

"TAKE 'EM AROUND"

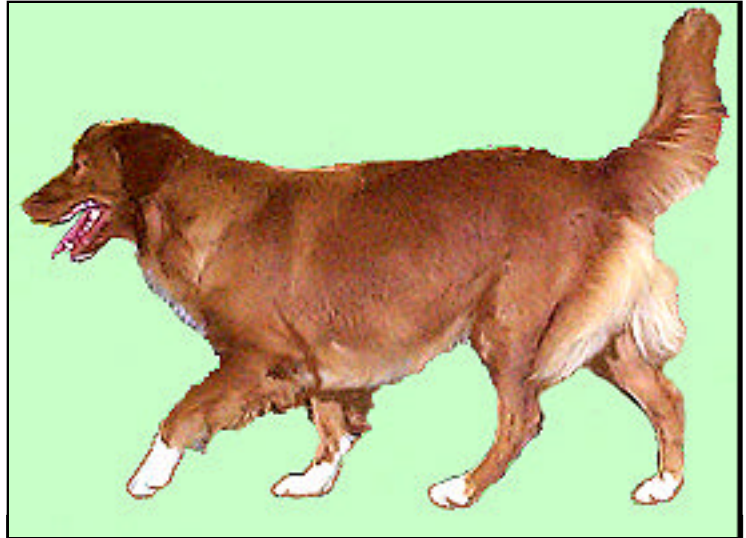
Sue Ailsby

Gaiting, like stacking, is more involved than first meets the eye. The dog must move around the ring or up and down the mat. His attention must be on where he's going, yet he must be aware at all times of where the handler is and how fast the handler is going. At the end of the diagonal mat, he must look again either at the handler or at the judge. He must trot. He must be able to alter his trot from fast to slow. He must respond to minute changes in pressure on the lead. He must be able to trot in a straight line without weaving back and forth. And he must understand that the ring is a circle with flat sides, not a square.

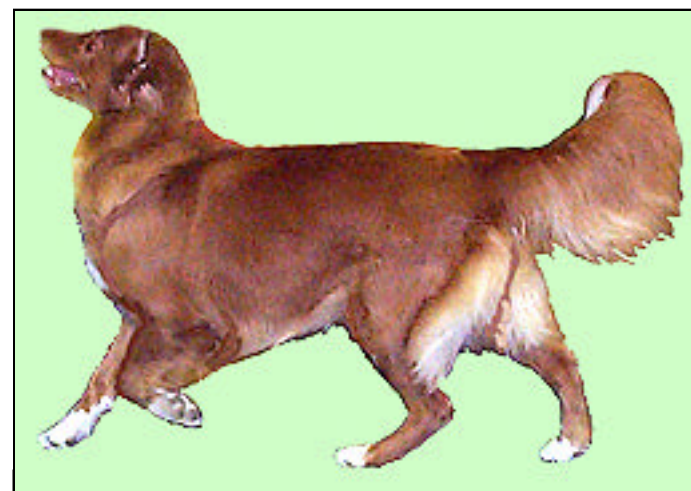
Ouch. Most handlers don't know that much!

EASY BEGINNINGS

Before we start training the dog, let's begin with a brief discussion of gait. All show dogs are judged at a trot. "Trot" is a specific gait in which the left front leg and the left rear leg come together and separate as the dog moves forward. "Pace" is a specific gait in which the left front leg and the left rear leg stay the same distance apart all the time, moving forward and backward together. The Pace is frequently adopted by tired dogs, by dogs that aren't built properly in various ways, and by dogs who have handlers that are constantly interfering with their gait with the leash. You don't want the judge to see your dog pacing, and will therefore put some effort into clicking and rewarding your dog for trotting when you are going for walks. "Walk" is a specific gait which, in many breeds,



Pace. Both left legs coming forward at the same time. Notice how Pacing lowers her shoulders and raises her hips. Eeuw!



Trot. Left legs meeting, right legs separating. Notice how Trotting has flattened her topline. Very pretty.

looks a great deal like a Pace, with left front and left rear legs going forward at approximately the same time (there IS a difference - in a Walk, the rear leg touches the ground slightly before the front leg does but, while the judge can tell the difference, for our purposes here, it isn't all that important). It is certainly acceptable for your dog to Walk a few steps in the ring to get from one place to a nearby place, but unless the judge specifically asks for a Walk, any distance in the ring will be covered with the dog in a Trot.

When you have enough experience, you'll be able to tell whether your dog is Pacing or Trotting by the feel of the loose leash, or by the sound of the dog's paws on the floor. For now, I recommend that you spend a fair amount of time simply sitting and watching dogs until you can tell a Trot from a Pace without having to stop and think about what each leg is doing.

FOLLOWING THE PATH

In free stacking, and in life, you spend a lot of time teaching the dog to watch you. Now you must teach him NOT to watch you. There are several exercises to help with this.

With the dog off-leash, walk in a small circle fifteen to twenty feet in diameter, counter-clockwise. The dog is in the center of the circle trying to figure out what the heck you are doing. If you've used this circle to teach the dog the beginnings of heeling, you'll have to do some work to show him that isn't what you want now. You could, for instance, put your left hand out to your side at shoulder height (as if you were holding a show lead) while you walk. Later, this arm-out will become one of the many cues he uses to tell that you are doing conformation gaiting, not heeling or loose-leash walking. Be sure that you're looking about ten feet in front of you along the circle, not at the dog. If you look at the dog, he'll naturally look at you, which isn't what you want. The dog must be AWARE of you, but if he's looking at you while he gaits, he'll be throwing his legs out of alignment.

OK. Counterclockwise circle, left hand out, looking where you're going, dog in the center. Clicker and treats. Now what? While you are walking, the dog might stand in the center of the circle and watch you. Click and toss a treat ahead of you along your path, to get him up and moving. The dog might come toward you or follow you as you walk. Click and toss the treat out in front of you. The dog might start walking and watching you, heeling. If (and when) he's that willing to work with you, start clicking him when he's NOT looking at you. If you can do this without looking at him, super. If you can't (and most people can't), get a friend to sit outside your circle and click for you when the dog is looking away from you. After the click, toss the treat into the center of the circle.

Oh, oh, oh! Why would you do that? The dog will learn mat diving! Ah, grasshopper, breath deeply. Be calm. We will deal with that "problem" later. For now, you're tossing the treat into the center of your circle for several reasons. First, the food is the primary reinforcer for the behavior. Eating from the center of the circle will help take the dog's attention off you, which is, after all, what you're trying to teach him. Second, it takes the dog away from you and gives him a chance to come back toward you and offer you the walking-together-but-not-looking-at-each-other behavior again. A win-win situation.

You can also use this walking circle to teach the dog to lead out in front of you, which will make him look animated, cheerful, and athletic. Once the dog is going around the circle well, start tossing his treat out in front of him instead of into the center of the circle, and click when he's slightly in front of you and looking where he's going, rather than beside you.

As he gets better and better at walking beside you and not looking at you, you can get fussier. Go faster, and click him only when he's trotting.

Another useful exercise is teaching the dog to look ahead of himself from a stationary position, then transferring it to movement. Ask him to stay, walk out in front of him, and put a large piece of bait on the floor. If he can't stay yet, hold him and toss it out in front of him. Be sure he



Superb trot, eyes on the prize.
Note the invisible leash!

sees it. Walk back to his right side. Tease him a little with your voice. "See it? Want it? Gonna get it?" When you are SURE he's looking at it, click and let him get it. Don't click or let him go unless he is looking at the treat on the floor. When you've done this in four or five different places, you can put a cue on it, and hearing the cue will get him to look out in front of him for a treat. My cue is "Look", and my cue to look at me is "Watch". I think it's fun to stand with the dog beside me and cue "Look" (she looks out in front), "Watch" (she looks at me), and "Look" again. It certainly lets me know that she understands where she's supposed to be looking!

A third exercise is to put a chair at the end of one mat. Use the chair as a target to be touched to earn a click. Have the dog go farther and farther to get to the chair. Soon he'll be doing two mats with a corner in between to get to the chair, then three mats and two corners, then the entire circle.

Will the dog try to cut the corner to go directly to the chair? Of course he will! If you don't like the path he's taking, turn away from him and don't click him for targeting the chair. With the circle work you've already done, he'll turn and come back to you so you can start again with a bit less distance before the corner.

Let's talk about that corner for a moment. You do want the dog trotting on the mats, which form a square. At the same time, you don't want the dog running right into those square corners, because having to turn the right angled corners will interrupt the lovely flow of his trot. So you want a flat-sided circle. By walking the circle exercise, and by working the chair target, you're teaching the dog to balance the style of circle he's making.

Another factor in the circle that you'll be paying attention to will be how far the dog is from you (although this is part of the corner definition as well). He needs to be close enough to you that you're both moving together, yet he should be slightly ahead of you, and far enough from you that he appears to have his own personal space and integrity. Another reason for your left hand out from your body at shoulder height - if the dog's spine between his hips is centered under your outstretched hand, he's probably in a perfect gaiting position, and the leash between your hand and his neck is not pulling him off to the side and throwing his gait off.

UP AND BACK

So, he can go around in circles. Now he needs to go in a straight line, and so do you! Let's start, as always, with you. The judge needs to see the dog trotting away from her, and back towards her. This away-from-the-judge and back-to-the-judge is called the "up and back", or the "diagonal". What she really needs to see is how the legs move in relation to each other, so you and the dog need to go straight. Wobbling back and forth won't help you. Life is easier if there is a diagonal mat for you to follow on the "up and back" in the ring, or at least if you can get one to practise with. If you can't, try drawing one on the ground, or putting a couple of strings on the ground to define the borders of an imaginary mat three feet wide.

You will have to wear good shoes with non-slip soles to show your dog. Why? Because the mat is not for you. Write this on the fridge where you can see it. The mat is not for you, the mat is for the dog. YOU are not allowed to walk on the mat! The mat is for the dog. Did I get that point across? Good!

Alone, without the dog, you'll practise the diagonal (note that the "diagonal" is not always done from one corner of the ring to the opposite corner - sometimes it's done on one side of the ring, but you and the dog have to know the same stuff anyway). Start on the right side of the mat, on the floor (re-member, you're not allowed to walk on the mat). Look for an eye-target in the distance so you can watch the target as you move along the right edge of the mat. This target is the trick to walking in a straight line. Don't look where your feet are, don't look at your pretend dog, just keep your eye on the target. This is a great hint for laying scent tracks in a straight line too, in case you were interested!

When you get to the end of your mat (this is the complicated part), stop, then back up to your left until you are on the opposite side of the mat, facing back the way you came. Find another eye-target, and go back to the beginning. Your left hand, at shoulder height out from your body, followed a path down the center of the mat, both going out and coming back. Wow, you're a star! Notice that if you'd had a dog on a leash, the dog would have been able to walk straight up the center of the mat, and straight back down the center of the mat, without zigzagging at all. Or at least, if you practised this a few more times by yourself, that's what could happen!

GIMME THAT RIBBON, BUBBA!

If your dog has a good head and expression, typical of his breed, it's a good idea to teach him to make some



Handler is backing up from the right side of the mat to the left to return. Dog has trotted away down the center of the mat, and is turning to return down the center.

eye contact with the judge. It's hard to resist a pretty dog who's staring at you, wiggling his eyebrows and asking for the ribbon with a big grin. For dogs who are a little uncertain of strangers, it also gives the dog added confidence as it turns every stranger into nothing more scary than a treat dispenser.

One way to start teaching this is to simply pass the dog off to someone else and have them teach him to make eye contact. This is a super game for class situations - pass each dog around the room with each successive handler clicking for contact.

Another way is to have a helper act as judge and stand at one end of the diagonal. Walk the dog up to the person, click, and have the "judge" treat the dog. Trot him back to the other end, turn him around, back to the "judge", click, and have the "judge" treat him. Repeat this until the dog really wants to get back to the "judge" in order to get the treat, then begin slowing him down with the leash before he gets there so he has a chance to stop and make eye contact with the "judge" in order to get the click and treat. Use different "judges" and different mats until the dog is truly thrilled to be trotting toward anyone standing staring at him. When you

get him into the ring, any motion of the judge's hand will automatically produce an excited and inspiring expression.



Handler is off the mat, dog centered correctly on the mat. The blue ribbon is the handler's eye-target.

This inspiring expression is a key factor in winning at conformation, and the clicker is a major weapon if you use it correctly. You can click the dog for holding his tail in the correct position. You can click him for putting his ears up. The last dog I showed in conformation was trained to make and hold eye contact with the judge as she walked around the ring examining the whole class, as well as to walk out in front of me to engage the judge in "conversation" after the diagonal. This got the dog's ears up, showed his expression, and established the judge as just another treat dispenser. If you are seriously into conformation, you can even have someone watch your dog gaiting and click when the dog assumes his best, flowing, extended stride in the trot. You, of course, stop and treat, then go again.

SPEED

Let's talk about you again. If you're moving a very small dog around the ring, you might get away with a fast walk. Otherwise, you're going to have to run. When you run, you are trying to get where you're going without making everyone look at you.

They're supposed to be looking at the dog. Bend your knees. Run smoothly. Videotape yourself and get better. Watch other handlers. Running unobtrusively is a mechanical skill, and you DO need to practise it. A few tips - men, don't take your car keys, your office keys, your house keys, or a pocketful of change into the ring. Jingling is not cool. Women, this is a sport. Wear a sports bra. Knocking yourself out does not help your dog win.

Now the dog. At a trot, there is a specific speed which is best for your dog to go around the ring. Try different speeds. Have someone videotape you. If you don't know enough about conformation to make a decision, get someone who does to watch the tape, or watch you run the dog and make the decision for you. There is also a specific speed which is best for your dog to do the diagonal. It's not the same speed as going around. Again, get someone who knows to watch you go up and back, and tell you how fast your dog should be moving.

MAT DIVING

I promised we'd talk about mat diving. Here we go.

Refraining from mat diving is the same behavior as Conformation Zen. If you didn't teach Zen when you were reading the Stacking article, go back and teach it now. Zen reminds the dog that he needs to control himself and give you what you want in order to get what he wants. When he understands Zen and has had some practise, you'll start explaining that bait which you throw on the floor is fair game, but bait which other people throw down, or that is just sitting on the floor waiting for innocent dogs to walk by, is completely unavailable.

If you have a reliable helper, you can teach this off leash. Do a little work on attention. When the dog is watching you, confident that if he watches you hard enough he can force you to click and give him a treat, have your helper show him a treat, then put the treat on the floor, and cover it with her shoe so he can't get it. Let him try. Short of biting through your helper's shoe, there is nothing he can do wrong. When he finally decides he can't get the bait under your helper's



Very nice. Dog is responding to the judge after walking into a pretty stack with the help of the leash.

shoe and starts to move away from it, click and hand him a treat. Do it again. Your helper takes the treat out from under her shoe, shows it to your dog again, and puts it back under her shoe. When he stops trying to get it, click, and give him a treat.

When you're training by yourself, have the dog on leash. Show him a treat and, without clicking or saying anything, toss the treat on the floor close enough that he will be interested in it, but definitely far enough away that the leash will prevent him from getting it. Let him try. He can pull on the leash, duck down, stand up, reach for the bait with his paws, whine, jump up and down, bark, but he will not NOT be able to get to the treat. When he finally gives up, click, and give him a treat from your hand. Do it again. Pick up the treat from the floor, show it to him, toss it out again, and let him try for it again.

With or without the helper, on or off leash, think about what you're telling the dog. He can't have the treat on the floor no matter what he does, but as soon as he stops trying to get it, you're guaranteed to click and give him a free treat. Hmmmm. Work really hard and get nothing? Or don't work at all and get something? Zen is starting to make sense!

Now you can start changing the criteria. Can he walk away from the floor bait without diving for it? Click and treat. Can he trot a big circle around the floor bait without diving for it? Click and treat. Can he trot a small circle around it? Can he trot over it? Can he free stack on top of it? Can he back up over it?

Will this training actually work? You bet. In Best Of Breed competition at a National Specialty, another handler tossed a huge chunk of liver and hit my freestacked male Special right in the face just as the judge was coming to him. My dog allowed the liver to hit him in the face and didn't take his eyes off his handler. In fact, he didn't move a muscle. He had the training to know the chunk of liver was unavailable to him, but that by avoiding the temptation, he was earning a guaranteed goody.

When you have more confidence in Zen, you can add a voice cue ("Off" perhaps) if you want to, although I would suggest that an "OK" cue would be better. You are teaching the dog that food which hits the ground is not available. Food which hits the ground after an "OK" or a click, on the other hand, is his for the taking.

THE LEASH

Possibly the worst part of judging is watching all the really bad leash handling. Why do dogs pace instead of trot? Bad leash handling. Why do dogs sidewind, paddle, goose step? Bad leash handling.

You have been teaching your dog to do the conformation behaviors without the leash. When you put the leash on him, remember that he can already do the behaviors. You don't have to use the leash to keep him with you, to make him start or stop or turn around, to move his feet,



Excellent attention in spite of bait on the floor, very loose leash. Zen at its best!

to stand still, or to get him to look at you. The truly beautiful show dog looks like he is doing everything on his own. Your cues are subliminal, a tiny shift of your weight forward or back, dropping or raising your hands by a quarter inch. You are only in the ring with him because it isn't legal for him to be in there by himself.

Is the leash useful at all? Aha, now we're getting into really professional work. Yes, the leash is useful.

Remember when the dog was walking up to the judge after the diagonal, giving her eye contact and demanding a ribbon? When the dog is about halfway back to the judge on the diagonal, you'll add a quarter of an ounce of pressure to the leash, and that pressure will build up slowly until it smoothly brings the dog to a stop five feet out from the judge. This too is a mechanical skill, and you'll have to practise a lot to get it smooth and beautiful, but it's worth the effort. If you ride, it is allowing the dog to "meet the rein" rather than pulling back to make the rein meet the dog.

And if you ride, you know that "The proof of the training is whether the horse becomes more beautiful because of it." Conformation handling is a dance. You lead the dance, but the object of the dance is for you to be invisible and for your partner to be smooth, natural, and stunningly beautiful. When people start congratulating you on having such a great "natural show dog", you know that all those hours of training have paid off.



"My best smile, my happiest tail.
Now how about that ribbon?"