AgilityFlix

8 jumps and counting

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One of the things that I have found most valuable in agility is the way I think about (and handle) jumps so that is the topic of this article.

The basic premise is that any individual jump is actually one of six different obstacles and only I know which one it is (since it looks exactly the same to the dog). Once I started thinking this way, it lead me to a number of specific conclusions that have turned out to give me a lot of control on course. The first is that each "obstacle" has a different name, for example, I might send my dog to a "jump" or to a "go on" and what she does (the way she jumps) is different as a result. I also decided that the physical cue for each "obstacle" should look different to my dog. And I also decided that if the verbal cue was going to be helpful at all, then I should train my dog to be able to perform that obstacle as if it was a "trick" (in other words, independent of my handling so that I wouldn't have to handle my dog through the behavior chain of the jump, but could cue them to perform that behavior while I went off and did whatever else I needed to do on course).
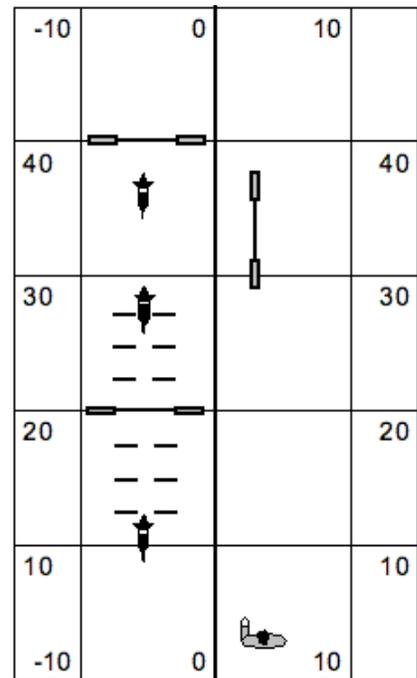
"GO ON"

When I send my dog to a "go on" obstacle, what I'm looking for is my dog to take off in extension (roughly 3 times the bar height away from the jump, so for a 20" jump, that would be 60" or 5 feet). This will ensure they will land equidistance after the jump – but I also want my dog to drive forward after landing.

This behavior is built via targeting or a thrown toy where they toy is delivered early enough that the dog does not look back over their shoulder before it appears in front of them. When the dog is sent to the "go on" they drive over the jump and anticipate a reward

forward ahead of them. I work all approach angles that are safe, all jump types (spreads, tires etc…) with me ahead of and behind my dog.

On a typical course ending, I could send my dog to the "go on, go on, go on" to finish off the last 3 jumps in a row.

What I like about this approach is that I find "go" to be really confusing, does it mean keep going until you run out of obstacles? Or keep going until you hear differently from me? And if so, when do I tell you not to keep going as you commit to the next to last obstacle? Does "go" only apply to straight lines? What about a big arcing curve, would it be ok to use it then or not? Is the direction set by where the dog is looking or where I am moving? I confuse myself just typing this…

Instead, if what I want is this type of behavior, then I just send my dog to the "go on " obstacle and if there are several in a row I can repeat the command. Or I can follow up the "go on" obstacle with a different obstacle name for the next one where a turn might be required.
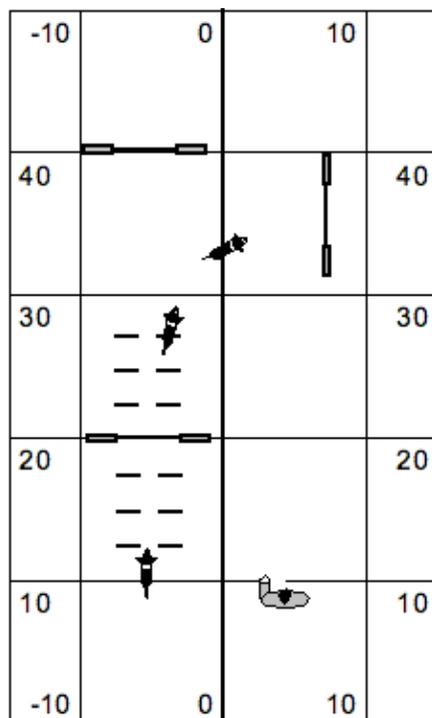
"JUMP"
When I send my dog to a "jump" obstacle, what I'm looking for is my dog to take off in extension just like a "go on" but I want my dog to turn toward me on the stride after landing.

This behavior is built with timing and placement of reward just as the "go on" is. In addition, I work landing and take-off side cues and also rear cross body language.

I think of "jumps" as sort of the default behavior for jumps. NADAC and ASCA courses often use tons of "jump" obstacles and you can envision in the graphic shown a jump at a typical 21 foot spacing or so and how the dog would add

one stride in between

And would already know on approach to the first jump how to plan striding for the next.

and 4) "JUMP-LEFT " or "JUMP-RIGHT"

When my dog performs a "Jump-left" or "jump-right", I'm looking for 3 things:

gravitate toward the left or right jump standard,

add a stride and take off about as far back as the jump is high,

rotate around your center of gravity and land facing left or right. (right shown)

I work both landing and take-off side cues where my dog is turning toward me and also away from me. I also work all approach angles and all jump types (broad jump, panel etc.)

I also work on cueing what happens after the above behaviors are performed. In other words, what does it look like if I want my dog to accelerate back to me, or forward, or even out away from me.

The interesting thing about having this kind of collected behavior on a jump is that my dog doesn't have to go on handler focus in order to perform it. For example, in the picture above, as my dog approaches the jump, I can her to "jump-right" , "tunnel" and drive full speed into the right side of the tunnel shown.

The flip side of this is that I found that I did need a handler focused turn command as well. Hence obstacle type #5.
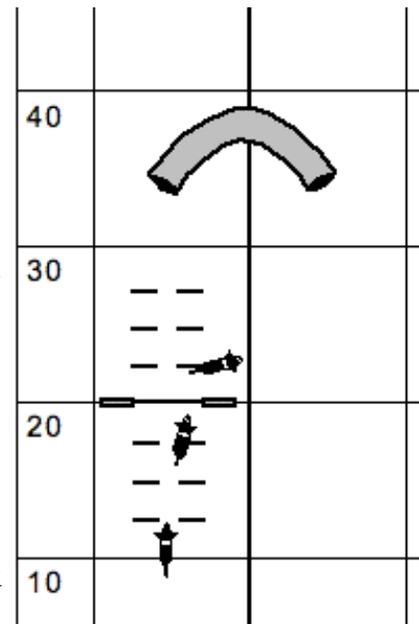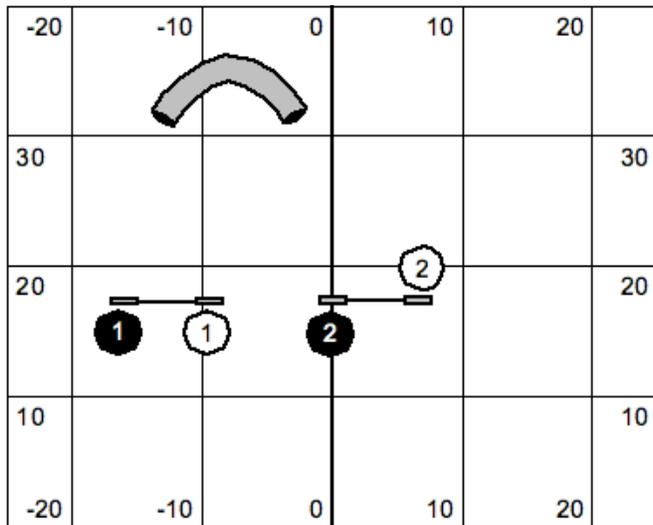
5) "ZIP"

What I decided I needed in addition to a "jump-left" and "jump-right" was to be able to have my dog collect and turn toward me and also go on handler focus and not drive to the next obstacle presented by the jump-x turn.

For example, if I am following the light circled obstacles I could cue "jump-right, jump" without any problem, but it was tough to get my dog not to commit to #2 if I wanted to handle the black circles.

If I am handling the black circled course, I would cue "zip, jump" and

That means on the approach to the black #1, my dog goes on handler focus and I can cue what happens after I get the collction/rotation over the #1 bar.

I decided that I only needed to train "zip" as a turn toward me so mostly I worked on all approach angles, all jump types but focused on rewarding for coming directly to me and not taking any other obstacle that might be presented.

6) "BACK"

The next jump obstacle is called "back" and I use that when I want my dog to push to the back side of the jump.

In the sequence below, I would send my dog to the "tunnel, back, back".

I built this by first building a send to the back side of the jump and a sit, by rewarding that behavior. As quickly as I could, I started moving
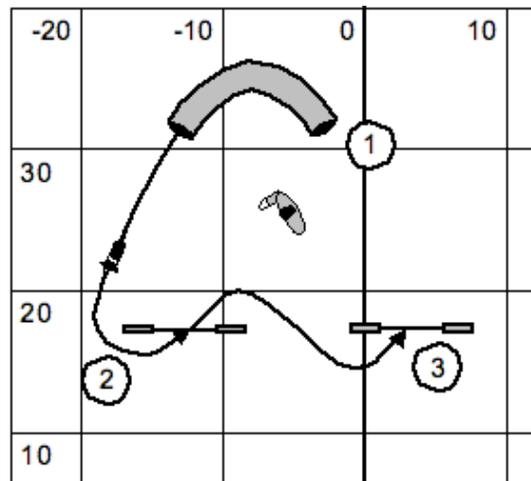
in other directions while my dog went to the back side so that she did not need (or expect me) to support the path to the back side of the jump.

Then I named this behavior "back". Later I moved placement of reward from the sit to the landing side of the jump, so the behavior chain became: go to the back side, anticipate the sit (ie: shift weight to the rear) and pop over the jump and get your reward.

The only thing you might want to know is that once the dog goes to the back side of a jump they can either do a tight turn around the standard they are closest to OR take the jump slicing toward the far standard. Cueing which one you want is handy so combining with a directional or a hand cue is helpful. "BACK-RIGHT" and "BACK-LEFT" are natural extensions of your jump cue. I also use a physical cue of dropping my shoulder and showing my off hand when I want my dog to wrap toward me after going to the back side. When they slice the far standard, then you end up performing a rear cross so normal rear cross body language applies.
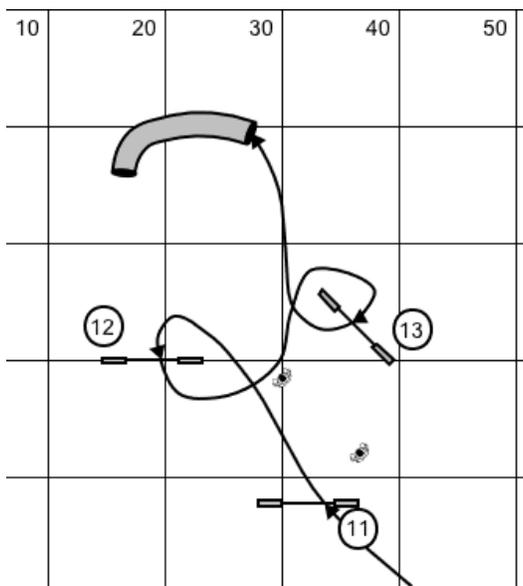
7) "HERE-AROUND"

In this example the number 12 jump is a "here-around" because I am pulling my dog into me and then turning them away to the back side. For this trick, I use my off hand only to pull in, like a threadle or RFP cue and then release them to go to the back side with the same hand. If I changed hands, I would end up shaping the forward approach to number 12.

The advantage of having this cue is when you can't get to a front cross to push to the back side of a jump. With practice you can send to the back side with the same independence as any other cue.

Barrels are great training aides for this cue!

8) "JUMP-OUT"

The last jump obstacle is called "jump-out" and I use that when I want my dog to jump the far side of the bar away from me. In the picture to the right, the #12 jump is a jump-out and the location of the dog shows when I would send her to the "jump-out".

I've deliberately set up this picture as if I can't get to a nice serpentine cue, nor can I handle it with a front cross between 12-13 and a rear cross would be unattractive in terms of communicating the path as well.

To be consistent with the way I handle, the "jump-out" is always associated with serpentine handling because I am pushing from the outside of the arc (11-12-13 as shown).
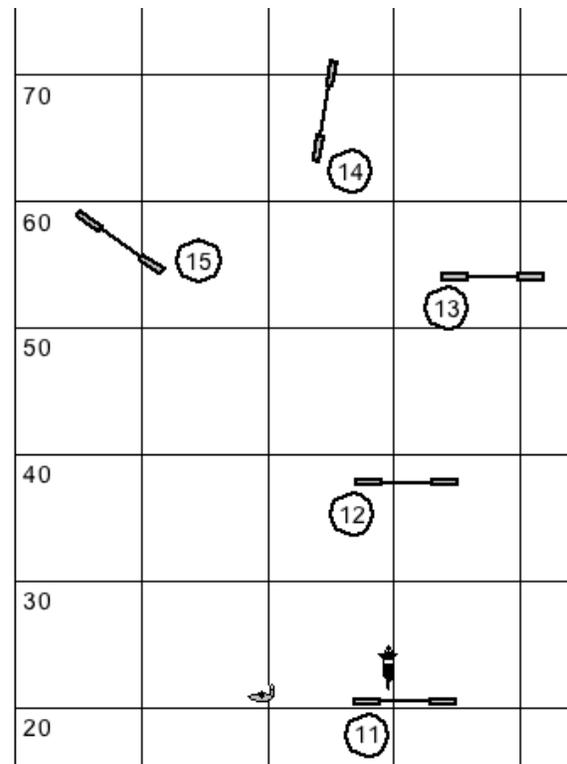
Well, those are the 7 different kinds of obstacles that all look like a "jump" to my dog. I think it makes sense to treat them as different obstacle types because the behaviors required are very different from each other. By having different obstacle names, I can often cue my dog how to perform the "jump" before I can show them with a physical cue what I want.

If I was starting a young dog now, the one thing I know I would do differently is build even more independence into the behaviors. For example, in the "back" example above, right now I can send my dog to perform a "back" at #2 and drive forward through the gap between 2 and 3 and she understands to go to the outside of jump #2 and perform the jump and then follow me through the gap. I don't have to wait for her to take off for #2. I'd like a similar level of independence for all 7 behaviors.