

Active SIDE



By Amanda Shyne, photos by Alicia Dube

When handling your dog in agility, the side of your body where your dog is supposed to be is called the *active side*. When I first started competing in agility, no one talked about the active side much less about training the active side. For the most part, people did front crosses and rear crosses, never taking their eyes off of their dogs; therefore, maintaining the strongest of the active-side cues—eye contact.

One of the reasons eye contact is such a strong cue is because it is a natural cue that puppies are born understanding. For instance, if a six-week-old puppy is restrained as you run away from him, when he is released he will follow your eye contact and run straight to your side. As our puppies progress into experienced agility dogs, they are frequently rewarded for engaging in this natural behavior which strengthens the behavior.

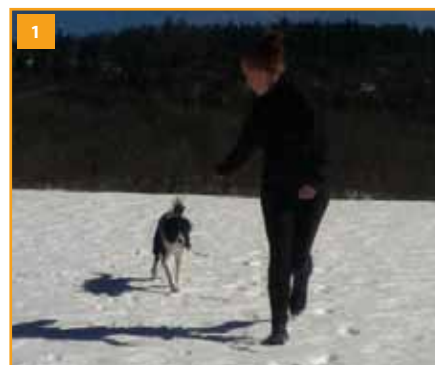
As many handlers begin incorporating European moves into their handling repertoire, eye contact is frequently broken when the handlers

perform a variety of “blind” handling moves. Therefore, training the active side becomes both more important and more challenging. The following exercises are designed to train your dog to recognize the specific cues that indicate the active side:

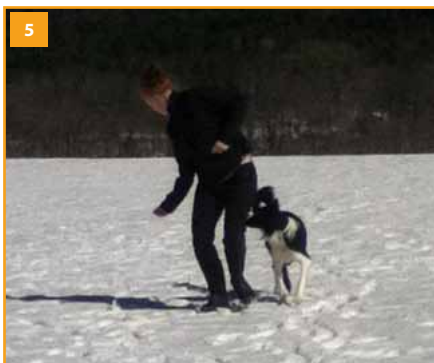
- Eye contact
- An open shoulder
- Hand signals

EXERCISE 1: RECALLS TO THE ACTIVE SIDE

Begin this exercise with 10 small, easily visible food rewards in each of your hands. Throw a single piece of food in one direction. As your dog is eating the reward, run in the other direction. As you run, clearly designate your active side with eye contact, an open shoulder, and a visible active hand as shown in **Figure 1**. When your dog finishes the food and runs to your active side, throw a food reward forward as shown in **Figure 2**. As you throw the food, *continue running forward* until your dog finds his



food reward, then take off running in the other direction. (If you decelerate or stop as you throw the food reward, you are training your dog to disregard



your motion.) As your dog finishes eating the food reward and begins to run after you, complete a front cross and then continue running in the same direction.

If your dog comes to your new active side, again throw a piece of food forward to reward his effort as you continue running forward. At this stage in the training, it is unlikely that your dog

will come to the wrong side since there isn't any equipment pulling him away from your active side, and you are using eye contact, the strongest active side cue. If he does come to the wrong side, however, verbally engage him and shake your active hand to try to get him to come to the active side as shown in **Figures 3 through 6.**

Repeat this exercise again, but this time after your dog eats the food reward, complete a blind cross. If your dog comes to your active side, reward him by throwing a piece of food forward as you continue running forward.

This is a great game to play with young dogs. Not only does it train the active side but it also rewards your dog for driving to your side and following your motion. As you play this game, vary the timing of your crosses. If you cross early (just as your dog finishes his food reward) it will be relatively easy for your dog to come to your active side. But if you delay your cross so that your dog is almost at your side when you start your turn, it will be harder for him to come to the correct side. Even though I would never want to handle this way on course (executing late crosses), mistakes happen frequently and I want my dogs trained to compensate for my shortcomings whenever possible!

EXERCISE 2: SEPARATING THE ACTIVE-SIDE CUES

Now you are going to repeat recalls to the active side, but this time you are going to separate the active side cue and work on them individually.

Again, throw a piece of food to allow yourself to get ahead of your dog. As your dog eats the food, run in the opposite direction. Keep both of your hands at your side, using only eye contact to cue the active side as shown in **Figure 7.** If your dog comes to the correct side, throw a food reward forward as you continue running forward. If your dog begins to approach the incorrect side, immediately use all of your active-side cues: shake your hand and open your shoulder in addition to verbally cuing your dog to pay attention.

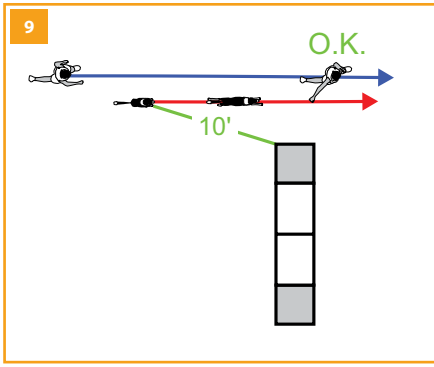


Repeat the exercise several times using only eye contact as your active side cue.

Once your dog is consistently responding correctly to your eye contact as your active side cue, begin using only your hand and open shoulder to cue the active side as shown in **Figure 8.** (Note: It is difficult to cue using an open shoulder without also using your hand, so for this exercise use both an open shoulder and a visible hand to cue the active side.)

Throw a piece of food to allow yourself to get ahead of your dog. As he eats the food, take off running in the other direction. Cue the active side with an open shoulder and an obvious outstretched hand. You should be looking forward in the direction you are running, with only your peripheral vision focused on your dog.

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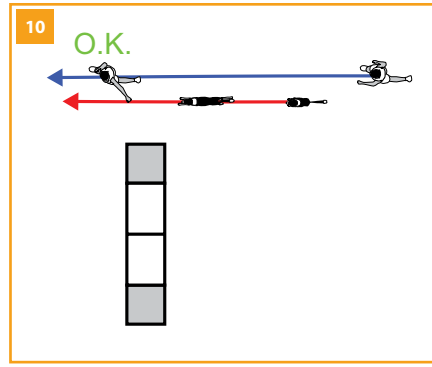


If your dog comes to the correct side, reward him with a thrown piece of food or a food reward at your side.

Repeat this exercise several times, making sure that your dog responds to your open shoulder and hand signal active-side cues equally well on both sides of your body.

EXERCISE 3: ACTIVE SIDE TRUMPS EQUIPMENT

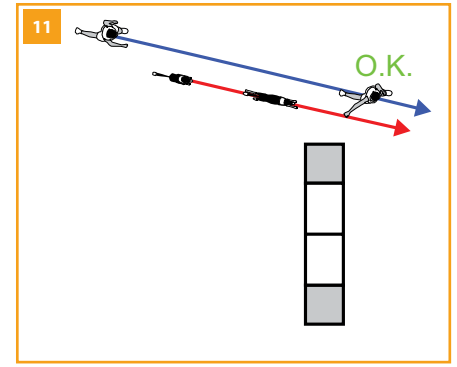
These exercises are designed to teach your dog that the active side overrides any equipment that might be calling his name.



A-frame

Place your dog in a stationary position (sit, stand, or down) 10' away from the side of the A-frame up ramp as shown in **Figure 9**. Starting on your dog's left side and 5' behind him, run forward and clearly cue your right side as the active side. Just before you pass the A-frame, release your dog. If your dog ignores the A-frame and comes to your active side, reward him at your side.

Repeat this exercise in the other direction, cueing your left side as the active side, as shown in **Figure 10**.



As you work on this exercise, *gradually* change your dog's starting position so that while he is in his stationary position he is looking directly at the A-frame. This will make the exercise more challenging for your dog and is more representative of what you will encounter on actual courses. Continue changing your dog's starting position until he can come to your active side while passing the A-frame up ramp as shown in **Figure 11**.

Tunnel

Set up a C-shaped tunnel. Place your dog in a stationary position 10' from



the first tunnel entrance as shown in **Figure 12**. Starting on your dog's left side and 5' behind him, run forward and clearly cue your right side as the active side. Release your dog just before you pass by the first tunnel entrance. If your dog ignores the first tunnel entrance and drives to your active side, throw a toy or food reward back to him as shown in **Figure 13**. Have a big party with your dog.

Repeat this exercise with your left side as the active side. If your dog comes to the correct side, either reward him with food/tugging or cue him to take the second tunnel entrance.

Continue repeating the exercise, gradually changing your dog's starting position so that he is looking directly at the tunnel entrance while he is in his stationary position. See **Figures 14 through 16**.

Jump

Place your dog in a stationary position 10' from the side of a jump. Starting on your dog's left side and 5' behind him, run forward and clearly cue your right side as the active side. Release your dog as you pass by the jump as shown in **Figure 17**. If your dog ignores the jump, reward him at your side.

Repeat this exercise in the other direction, with your left side as the active side.

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Continue repeating the exercise, gradually changing your dog's starting position so that he is looking directly at the jump while he is waiting for release in a sit, down, or stand. See **Figures 18 through 20**.

**EXERCISE 4:
CIRCLING A JUMP**

Set up a jump in a large open area. Begin the exercise by throwing a piece of food on the ground so that you can get a head start on your dog. Cue your active side—the side of your body away from the jump—and

begin to make a circle around the jump. Your dog should attach himself to your active side and not take the jump as in **Figures 21 and 22**.

As you experiment with this exercise make sure that your dog is not running at your side, but that he is running slightly behind, you driving toward your active side. If your body is blocking your dog's sight of the jump, the exercise is far easier for him to complete correctly.

If your dog does "blind cross you" and moves to take the jump as

shown in **Figure 23**, try to call him off the jump by using verbal cues ("Doggy, doggy") and by making your active side more obvious (shaking your hand and becoming more animated). If your dog pulls off the jump and comes to your active side, have a party. If he doesn't, simply go back to Exercise 3, where your dog is in a stationary position as you lead out past the jump. Once he has been reminded that your active side trumps equipment, then you can add the motion of circling the jump back into the game. 🐾

Amanda has been competing in agility for 10 years. She and her Border Collie Dilly were 2008 and 2009 USDAA Dog Agility Steeplechase finalists at the Cynosport World Games. They were also finalists in 2007-2009 in the Grand Prix at Cynosport, placing 3rd in 2008. Amanda is a tenured professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts and teaches classes in statistics, learning, dog evolution, and animal behavior. She is a frequent agility seminar presenter and can be contacted at amandashyne@gmail.com.

