



# Walking the course

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So this is one of those blogs that could, in theory, change everything for you - If I can make it make sense. Here is my fundamental premise: **I think it is a mistake to decide what information you are going to give your dog before you figure out what information your dog is going to need.**

When evaluate handling options on a course, There are a few steps I go through to figure out my handling strategy. With a couple of minor additions (in a later blog), this is all you need to do, every course, every level, every time.

My goal is to be 100% confident that I have a perfect handling strategy BEFORE I begin to work out the details of how I am going to execute it. A long time ago, I did the opposite, I immediately walked the course worrying if I should front cross or rear cross or whatever and I got tired of having wrecked my run before I even got my dog to the line because I was skipping over the steps that would determine if a cross was even a good idea!

Here is an example course to illustrate the steps.

## **Step 1) Walk the course as the dog (on the dog's path)**

What I'm trying to do is find the ideal path through the course. This is my best opportunity to walk it with an open mind as to what path through the course works best for my dog.

I am specifically going to pay attention to two things.

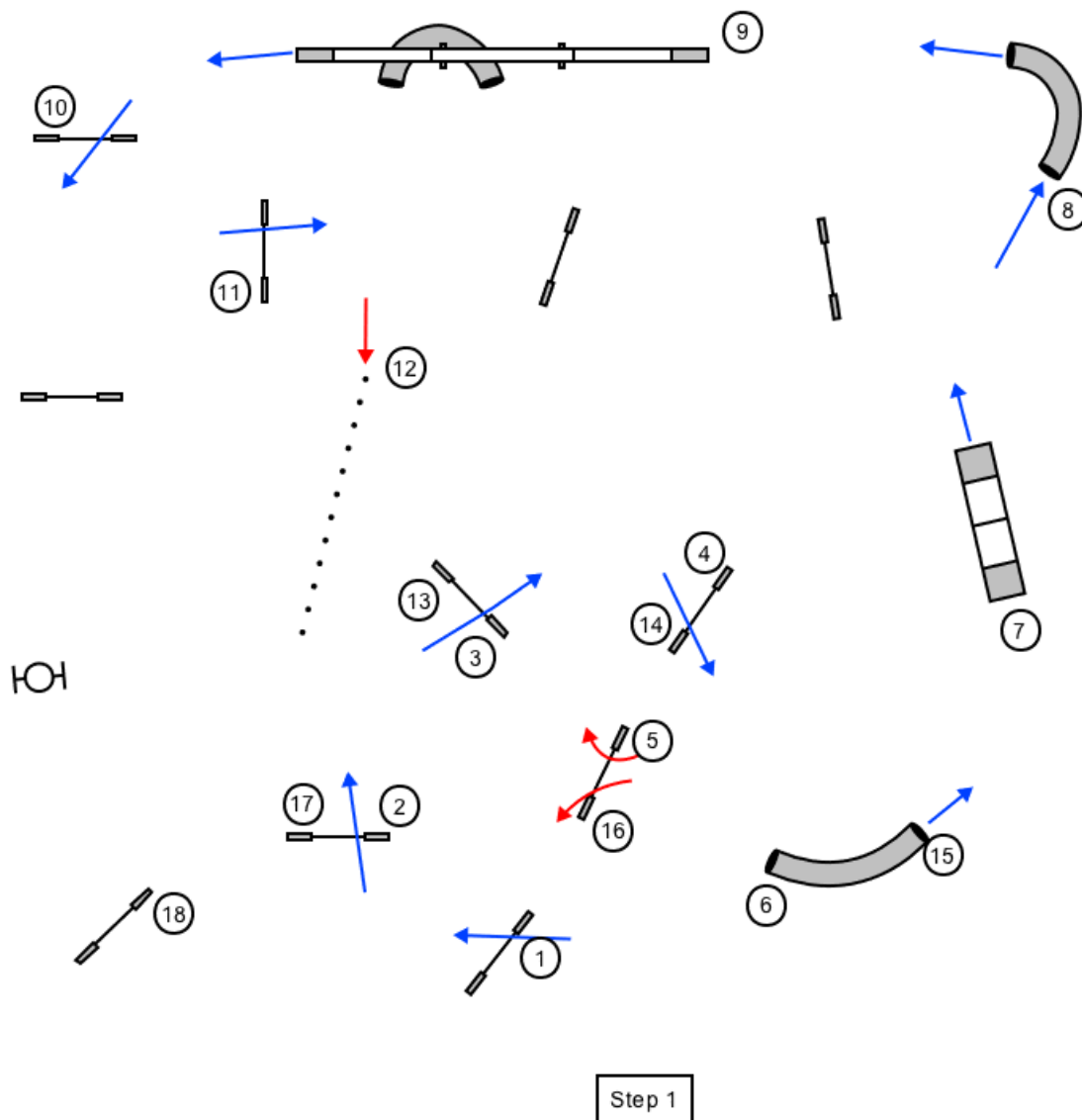
- 1) Which side of each jump do I want my dog to take. My only options are left-side and right-side.
- 2) For every obstacle where it is an option, do I want them to collect (turn) or extend (drive forward) when they perform it.

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In this course, you can see the choices I have made.

The long blue arrows represent an extended behavior (for jumps, I define that as the dog takes off 3 times the bar height away from the jump and lands 3 times the bar height past it).

The shorter red arrows represent a collected behavior (for jumps, a good rule of thumb for a well trained dog is that they take off about as far back as the jump is high, and land the same distance out. They can also turn as they land in the direction you want).



There are a couple of interesting things to notice:

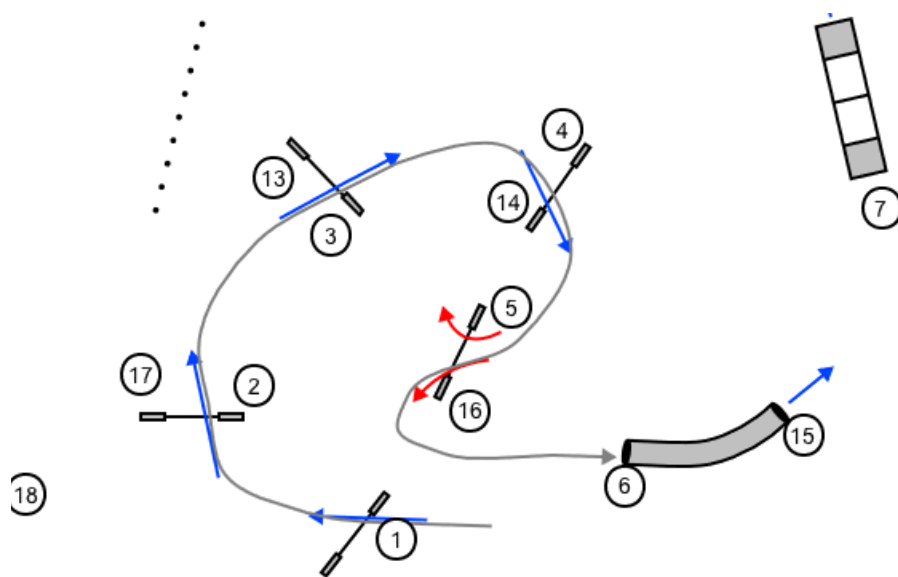
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Notice the lines do not pass through the middle of the jumps. I have to pick either left side or right side for the purposes of determining my strategy. the actual path over the jump can vary a bit- but dogs do tend to optimize where they jump a bar based on what you show them.

Notice that the lines are straight. For example, if my dog jumps #3 as shown, they will land straight ahead. **Be sure you are not walking your stride length in stead of your dog's!**

Notice at the jump number 5, I am not sure of my best strategy, I could cue my dog to turn left or right to get back to the tunnel. I'll have to think carefully about the ideal path I want to create for my dog. I walk both, and then pay attention to which feels better, is shorter, easier for my dog, more efficient for them or faster. Whatever criteria you use, it is about the dog - not about you! I am not choosing the dogs's path out of fear of an off course (I won't show them an off course) or handling preference (I don't like front crosses). I think I like turning my dog left over the jump as a better line into and out of the jump to the tunnel.

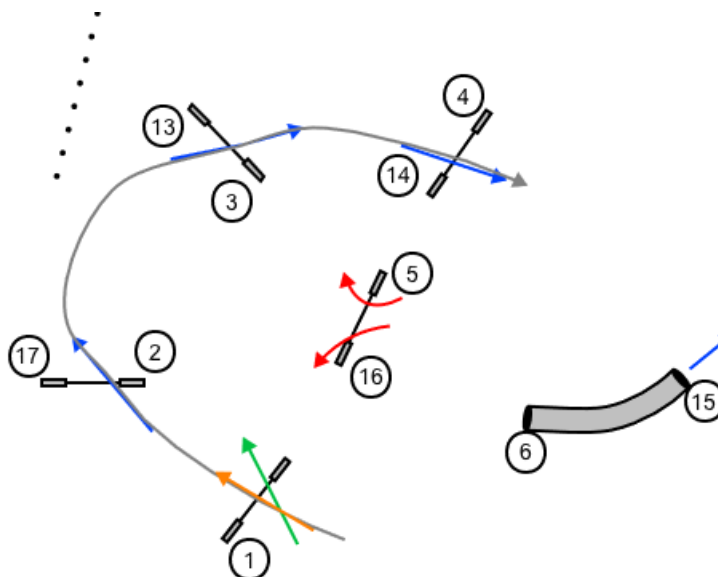
If you were to lay tape on the ground, putting a golf tee to secure the tape at the start and end of each arrow, and connecting them with a natural looking arc- you would find that your dog's path is often perfectly along the line! Try it and train yourself to pace off your dog's actual take off and landing spots with accuracy.



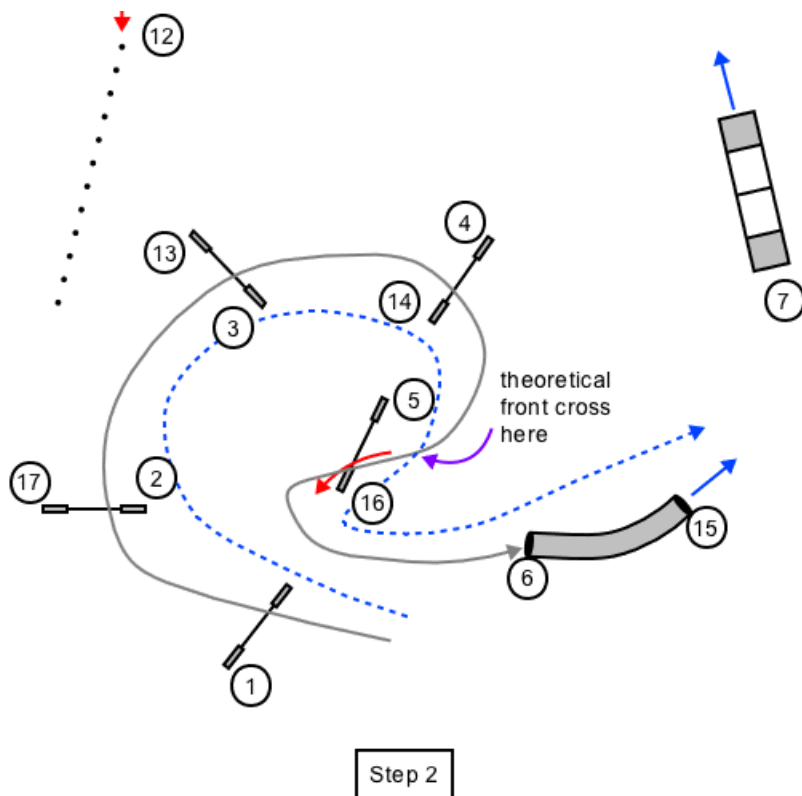
### Starting position tip:

Here is another interesting tip. Note where I would put my dog in a stay for jump #1. Is this where you would have done it had you started looking at the course as a handler? My guess is that you would have immediately noticed that starting your dog on the green arrow (below) would be a bad idea, but many people do this accidentally, not realizing that when they set the dog up in the middle of the first jump and then stand to the right of their dog, they have actually set this line.

Another typical mistake is to automatically set a straight line from jumps #1 to #2. Often this is a good idea, but look at how it creates an ambiguity about the weave poles and a poor line over jump #4 as each approach angle to each jump affects the line to the next and so on. The handler could cue collection on jumps # 2 to make the path tighter to #3 and also cue collection at #4 to fix the path, but that will cost some time and would be less efficient as the first solution.



**Step 2) Walk the course as if you are holding your dog's collar in your hand.**



Now take your imaginary dog through the course. (you can actually put your dog on a ribbon, or handle a friend through the course, in a slower version of the real thing).

a) If I want my dog to take the right side of a jump, I need to be on the right side of it. If I want my dog to take the left side of a jump, I need to be on the left side of it.

b) Where there is a transition between sides - I walk it with a theoretical front cross (don't worry if you could never get there, hate front crosses, prefer blind crosses or whatever).

You are not selecting your final

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handling execution - you are getting the information necessary to determine what information your dog needs from you!

In this section, the handler shows the dog the first 4 jumps with dog on their left side, and then changes side to show jump 5 and the tunnel with the dog on their right side. There is one theoretical front cross.

For now, notice these two additional curiosities when you take your pretend dog through the course.

- 1) Make a note of where you walk a theoretical front cross before and after the same obstacle - that is your marker to look at it again later as a possible serpentine.
- 2) Make a note of where you walk a theoretical front cross twice in a row with no obstacle in between - that is a marker for a potential threadle.

### **Step 3) Visualize getting to each theoretical front cross.**

Now walk through the course again, visualizing whether or not you can perform the front crosses or if you prefer the information encoded in a blind cross or rear cross instead. If you can get to the front cross, then do.

In the opening of this course, of course you can get there, so do!

Double check your serpentine and threadle options. Do they provide better information and a more efficient path than actually doing the crosses? You don't have to think about this for the opening shown.

### **Step 4) Finalize the details.**

At this point you have identified a perfect handling strategy. It will work exactly as you plan so now all you have to do is work out the details. Walk your best strategy, really visualizing where you are, what your dog needs from you and what information you are going to give them to satisfy that need. Work out the details of your front cross line and whether you cue collection or extension for tunnels, jumps and running contacts. Orient yourself to where you need to get to on course and whether you are looking at your dog or at an obstacle. Rehearse on course as carefully and precisely as you can. Stay focused!

In the opening of this course, I would want to take care to identify exactly where to set my dog at the start line. I would decide where to lead out, knowing that all I need to do is support the natural extended arc through the first few jumps. As my dog is approaching jump #4, I am "working" the 1/2 way point on the path to #4 as I make my way to the front

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cross line between #4 and #5. The work is kind of minimal but I am rotating my left shoulder back to keep facing into the gap between my dog and jump #4. By the time my dog is actually jumping #4 I am will into my front cross rotation and I just need to make sure not to overstate and end up facing jump #5. If I do, I will accidentally cue extension over this jump.

Instead, I will keep my attention focused on the 1/2 way point between jumps #4 and #5 which keeps my body facing toward my dog as she comes toward me over jump #5 - thus cueing collection.

Now either a post turn or blind post turn, will let me accelerate toward the tunnel pulling my dog in that direction.

There are other articles that talk about these handling moves, but this illustrates how much care I am putting into the actual mechanics of moving through the course. I am not just wandering around in the walk through but really focusing on the job I have to do.

#### **Step 5) Visualize again.**

Stand off to the side and close your eyes - can you "see" the entire course? When you walk it, can you see your dog moving along their ideal path? Pay attention to what your lead hand is doing - is it doing useful work? In your mind are you making the ideal path happen (or just hoping it will)? Are you watching your (virtual) dog's eyes at the tricky bits?

Shrink the course into a 5 foot by 5 foot square and air handle your way through it. When you come out of your miniature blind cross are you oriented correctly to where the next obstacle is? Do you have a hiccup somewhere, where you can't remember if it is the tire or the triple? Work through anything that doesn't come to you fluidly and clearly.

#### **Step 6) Relax!!**

You've thought through the ideal path and ideal strategy. You've looked at viable options and picked the ones that work best for you and your dog. You've virtually run the course three or four times already, visualizing exactly how it is going to go. Now when you run, all you have to do is be in the moment and enjoy the chance to play this awesome game with your best buddy.