenly decelerate and stop. The dog should slam on the brakes and stop with you; then you can reward with something else. If the dog sails on past you to the toy, then your deceleration cue is not strong enough or is one that has not been rewarded enough.

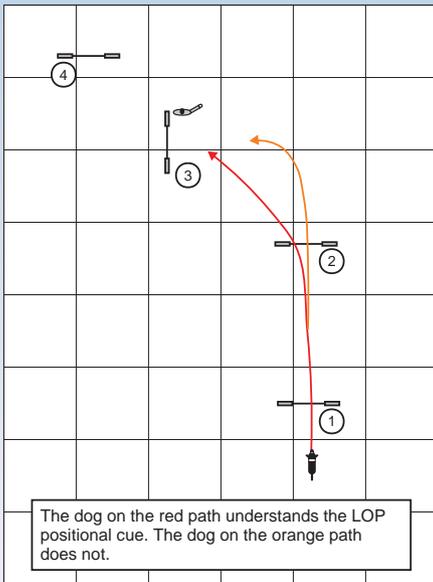


Figure 6

## Positional Cue Test

Figure 6 shows a simple double box lead-out pivot (LOP) sequence. Lead out close to #3 and release your dog. The dog should take #2, already be on the left upright, and curling in toward you before you execute the LOP. If the dog jumps straight and then turns, it is a clear indicator that he does not understand your positional cue.

These three drills are tests to give you information on what your dog does or does not understand. Failure should be seen as a good thing because it leads to identification of weaknesses and your making a training plan to solve them.

## Practicing Proper Front-cross Timing

One of the main questions I get in seminars is how to practice front-cross timing.

The basic timing of a front cross should be as the dog plants to take off, the point where he commits to taking the jump. On course you run to your position to do the front cross, and decelerate as you arrive. When your dog starts to take off, you execute the front cross, and the dog turns. In training you reward, and at trials, you head off for your next position. I think it truly is as simple as that. Looking for the takeoff point is what you need to focus on.

Simple lead-out pivots in basic box work, as in Figure 6, can be a real help because they take away handler movement, which can be distracting. Remaining still allows you to focus on seeing and learning the dog's takeoff point.

You need good start-line behavior as well. If you have a dog that creeps or breaks his start position, this will affect your ability to learn timing and to teach the dog a positional cue. I can never emphasize enough the importance of foundation training.

One-jump, two-jump, and then three-jump drills are the progression that handlers should go through to work on front-cross timing. This progression will gradually increase the distraction of handler movement while focusing on the dog's takeoff point. If necessary, you can put a marker at the dog's takeoff point to help give you an even bigger visual cue at this stage. Then you will need to gradually decrease these props as well as add difficulty into the sequences. You should reward the dog constantly for turning toward you. This gives you the basic training of cue = behavior = reward.

A valuable tool to help solve your front-cross timing problems is videotaping and then reviewing both your training and competition runs. Freeze the video on the dog's takeoff. At this point you should be giving a good positional cue and just be starting to rotate your shoulders. If you are farther through the front cross at this point, you know you are too early. If you are nowhere near the front-cross position, then perhaps a rear cross would have been best on this particular sequence or course.

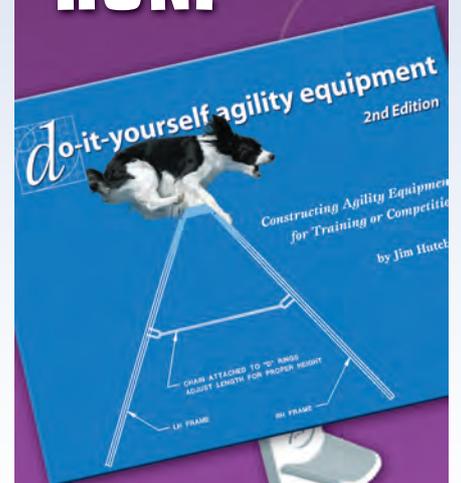
Teaching timing is about schooling the human and the dog. When you are first learning about timing, the rate of reinforcement for you can be very low, so remember to work through stages slowly so that reinforcement levels for you and the dog can remain high.

Someone recently compared handling and dog training in agility to "bacon and eggs." To have greatness, you must have both. Having more of one might give you some satisfaction but the end result will never be as good. Have you missed out on the foundation training of start lines, circle work, deceleration, positional cues, BCBL, reinforcement zone, and more? Do you tend to overhandle to combat these weaknesses? To gain the results you truly want, you can revisit and retrain them all.

Handling is constantly evolving. To stay competitive, we need to keep evaluating what we are doing and what others are doing; yet, the basics and foundation must always remain constant in a consistent handling system. 🐾

*Greg Derrett has been competing in agility since the late 1980s and has won a national final in Great Britain in 15 of the last 16 years. He has an advanced studies diploma in animal behavior and his proven methods of training have helped him stay at the top of British agility. Several of his clients have won national finals in several different countries and gold medals in international competitions. Greg has four videos on agility training for sale and he also offers online lessons. Greg lives in the U.K. with his wife, Laura, and their seven Border Collies. Visit his website at [www.gtagility.com](http://www.gtagility.com).*

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