

COME To HEEL *Part 1*

By Amanda Shyne, photos by Alicia Dube



As agility courses become more technical and dogs' yards per second increase, specific skills are becoming increasingly necessary to successfully communicate course direction to our dogs. Possibly the most important of those skills is "come to heel." Heel in this case defined as the dog positioned alongside his handler so both dog and human are facing the same direction and the dog's topline is parallel to his handler's line of motion. Dogs that fall out of heel or try to face their handlers are often unable to differentiate between obstacles their handlers want them to take and those they do not. Dogs that maintain a "loose" heel position on either side of the handler can consistently respond correctly to forward cues and are unlikely to stray in front of their handlers and take off-courses.

The exercises here are designed to work in tandem to teach your dog the value of positioning himself in heel. All dogs and people learn differently; therefore, I like to teach individual skills in a variety of ways. So if one

method is not working effectively for a particular dog, he will get the same information from a different method.

EXERCISE 1: INTRODUCING THE PERCH

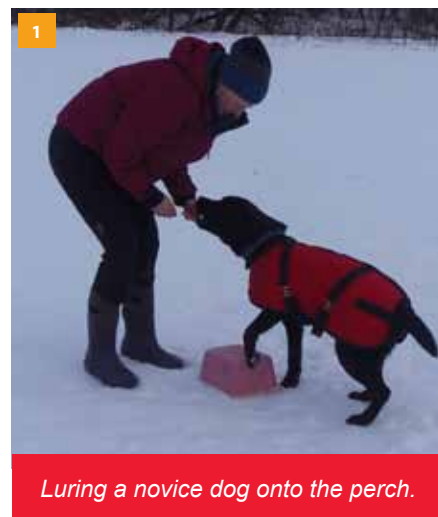
One of my favorite ways to begin teaching dogs to fall into heel position is to use a perch. Initially the training improves the dog's body awareness, but as you advance through the stages of perch training, your dog is rewarded for finding and maintaining heel position on either side of your body.

Procedure: Begin by placing a large, stable bowl upside down on flat ground. I use bowls with rubber bottoms, but any stable object large enough for your dog to place his front feet on will work. Lure your dog to step on the perch with his front feet or free shape the behavior. See **Figure 1**. Click and reward your dog with his front feet on the perch. If your dog continues to maintain this position, click again and throw a visible piece of food on the ground so your dog

has to move away from the perch to get the treat. Repeat this several times until your dog is actively looking to place his front feet on the perch.

EXERCISE 2: PERCH WORK

Purpose: This exercise teaches your dog how to control his hind end. In addition, it begins to teach the movements necessary for your dog to pivot into heel position.



Luring a novice dog onto the perch.

As agility courses become more technical and dogs' yards per second increase, specific skills are becoming increasingly necessary to successfully communicate course direction to our dogs. Possibly the most important of those skills is "come to heel." Heel in this case defined as the dog positioned alongside his handler so both dog and human are facing the same direction and the dog's topline is parallel to his handler's line of motion.

Procedure: Set up the perch. Ask your dog to step on the perch with his two front feet. When he steps on the perch, offer him a food reward. Make sure his front feet remain in contact with the perch while he eats his reinforcement. Next, move the right side of your body toward the left side of your dog while keeping your toes touching the perch. As your dog begins to feel the pressure of your body, he will likely pivot and move his rear feet away from you. See **Figure 2**. As soon as you see your dog shift his weight in preparation for movement, click and reward the motion.

I frequently see striking breed differences with this exercise. For instance, Labs often do not move away from pressure until their handlers are almost on top of them, whereas Border Collies tend to move away on their handlers' first or second step.

Gradually shape your dog to move his hind feet away from your pressure. Initially reward minute movements and progress to rewarding bigger movements, like two or three steps. Remember, your dog must always keep his front feet on the perch. If he moves his front feet off, stop and ask him to get back into position.

Move back and forth around the perch, in both directions, continuing to reward your dog's motion away from your body. Make sure your body remains in close contact with the perch. Try to keep your toes touching the perch; this forces you to remain connected to the equipment and keeps your body from getting out of position.

EXERCISE 3: PERCH WORK TAKE 2

Procedure: Set up the perch. At this stage in training your dog should be eager to get his front feet on the bowl; if he is being a nuisance and getting in your way as you get the equipment out, you are on the right track! See **Figure 3**. Ask your dog to step on the perch with his two front feet. Move back and forth, circling the bowl, and rewarding your dog's motion away from your body. Each time you reward, position the food on the outside of the dog's face so that as he eats the food you can encourage him to continue moving into a loose heel position. See **Figure 4**.

Continue training the perch until your dog will respond to your body pressure by nestling himself into a loose heel position on the other side of you.

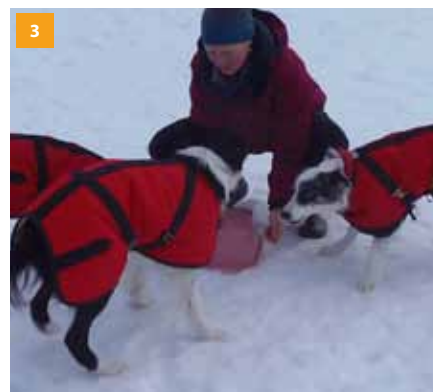
EXERCISE 4: PERCH WORK TRANSITIONS

Purpose: This exercise teaches your dog that the behaviors he learned on the perch apply when he is on the flat.

Procedure: Pick one or two transition objects your dog can use as a perch. I use flat rocks in my yard and clipboards because both tend to be handy. Regardless of what you use, the transitional perch should be less obvious to the dog than the original perch. Lure your dog to place his front feet on the transitional perch then reward him a few times in position. After he has been rewarded several times in position, click and throw the treat so he has to leave the transitional perch to get it. After your dog eats his reward, ask him to



Move the left side of your body toward the right side of the dog until he moves his hind legs away from your pressure.



All the dogs trying to get on the perch.



Feed the dog on the outside of his face to encourage him to move into heel position.



A transitional perch.



Feed with your hand low and on the outside of the dog's face.

come back to the transitional perch and position his two front feet on it.

Once he understands the correct placement of his front feet on the transitional perch, begin rewarding him for moving away from your body pressure, just as you did with the original perch. Move back and forth around the transitional perch, rewarding him for his movement away from your body pressure. Again, make sure to reward on the outside of his face—the side away from your body—so you encourage his movement into heel position. See **Figure 5**.

Troubleshooting: Some dogs need multiple transitional perches before they understand that falling into heel is a desired behavior everywhere. If your dog is struggling with the transitional perch you choose, simply choose another more obvious perch. Review all the exercises on each transitional perch and eventually your dog will fall into heel regardless if he is on the flat or on a perch.

EXERCISE 5: RUNNING IN A LOOSE HEEL POSITION

The second way I teach heel is probably the most common approach. I lure my dog into heel position and continue rewarding him for maintaining that position no matter what I do or how I move.

Procedure: Begin with lots of small, easy-to-eat treats. (I often use small kibble with my puppies and feed them their breakfast in heel position.) Lure your dog into a loose heel position on the left side of your body and reward him for coming to your side. Deliver

the reward with your left hand low and on the left side of your dog's face. See **Figure 6**. The position of your reward is very important! Make sure when your dog takes the treat, he does not move forward beyond heel position, nor does his butt move out so he is heading you off. Provide your dog with a few treats while he is in a stationary heel position, then slowly move forward. Your goal is to keep your dog in heel; if this means giving 50 treats during the time it takes you to move forward 5', so be it!

If your dog is struggling to remain in a heel position, increase the number of food rewards you are providing and slow your motion. Remember that maintaining a heel position is mentally taxing for your dog, so incorporate many short breaks during which your dog is allowed to release some stress, either by tugging or chasing a toy.

Repeat this exercise with your dog on your right. When your dog is on the right, make sure your reward is delivered low with your right hand on the right side of your dog's face.

EXERCISE 6: RUNNING IN A LOOSE HEEL POSITION TAKE 2

Procedure: Lure your dog into a loose heel position on the right side of your body and reward him for assuming position. Give your dog a few treats while he is in a stationary heel position, then walk forward. Continue to reward your dog as you walk. If your dog is doing well, you can start to vary your speed. Gradually walk a

bit faster, then jog, and finally stop. Your dog should maintain his position at your side, with his topline perfectly straight, moving in the same direction you are walking.

Remember to take frequent stress-releasing breaks. Walk for one or two minutes with your dog in a loose heel on your right side, then give your verbal release and allow your dog to move off. After enjoying a quick tugging break repeat this exercise with your dog on your left side.

EXERCISE 7: HEEL OR LIE DOWN?

The third method I use to teach the heel position started with my youngest puppy, Happy, and it is now one of my favorite heel games. At six months Happy did not have a good down. In fact, I was still using a hand cue to get the down behavior. So, I incorporated a quick down into the game of heel and both of us found the game more fun and rewarding!

Procedure: Begin in an open area with your dog at your side. Ask your dog to lie down and then take a step forward. Verbally release your dog and click as he moves out of the down. (Clicking rewards your dog for correctly moving out of a stationary behavior on a verbal release and ensures your dog will then move toward you to get his promised food.) When he gets to your side, feed him a treat as you continue to walk slowly forward. Again ask your dog to *Down* (try to continue moving forward even as you say your command). Click while your dog assumes a down position, then go back to your dog once or twice to reward him for staying in a down as you move forward. Again verbally release your dog when you are a few steps ahead of him, click as he moves out of the down position, and then feed him his reward in heel position. Remember, when rewarding your dog in heel position, always feed with the hand closest to your dog and deliver the food on the outside of his face to encourage him to remain in line with your body.

Repeat this exercise several times on each side of your body.



EXERCISE 8: HEEL OR LIE DOWN? TAKE 2

Procedure: Begin in an open area with your dog on your left side. Ask your dog to lie down and then take a step forward and two to the right. Before you release your dog make sure that your “active” side (the side you want your dog to come to) is clearly being cued. Your left hand and shoulder are pointing at your dog and your eyes are looking directly at him. See

Figure 7. Verbally release your dog as you walk forward, and click as he moves out of the down. Feed the dog his food reinforcement in heel position as you slowly walk forward. Repeat this exercise with your dog on your right side. Ask your dog to lie down and then take a step forward and two to the left. Reward your dog for correctly assuming a down then move back to the position, one step in front and two to the left of your dog.

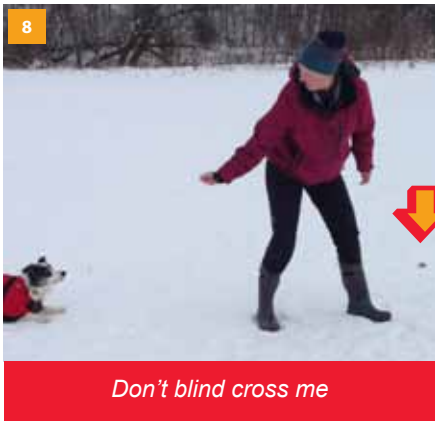
At this point, most dogs understand the game and will dive into heel position on release; however, some dogs may need the added information the clicker provides. In essence the clicker says to the dog, “Come over to me, I am going to give you a treat.” As your dog becomes more proficient at this exercise, increase your speed. The faster you run the harder it is for your dog to drop into a down on just a verbal command and the harder it is for him to control his enthusiasm when running at your side in heel position.

EXERCISE 9: DON'T BLIND CROSS ME!

As more handlers incorporate blind crosses into their handling, it is even more important to teach our dogs what handling signals cue the active side—the side of your body you want your dog to attach to. The active side is cued by the handler’s hand/arm, shoulder, and eye contact. The strongest of these signals is eye contact which often includes a shoulder cue. The following exercise is designed to teach your dog to respond to your active side cues rather than moving toward visible reinforcement. Here the reinforcement will be a toy or food, however, later in your dog’s life the reinforcement may be a jump or a tunnel.

This exercise is similar to the last in that it teaches your dog to connect to your active side. However, instead of requiring your dog bypass an obvious reinforcer, this exercise requires your dog maintain a connection to

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the active side rather than taking the easier path to your nonactive side.

Procedure: Put your dog in a sit-stay and then place a treat or a tug toy (whichever is a lower value reinforcer to your) about 7' in front of your dog. Move 3' to the right of the reinforcer on the ground and release your dog into heel position on the right side of your body. See **Figure 8**. Make sure your body supports your dog coming to your right side—have your hand, shoulder, and eyes in a direct line pointed at your dog. If he begins moving to your right side, verbally reward him. However, if he moves toward the reinforcer on the ground tell him to *Leave it* and verbally encourage him to come to your right side. When he gets to heel position on your right

reward him with a high-value food reward. When when he finishes eating the reward, rotate around and move toward the reinforcer on the ground while verbally encouraging him to *Get it*. Repeat this exercise but move to the left of the reinforcer on the ground and cue the left side of your body as the active side.

Troubleshooting: If your dog is disregarding your body cues and running to the placed food or toy exchange your current reinforcer for an empty food bowl. Pretend to put a piece of food in the bowl so if your dog makes an incorrect choice he does not get rewarded for it.

EXERCISE 10: RUNNING IN CIRCLES

Procedure: Begin with your dog loose at your side. Clearly show your active side (in this exercise the active side is on the outside of the circle) and begin to move in a small circle (about 2' in diameter). Your dog should circle with you staying on your active side. Provide your dog with many short tugging breaks both to reduce his stress and reward his effort. (Frequent reinforcement may also help you remain clear headed; this exercise makes me dizzy!) If your dog is doing well you can reduce the size of the circle and pick up your

pace. Make sure your active side is always obvious; in other words, your hand, shoulder, and eyes are all directly focused on your dog.

This exercise becomes increasingly difficult the smaller the size of the circle and the faster you move. When you are moving quickly it is easier for your dog to incorrectly cross behind you, rather than continuing to circle around you, to stay on your active side. Try hard not to let him make this mistake. If it seems like your dog is about to cross behind you, slow down, catch him with your hand, and bring him to your correct side. Continue playing this game for a minute or so, moving as fast as possible with your dog maintaining his connection to your active side. Repeat this exercise with your dog on the other side of your body.

CONCLUSION

Falling into a loose heel position is one of the most important skills we can teach our agility dogs. Next month we are going to practice a series of drills that are more difficult and more applicable to the agility course. Work hard on these basics so you and your partner are ready for next month's exercises! Have fun training! 🐾

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.

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