

Training Multiple Dogs at ONCE

By Amanda Shyne, photos by Alicia Dube



Recently I brought Happy, my youngest Border Collie, to a local AKC trial. I was anxious to get him in the ring and use the skills we had been training for the past year and a half. Confident that Happy's foundation was solid; I believed that his performance would be the same. The excitement of running Happy in his first agility trial quickly wore off as I realized I had "no dog." Happy was so overwhelmed with the trial environment that he could not look at me, much less engage in any trained behaviors. When seeing how distracted Happy was, I knew immediately the problem was a lack of socialization and habituation to the trial environment. Happy grew up at home with my 3-year-old son, not at dog trials as my other dogs had. The simulation of the trial was overwhelming to him! Knowing the reason for the problem was little comfort as I fretted over how to train Happy to focus at trials, without being able to trial more than once or twice every two or three months.

The solution came to me later that night: I would simply allow my other dogs to run around, bark, and play with toys during Happy's training sessions at home. The next day, Happy (on leash) struggled to look at me while Dilly raced around the agility yard. I was thrilled! Happy's behavior was the same in the yard as it was at the trial, which would allow me to train him to perform better in both situations.

My training program was very simple. I rewarded attention using a secondary reinforcer (the clicker), usually followed by a primary reinforcer, either food or tugging. Happy already had many skills needed for agility, he just needed to learn to focus in a stressful environment with other dogs running around and distracting him from his responsibilities.

Happy gradually improved. One month later, after our dismal first showing, he was in the middle of the weave poles when Dilly ran through pole 9 and 10. Happy continued

weaving! Clearly Happy's behavior was better, but would it hold up at a trial? That weekend Happy was entered in his first USDAA trial and while his performance was far from perfect, his focus and attention were vastly improved. See **Figures 1 through 4**.

Initially when planning this article, I intended to write about training agility dogs to lie down and wait their turn while playing agility. But after seeing how quickly Happy went from a highly distractible puppy to a focused agility dog, I thought other people who struggle with inattention at trials might find Happy's solution helpful in their quest to train appropriate trial behavior.

TRAINING DOGS TO TAKE TURNS

Early in my agility career I only worked with one dog, Dilly; however, as agility began taking over my life I, like many others, began acquiring more agility dogs. As soon as Gim-mie, my second agility dog, began



training sequences I became annoyed having to go back and forth to the house to switch out dogs. So early on I decided to train the two dogs to lie quietly and watch when it was not their turn to do agility.

In addition to allowing me to be lazy, I have found that this style of training allows me to work with fresh, intense dogs. This high intensity and drive is difficult for my dogs to maintain for any length of time due to their consistently giving 100%, whether we are doing course work or one-jump exercises. I found that giving them short breaks while I work my next

dog not only improves the quality of my training by keeping my dogs fresh, but also increases my dogs' motivation since watching a buddy run agility is highly stimulating.

I also appreciate how training multiple dogs at the same time allows me to self-regulate my handling. For instance, if something goes wrong while I am running a sequence and I am not sure if the problem is training or handling, I can pull out a different dog with a different level of training to gauge my handling technique. If the more experienced, and presumably better-trained, dog also misreads my

intentions, I can be pretty sure that I am making a handling error and need to work to correct the problem.

The first step in teaching a dog to wait his turn while watching you run another dog is to specifically reward quiet behavior in the watching location. I like to pick a clearly defined area that is close in proximity to my training area and gives the watching dog full visibility to the training field. For instance, I use my deck (see **Figure 5**) when training in the backyard and an agility table (see **Figure 6**) when training on the agility field.

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EXERCISE 1: SWITCHING DOGS

The first thing your dogs need to learn as they begin to take turns is what releases them from the watching area. Each of my dogs has an individual release word that applies only to him, in addition to my general release word, *Free*. Train the individual release word separately, away from agility equipment.

Next, ask both dogs to get onto (or into) the waiting area, and reward both dogs multiple times for staying in the designated location. Then, verbally release one of the dogs using his individual release word. Immediately reward the watching dog for staying in his location, then throw a piece of food to your working dog who correctly responded to his release. See **Figures 7 and 8**. Repeat this step several times, switching your release words so that both dogs take turns remaining in the watching location and moving out of the location. During this time I begin to add a verbal cue for the behavior; I use the word *Watch*.

Troubleshooting: If your watching dog is struggling to maintain his loca-

tion when his buddy moves, you can feed him as you give your working dog his release cue.

EXERCISE 2: WATCHING TUGGING

Begin this exercise with both dogs in the watching location. Release one dog (the working dog) and reward the watching dog with a high-value food reward. Next, begin to tug with the working dog. See **Figure 9**. Remember, your focus needs to be on your watching dog—this is why I like tugging; I can tug without looking at the dog with whom I am tugging. Continue to reward quiet watching behavior and quickly respond to any misbehavior (moving out of location) by taking your watching dog and moving him back into position. (If taking your dog by the collar is too harsh of a correction, as it is for Dilly, simply stop tugging with the working dog and ask both dogs to get back into the watching position. Begin again, rewarding more frequently this time.) Gradually increase the intensity of the tugging while continuing to reward your watching dog for remaining in the designated location.

EXERCISE 3: WATCHING THE TUNNEL

Place both dogs in their watching location and move a straight tunnel close to them. Release one dog from the watching location and drive him into the tunnel. See **Figure 10**. Run toward your watching dog and quickly feed him a high-value food reward, then turn and reward your working dog for coming out of the tunnel and looking for you. See **Figures 11 and 12**. Repeat this exercise several times, periodically changing which dog is the working dog and which is the watching dog.

CONCLUSION

As your dogs become better at watching, you can gradually shift your focus from the watching dog to the working dog, and you will be able to spend more energy training your working dog and less on training the watching behavior.

Training multiple dogs cuts into already packed schedules, but training them together allows for efficient time management, improved training sessions, and creates dogs with excellent self-control. 🐾

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.