



# Click — Treat

## ARE YOU LIMITING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR CLICKER?

By Amanda Shyne, photos by Alicia Dube except where noted

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In the past year, I have taught a popular weave pole seminar nearly 20 times. One of the most important things I have learned during this experience is that agility trainers do not maximize the value of the clicker or even use it as a reinforcer. Most people have trained their dogs to understand that the clicker signals an appropriate or desired behavior is in progress, and they use it in this way to communicate with their dogs. But, if used correctly, this is only a small piece of the clicker's power.

Many agility dogs understand the click to mean that the behavior is now over and they are allowed to stop and acquire their primary reinforcer. (A primary reinforcer is any type of reinforcer that is intrinsically rewarding and will maintain its rewarding properties even if it is never paired with other reinforcers.) This limits the clicker's value! Using the clicker to simply communicate an impending

primary reward often reduces this tool to an obstruction when training weave pole entries, tight turns, contact performance, and almost all sequence work.

What many agility trainers fail to realize is that the clicker, or the sound of the click, is reinforcing to our dogs all by itself. Like all secondary reinforcers, the clicker initially gains its reinforcing properties from being paired with primary reinforcers (food and/or tugging) during the training period. After the initial training is complete, the sound of the clicker is reinforcing all by itself.

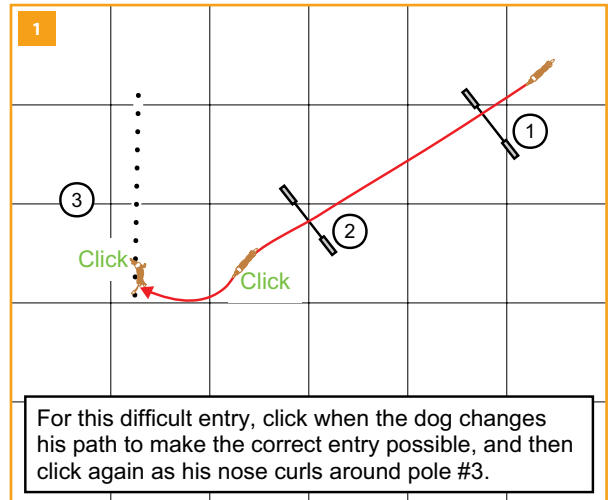
Money is also a secondary reinforcer; it gains its value from being paired with all the great things we can buy with it (e.g., food, shelter, agility equipment, etc.) Just as the click is initially meaningless, money is irrelevant until young children learn to associate between the secondary re-

inforcer (money) and the primary reinforcers (food, toys, etc.) Following this period of learning, the secondary reinforcer becomes very desirable. Dogs trained with the clicker respond positively to the sound of the click—whether or not it is immediately followed by a primary reinforcer!

Acknowledging the reinforcing properties of the click allows us to use the clicker in a variety of situations that enhance the effectiveness of our training. The following three examples are situations where I have used the clicker to quickly and successfully to teach Happy, my young Border Collie, new skills. Happy learned these skills much faster and more thoroughly than my other two dogs, due in large part to my increased use of the clicker as a secondary reinforcer during handling and training sessions.

## WEAVE POLE ENTRIES, EXITS, OR ANY PROBLEM AREA IN THE POLES

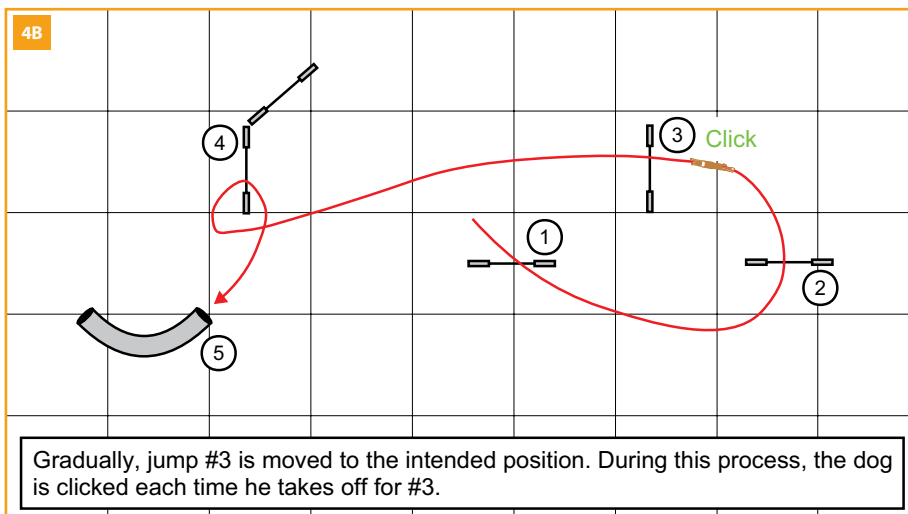
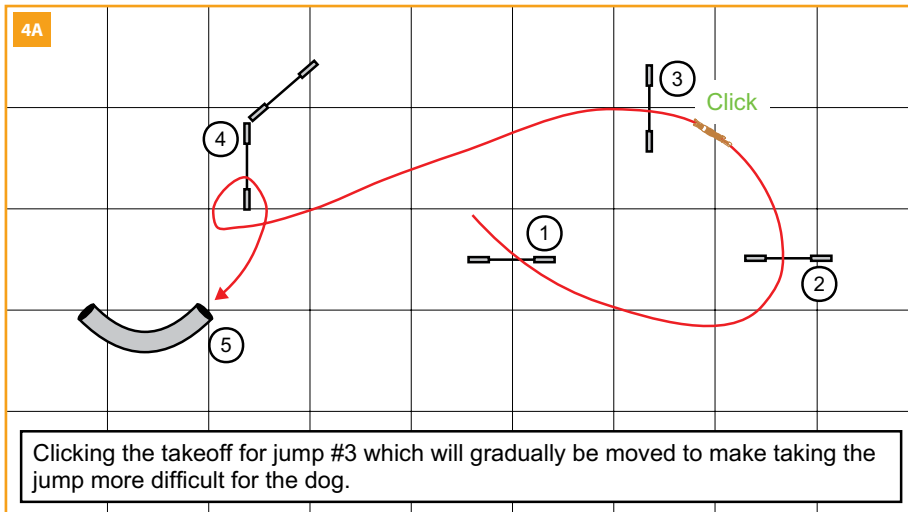
**Figure 1** shows a particularly hard entry where I want to reward my dog's approach to the poles and then his correct movement between the second and third poles. Therefore, I click when my dog changes his path to make the correct entry possible, and then click again as his nose curls around pole #3. The primary reinforcer is not given until the end of the sequence.



In **Figures 2 and 3** you can see that I asked my dog to complete a very difficult entry from the left of the poles. Again, I clicked my dog for changing his path to make entry possible and then for controlling his body enough to stay in the poles after such an entry. Again, the primary reinforcer is given at the end of the sequence, not immediately following the click.



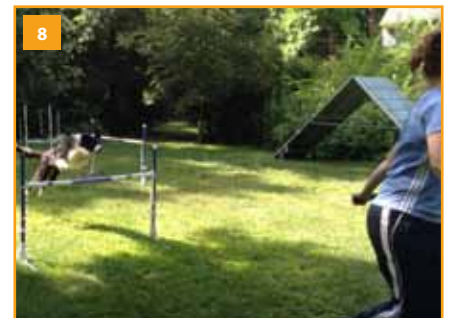
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## TAKING OBSTACLES IN HIS PATH

One problem I frequently observe in both fast dogs and dogs with a big stride is going around the obstacles, typically jumps. This was a common problem with my young BC, Happy, who is both huge and fast.

I used the clicker to train Happy to take all of the jumps along my intended path in a sequence. Initially, I placed jump #3 at a location where Happy's natural stride made taking the jump the easiest choice as shown in **Figure 4a**. Then I clicked Happy's takeoff. Gradually, I moved the jump back to the position where I really wanted it, as shown in **Figure 4b**, all the while clearly communicating to Happy with a click that I liked his efforts to take jump #3. See **Figures 5 through 8**.



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Most often I would click when Happy was taking off for the #3 jump (Figure 7); however, sometimes I would also click Happy jump #2: while he was performing the jump if he was maintaining good eye contact and/or on the ground for digging in and trying to chase me along the path.

If I had used a primary reinforcer to communicate with Happy then he would have been rewarded for taking the jump, but my body position and movements (or lack thereof) would have been quite different than if I was truly running the sequence.

These differences in my body position and movement could be what cued Happy to take the jumps, and not a true understanding of his responsibility to take all the obstacles in his path.

### **JUMP COMMITMENT**

As courses become increasingly challenging, one of the skills I find myself spending more and more time training is jump commitment. In order to handle effectively we need to give the dog permission for a jump and then be allowed to move away to cue

the next obstacle. If our dogs force us to remain in close physical contact while they are taking a jump, we lose valuable time and often the ability to cue upcoming challenges.

There are many ways to train jump commitment and all of them successfully incorporate the use of a clicker. Simply click your dog's takeoff. Regardless of the training method you are using, or your body position and motion while cueing the jump, you can always click takeoff to reward your dog for the exact behavior you want to train.

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In Figures 9 through 11 I am training Happy to move forward and take a jump on a verbal command. As training progresses, I will move farther and farther away from the jump, making this an increasingly more difficult exercise. The ability to reward my dog far away from my body, at the moment of takeoff, decreases training time and improves performance substantially.

### **DON'T LOSE THE POWER OF THE CLICK**

One important thing to remember when using the “click” as a reinforcer is that it is a secondary reinforcer. If

the clicker is never paired with primary reinforcers (food or a game of tug), it will eventually lose its reinforcing properties. You need to maintain the click’s power by continuing to pair it with primary reinforcers once in a while. Vary your pairing of the primary reinforce—sometimes pair your click with a primary reinforce, sometimes don’t. Feel free to vary the type of primary reinforcer you use (sometimes the tug toy, sometimes food), this makes the click a “generalized reinforce.”

In the past, I have used the clicker effectively when training tricks, playing puppy games, and sometimes

when working on specific agility skills (such as directionals). However, now that I use the clicker to reinforce tight turns, the middle jump in a serpentine line, and choosing the correct obstacle in a difficult discrimination, I am beginning to understand the wellspring of new opportunities to improve my training with the clicker. Happy, who has been running sequences with a clicker his whole life, is not only confident in his jump commitment, weave pole entries, and contact performance, he is a puppy who loves working for the sound of the click. 🐾

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*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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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](mailto:amandashyne@gmail.com).*

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