



ACTIVITY: WORKING TRIALS

THE CONTROL SECTION IN WT

Following on from the articles on tracking and search squares, it is time to look at control.

While most trialists appear to remain cool, calm and collected about nosework, many seem to get into a terrible panic about control, and turn into nervous wrecks while waiting for their turn.

This may be because on the control and agility field you tend to have spectators, or perhaps it is due to the fact that in nosework it is down to the dog, while control relies heavily on the handler, but for whatever reason some trialists will tell you that they love nosework but not so much the control.

I do not belong to this school of thought, as turning the whole thing round I feel helpless on the nosework field but in a position to do something to assist in control, but that may be down to my obedience background.

The control exercises, like nosework, increase in difficulty as the stakes progress, although CD tends to have more heelwork than the other stakes, both on and off the lead, and also has a sit and down stay rather than just the down.

Heelwork is done at all three paces and without extra commands throughout all stakes, but the amount of heelwork tends to be reduced in the higher stakes. However, less does not necessarily mean easier, and it is not unusual in TD or PD for this exercise to be carried out under distraction, with handlers required to have a conversation with the judge or steward or carry out the exercise around the jumps or in or around the search square.

Of all the exercises in trials I have found that heelwork seems to be the most universally disliked. I am not sure why this is but I suspect it is because handlers find it boring and, as such, so do their dogs. This leads to a lack of training as when given a choice of things to train handlers rarely decide on heelwork.

I am probably unusual in that I find teaching heelwork to a youngster really exciting, and once they have the idea of what I want I take it to extreme situations, with and without distraction, but always in short bursts leading to high excitement. It is important to remember that a few paces of flashy attentive heelwork is better than any amount of flat uninterested plodding about, so to begin with that is all I ask for. I bring the dog to heel and start heelwork without any set up and do just a few paces and then play.



This method works for me and I can vary the amount I do and introduce turns all as part of this heelwork 'game,' and I can remember at Phoebe's first trial suddenly wondering if she would do a whole round of heelwork as we had not done more than a few paces at a time in training.

However, the message had obviously got through as she did some lovely heelwork and has gone on to score well in this exercise throughout her life. Although I do tend to have quite fizzy dogs who are inclined to work forward I never have inattention or lagging and all the dogs I have worked in trials have really enjoyed heelwork.

In the lower stakes there is a recall and a formal retrieve of a dumbbell, and although the former appears to cause little difficulty many new handlers struggle with the retrieve which is normally achieved by a 'chuck it and hope for the best' method.

I am a firm believer in teaching this exercise and go through a step by step teaching procedure, starting with the hold and moving on through take, pick up and go and get all in simple easy to understand steps, and without ever throwing the dumbbell.

I give lots of praise at every stage, and only when I know my dog understands what is required, will I actually throw the bell. I find that by going through this routine the dog not only learns the whole exercise but individual parts of it, so I can ask it to pick up anything anywhere without seeing it thrown, which can prove very useful with a tricky article in the search square.

The sendaway is arguably the most important part of control although it is marked the same as the down stay. However, the ten on offer for the sendaway and/or redirect has to be earned whereas the ten for the stay involves the dog doing absolutely nothing at all. I think the most important thing about training a sendaway is not to lie to your dog, so if you start off, as most of us do, sending your dog to a toy then this is the reason that he runs, if you then take away the toy, you very soon find that you have taken away the dog's incentive and that's when it all starts going wrong.

My dogs continue to run to a reward in training throughout their life and the only time they run to nothing is at a trial. However in order to prepare for competition the obvious marker gives way to a less visible reward and as the distance grows in training the reward becomes less evident and the dog runs on trust. It is therefore essential that this trust is maintained, and this can only be achieved by retaining the reward in training and reinforcing it after a trial. I rarely do a redirect in training after a sendaway but am more likely to praise and reward the sendaway, and then put the dog back at the point and do a redirect.

There has been endless amount written about how to teach these exercises but the common factor is that we make the dog believe that it is worthwhile running to a point in the expectation of a reward, and as long as the dog believes this then it will run. At trials they can often see things differently and head off in the wrong direction, but a dog that is confident and sure of its reward will always go somewhere which is far better than going nowhere, and on the days it gets it right the result can be spectacular. On these occasions other handlers will often come and ask you how you trained the exercise but no-one wants to know when it all goes pear shaped! The most important thing to remember about sendaway is that if the dog is happy to run and you can move it around it will always get some marks, so train the exercise positively and accept that it will not always go according to plan, and you will end up with a dog that can be relied on to do its best and keep trying.

Other marks in control come through the stay, speak and steadiness to gunshot tests, all of which are tests of the dog's character. The steadiness to gunshot exercise is however being removed from WT in January 2024.

A dog who will stay in a line-up of strange companions for ten minutes without its handler, remain calm and unconcerned when a gun is fired, and will speak on command and continue speaking in a strange place among other dogs and handlers is a confident dog, and this confidence can be built by careful handling and not over facing the young dog.

It is quite surprising how few dogs are troubled by the gun, but those that are need careful, positive handling and it can be overcome.

Although the stay is an easy test it still needs building carefully both with and without distraction if the dog is to feel at ease, and the earlier the dog is encouraged to find its voice the stronger its speak will be. Contrary to what most people believe, teaching a dog to speak does not lead to a noisy dog and in our experience a noisy dog, like a reticent one, is born. Spica is the noisiest dog we have ever owned but did not learn to speak on command any quicker than any of our others. However no amount of telling him to be quiet and getting quite cross with him over his barking has had any effect on his 'speak' exercise, which he does well, and he still remains the noisiest dog we own, yet all of them have been taught to speak.

These are the exercises that make up the control section of trials and all can be enjoyable if taught with a positive attitude and a sense of fun so when you set about training these tests remember to ask yourself 'What's in it for the dog?'

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