



TRAINING *The* TUNNEL

By Amanda Shyne, photos by Jim Daigle



This article will detail a strategic plan on how to train an obstacle which is often taken for granted—the tunnel. While most agility trainers can tell you which method they used to train their dog the weave poles, contacts, and jumps, very few can remember or even describe the way they trained the tunnel. Haphazard tunnel training can cause three main problems: 1) It can create “tunnel suckers;” 2) It does not teach our dogs when we want extension or collection when exiting a tunnel; and 3) It does not teach our dogs independence in finding the tunnel entry, or where to look for their handler at the exit of the tunnel. The latter is becoming more problematic as courses get harder and dogs frequently get sent to the back of C-shaped or S-shaped tunnels.

If your dog is already proficient with the more typical tunnel presentations, such as straight tunnels or C-shaped tunnels, then you can skip to step 5.

STEP 1: SHAPING THE TUNNEL

Begin with your dog facing a short, straight tunnel. I like to collapse the tunnel down to 3' in length or use a short training tunnel. Have a clicker in your hand and some juicy food rewards or a tug toy in your other hand. Then, either free-shape your dog to enter the tunnel or lure him through a few times. But make sure you never encourage your dog to take the tunnel by placing your hand in the tunnel entrance. This would then require you to remove your hand from the tunnel, at which point your dog should follow your hand and exit the tunnel.

If you are lucky enough to have a second person to help you, place your dog on a harness (one that doesn't restrict him from pulling) and a leash. Ask your helper to hold the leash and restrain your dog on one side of the tunnel while you are on the other side, verbally encouraging your dog forward. During this phase in training, make sure you are facing the same direction as your dog in order to encourage his movement through the tunnel. Facing your dog cues collection and can block your dog's motion in the tunnel. If your dog moves toward the tunnel entrance, your helper should release the dog so he can go through the tunnel. If your dog tries to go around the tunnel, your helper should continue to restrain your dog with the leash until he focuses on the entry. Just before your dog exits the tunnel, begin running forward and throw your toy or food to encourage your dog to accelerate through the tunnel. See **Figure 1**.



While your helper restrains the dog by the leash, go to the other side of the tunnel. Encourage the dog to come through, but make sure you're facing the same direction as the dog. Move forward and throw your toy just before the dog exits the tunnel.

Note: Any time you throw a reward forward, support your dog's forward movement by running. If you throw a toy forward and decelerate or remain stationary, you are training your dog to disregard your motion.

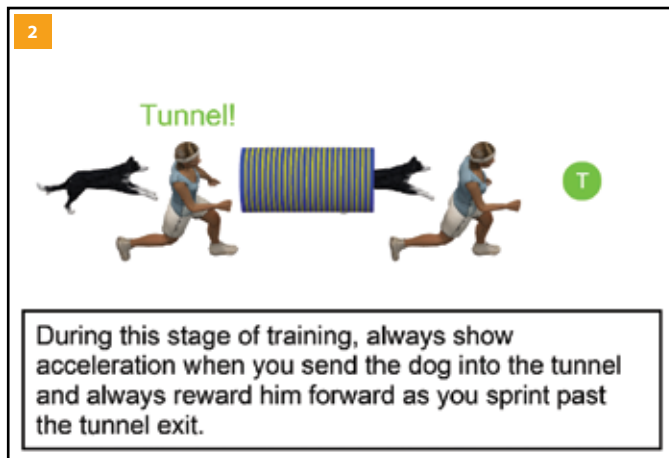
STEP 2: SHAPING THE TUNNEL WITH SPEED

Once you have shaped your dog to move confidently through the tunnel, you can add handler motion. Begin *walking* back and forth near the shortened tunnel, alternating the dog on your left and right, encouraging your dog to run through the tunnel each time it is presented. Ignore any repetitions in which your dog passes the tunnel without entering it. However, if this happens three consecutive times, go back to step 1 and free-shape your dog through the tunnel several times before progressing.

STEP 3: TRAINING THE TUNNEL WITH SPEED

Lengthen the tunnel to 4' or 5', making sure that it remains straight. Then repeat step 2 with more speed. *Run* back and forth by the tunnel, rewarding your dog with a game of tug or a thrown toy each time he exits the tunnel. In this stage of training always show your dog acceleration when sending him into the tunnel—don't stand still and send him. It's also extremely important to cue the tunnel: run forward toward the tunnel with a low and steady hand while repeating the command *Tunnel!*

To remain consistent with your handling cues, make sure that you also reward him forward, either with a thrown toy



or with a tug toy that you drop at your side as you *sprint past* the tunnel exit. See **Figure 2**. If your dog does not tug and has little interest in toys, I suggest you get a Rip N Tug Treat-dispensing Lotus Ball. The Lotus Ball is easy to throw and can be used to reward acceleration. The nice thing about the Lotus Ball is that your dog can open the ball himself to get the food reward without having to wait for you to open the toy.

The reason so many dogs are referred to as “tunnel suckers” is that we train them to enter the tunnel



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3

Tunnel! Tunnel!



Create a small bend. Initially the curve can be so minimal that your dog can see through the tunnel when standing at one end.

4

Tunnel! Tunnel!



As your dog's confidence increases while running back and forth through the tunnel, gradually increase the degree of the curve. As the curve intensifies, the length of the tunnel will also increase.



5

Tunnel!



Put a bend in a short tunnel. This time you are going to handle on the backside of the tunnel. Verbally cue the tunnel as you run forward. Continue running to the exit and reward your dog on the backside for exiting the tunnel looking for you.

with very few cues. So giving clear verbal and physical cues is the most important part of tunnel training. One effective strategy you can employ that will eliminate tunnel sucking is to run all the way into the entrance/curve of each tunnel you ask your dog to perform. Aggressively handling the tunnel teaches your dog that tunnels on course will always be presented clearly and he will not need to actively search them out. In fact, for the first year of training with a new dog, I force myself to *touch* the entry and the exit of the tunnel each time I ask my youngster to complete the obstacle. This not only improves the inexperienced dog's tunnel performance and confidence, but it also improves the way I handle my other dogs. Although there are times when it is beneficial to send your experienced agility dog to a tunnel and then take off, there are also many times when it is best to drive all the way into the obstacle and to pick up your dog at the tunnel exit and take off for the next obstacle together. Handling the tunnel in this way has the added benefit of decreasing the likelihood of your dog curling into you and entering the incorrect tunnel entrance of a C-shaped tunnel.

STEP 4: C-SHAPED TUNNELS

Once your pup is racing through a short, straight tunnel without hesitation, create a small bend in the tunnel. Initially the curve can be so minimal that your dog can see through the tunnel when standing at one end. Go back and forth through the tunnel, handling the dog on the inside of the curve. See [Figure 3](#). As your dog's confidence increases, gradually increase the degree of the curve. As the curve intensifies, the length of the tunnel will also increase. Continue working until the tunnel is fully stretched out in a "C." See [Figure 4](#).

Verbally cue the tunnel as many times as you would like while your dog is moving toward the entry. This verbal repetition will confirm your dog's correct behavior of driving toward the tunnel. Also continue to accelerate as you cue the tunnel and reward your dog with a thrown toy or tug on the run as you sprint away from the tunnel exit.

When you throw the toy, make sure you continue running to the toy until your dog gets to it. If you decelerate or stop after throwing a toy, and allow your dog to continue running to the toy, you are rewarding your dog for disregarding your motion, or lack of motion in this case.

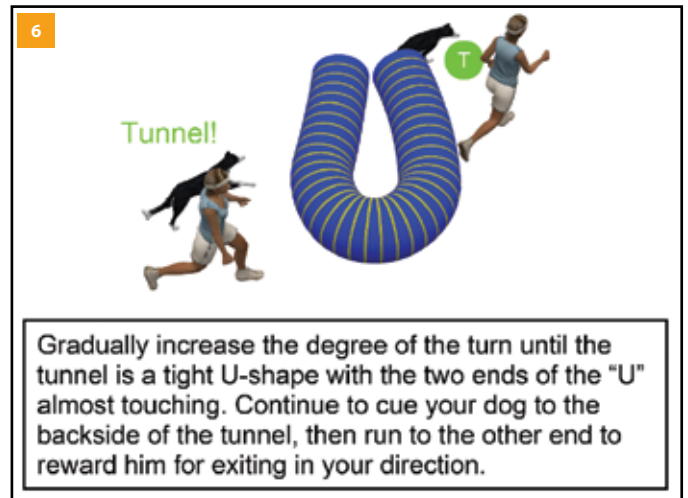
STEP 5: BACKSIDES OF THE TUNNEL

Begin this step by shortening and straightening the tunnel. Cue the tunnel once and reward your dog lavishly for correctly performing the obstacle. Next create a small bend in the tunnel; however, this time you are going to handle the dog on the back side of the tunnel. Verbally cue the tunnel as you run forward with your dog to the tunnel entrance. Continue running to the tunnel exit so that you are ready to reward your dog for exiting the tunnel looking at you. The placement of the reward is particularly important when teaching your dog how to exit the backside of the tunnel. The reward should come *behind* the tunnel exit so that your dog is rewarded for turning out of the tunnel in your direction. See [Figure 5](#).

Turn around and repeat the exercise, this time with the tunnel on the other side of your body. If your pup readily races through the tunnel and exits looking in your direction, increase the curve and then repeat the exercise. Gradually increase the degree of the turn until the tunnel is a tight U-shape with the two ends of the “U” almost touching. Continue to cue your dog to the backside of the tunnel, then run to the other end to reward him for exiting in your direction. See **Figure 6**.

When performing this exercise you are training your dog to find and enter the first tunnel entrance available to him. This setup makes it difficult for the handler to run to the tunnel entrance while still meeting her dog at the exit; therefore, you may need to send your dog to the tunnel entrance. Remember, just because you are sending him does not mean your dog is allowed to take the tunnel without permission. When you cue the tunnel, step forward toward the tunnel entrance, support with a steady low hand, and continue saying *Tunnel* until your dog has successfully entered.

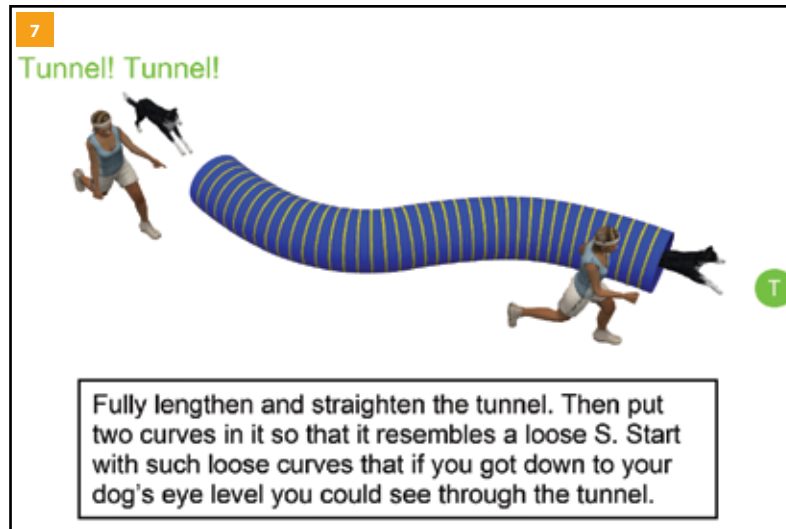
As you slowly progress through this training your dog will become proficient with every possible tunnel entrance. In addition, finding the correct entry becomes a fun game that requires even the most accomplished agility dog to dig in and work hard to find difficult tunnel entries.



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Troubleshooting

- If your dog is looking in the wrong direction as he exits the tunnel, verbally connect with him by saying his name and then reward him as he turns toward you. However, if he is so confused that he spins away from you as he exits the tunnel, straighten the tunnel before repeating the drill.
- If your dog bypasses the first tunnel entrance and enters the second, immediately stop and decrease the curve of the tunnel for the next repetition. Your dog will be far more competent at finding entries if you proceed slowly with a high rate of reinforcement than if you train too quickly and practice incorrect performances.



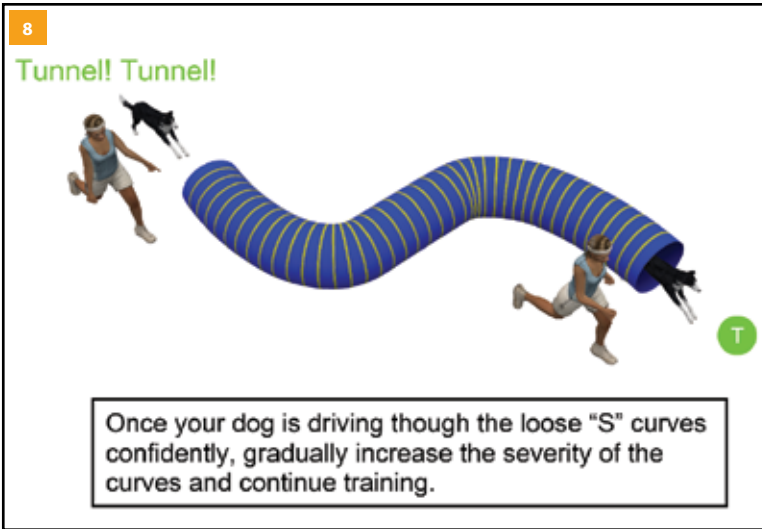
STEP 6: S-SHAPED TUNNELS

For this step it's best to use a 20' tunnel. Fully lengthen and straighten the tunnel. Then put two curves in it so that the tunnel resembles a loose "S." Again, start with such loose curves that if you got down to your dog's eye level you could see through the tunnel. See **Figure 7**.

Verbally cue your dog to take the tunnel and accelerate toward the tunnel entrance. Remember, verbally cuing *Tunnel, Tunnel, Tunnel* does nothing other than support your dog's correct behavior—running toward the tunnel. Continue running and meet your dog at the tunnel exit with a rowdy game of tug or some especially tasty food rewards. Once your dog is

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driving through the loose “S” curves confidently, gradually increase the severity of the curves and continue training. See **Figure 8**.

S-shaped tunnels are particularly hard for many dogs because the dogs seem to think they are done once they round the first curve. Training the S-shaped tunnel in this gradual way allows all dogs to maintain their confidence and drive while learning this more difficult tunnel shape.

STEP 7: REAR CROSSES

Shorten a straight tunnel to about 5' or use a short training tunnel. Grasp your dog's collar and together move to a position about 4' in front of the tunnel entrance. Continue to restrain your dog as you verbally cue excitement, saying things like *Ready, Steady, Ready*. Then verbally cue the tunnel and release your dog. As you release your dog, support the tunnel with a low steady hand while moving on a diagonal line behind your dog in order to rear cross the tunnel. Continue running forward (on your diagonal

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line) and reward your dog for looking for you on the correct side of the tunnel. See **Figure 9**. I find it helpful to use a clicker when playing this game. I click the instant my dog's nose exits the tunnel looking in my direction.

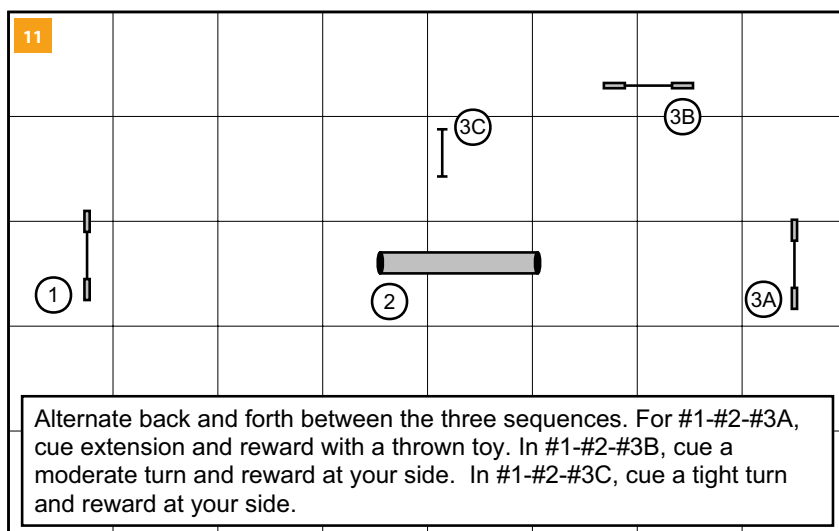
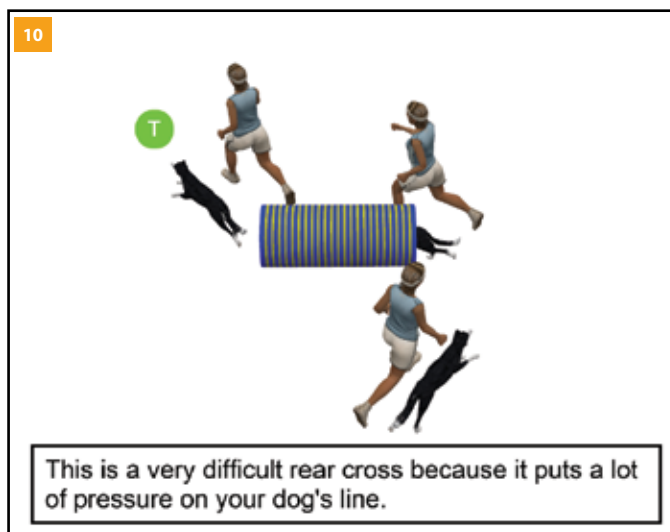
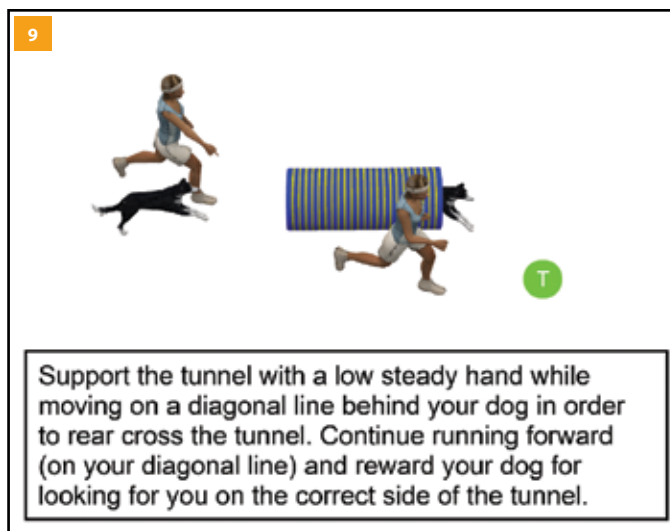
Repeat this exercise beginning on both sides of the tunnel, making sure you vary the angle of the diagonal line you rear cross on. Sometimes making the angle very difficult; for instance, stand beside the tunnel facing the entrance (with the majority of the tunnel behind you and your dog) send your dog into the tunnel and cross behind him as shown in **Figure 10**. This puts substantial pressure on your dog's line to the tunnel so be especially aware of verbally supporting your dog while at the same time keeping your hand low and steady to support your dog's movement into the tunnel. Click and reward your dog for exiting the tunnel looking in your direction.

STEP 8: TURNS OUT OF A STRAIGHT TUNNEL

Correctly cuing a turn out of a straight tunnel depends upon several variables: 1) You need to consider your dog's drive, speed, and independence in taking tunnels; 2) You need to analyze the line of the obstacles leading into the tunnel and the angle at which your dog will enter the tunnel; and 3) You need to consider the severity of the expected turn out of the tunnel. As a general rule, dogs with less speed and smaller strides need fewer handler cues for upcoming turns, whereas faster dogs with bigger strides need more prep time in order to turn efficiently out of the tunnel. Many gentle turns can simply be cued by slight deceleration before your dog enters the tunnel. Sharper, more extreme turns may need harsh deceleration or even a Ketchker turn preceding the tunnel entry. These are important skills to practice with your dog. However, training sharp turns out of a straight tunnel should *not* begin until your dog is completely confident in the tunnel and recognizes that the verbal cue *Tunnel* gives him permission forward, regardless of your change in motion.

Remember, as with any turn, use as few turning cues as possible while still getting the optimum turn. In other words, if your dog will turn well when shown deceleration as he enters the tunnel, then doing a Ketchker before the tunnel is unnecessary and will decrease your dog's speed through the tunnel for no reason.

Set up the drill shown in **Figure 11**. It contains three sequences to practice: #1-#2-#3A, #1-#2-#3B, and #1-#2-#3C. While training your dog to respond to turning cues, you need to continue training and rewarding him for responding to your acceleration cues. So go back and forth between the three sequences: first cuing extension (rewarding your dog forward with a thrown toy or thrown food) and then cuing deceleration and either a tight or a moderate turn (rewarding your dog at your side). Experiment with the various turning cues and combinations of cues to see how they affect your dog's turns. 🐾



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.