

Mind to Mind Clicking For Stacking

Most people think that a dog is "conformation trained" if it walks on a leash and doesn't sit or bite the judge. Professionals know that training a dog for the Specials ring is, in fact, as complicated as training a dog for Utility. The more a dog knows about how to do his job in the ring, the closer he is to that elusive "Ch" title.

EASY BEGINNINGS

As a starting point, you will need the dog ready to go to work, standing up, willing to be handled in all his parts, facing your right hand, understanding the clicker, and wanting treats. Only one part of that is within the bounds of this article, and that is "standing up". We tend to put a lot of effort into clicking pups for sitting. To train a conformation dog, we'll have to put an equal amount of time into clicking the pup for standing. Don't get fancy - observe the butt in the air, click, treat. Are his front feet even? Who cares? Are his back feet even? Who cares? Is his head up? Who cares? Simply click and treat when his feet are down and his hips are off the ground.

What do we call this behavior? Don't call it anything. First because it isn't an end behavior, it's just a beginning. Second, I use very few voice cues for conformation. I prefer to speak to the dog with my body.



Whether you control the position of the dog's head physically...



... or mentally, you do not control the dog's body until you control his head.

Conformation becomes a dance cued with subliminal signals.

HAND STACKING

Hand stacking is the art of physically placing the dog's feet in the best position. Determining the best position for each dog is as individual as the dog is, but there are a few things that remain constant.

You cannot control the dog's feet until you control his head. Write this down on a piece of paper and stick it on your fridge: you do not control the dog until you control his head.

If you have a small dog, put him on a grooming table. A medium to large dog will do best standing on a pause table or other table off the ground. You can practise this with the dog on the ground, but you can see his feet better with him up higher.

Another tip - conformation is a sport of inches. When you move his head, you will be moving it an inch to the right or left. When you move his foot, you will be moving it an inch forward or back. Subtlety is the key to a polished performance.

Start with the dog standing in front of you, facing your right hand. Take his muzzle in your right hand. Click and treat. Repeat until he's comfortable with you holding his muzzle while he stands unresisting in front of you. Now hold his muzzle and move his head to his left. If he goes with the pressure, click and treat. Usually you can feel some tension in the neck when you try this - do it gently, do it calmly, click when he releases

the neck tension, when he moves his head willingly with you. Keep your touch light - this is fingertip pressure. The dog is releasing his head to you, you are not forcing

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it from side to side.

When you can cup your hand under his muzzle and move his head easily from side to side, it's time to pay attention to his center of gravity. When he's standing naturally, he will have his weight evenly on his right front foot and his left front foot. As you move his head to the left, his weight shifts more to his left foot, taking the pressure off his right foot. As you move his head to his right, he will have more weight on his right foot and less on his left foot. We're going to take advantage of this.

First, however, a tip: How To Avoid Looking Like A Newbie In The Conformation Ring. When you lift the dog's front foot, you do it from the ELBOW. Under no circumstances in the ring will you ever, ever, ever touch a

dog's front legs below the elbow.

To move the dog's left front leg, reach over him with your left hand, take his left elbow firmly in hand, lift and move the leg to

where you want it, and put it down.

Whoa there! You forgot the head - remember, if you don't control the head, you don't control the dog. Moving his leg starts from his head. With your right hand you are moving his head to his right, taking the weight off his left foot. He knows how to do this. Now reach over his withers and lift his left elbow up, click and treat. How did you click? I don't know - you had one hand full of muzzle and one hand full of elbow. Maybe you had a toe clicker. Maybe you had a helper. Or maybe you were using a vocal



Move the front leg from the elbow. Note the dog's weight evenly distributed on the remaining three legs, and the dog is perfectly balanced.

CR such as "yes" instead of the click.

However you did it, be sure that you don't ask for more until he's comfortable with you controlling both his head and his elbow.

The last stage of moving his left foot is to put it back down. In the beginning, don't worry about WHERE you place it, you are just teaching the dog to allow you to pick it up and put it down. If he was comfortable with the foot where you got it from, put it back there. As the paw touches the ground, move his muzzle back to the left. This will shift his weight back onto the leg you just moved, thus anchoring it right where you put it. Click and treat for the weight shift.

There are two ways to move his right front leg. You can leave your right hand to move his muzzle to his left, lean back a bit, and use your left hand to lift his right elbow. Or, you can stand over him, switch his muzzle to your left hand, and use your right hand on his right elbow. Personally I prefer the first way, as I want to leave the dog with as much personal space as possible.

There are a hundred tiny victories for your team between holding the muzzle and placing both front legs correctly, I've only described a few of them. Sometimes you click because he was comfortable with you holding his muzzle. Sometimes you click for a weight shift to the left or right. Sometimes the click is for the appropriate paw lifting - by all means click when you feel the elbow rising to meet your hand when the weight is off it.

The same rule applies to the rear as to the front: you will never, ever touch the back leg below the hock joint. It will be harder to get the weight off a rear leg, and it's important that you allow the dog a moment between gripping the hock and lifting it, in order to be sure that the dog's center of gravity is ready for your lift.

To shift the weight off the left rear leg, move the dog's head to his right and slightly forward. Click the weight shift.

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When he's comfortable shifting his weight, pick up his left hock with your left hand, put it back down, and shift his weight back onto the left hind leg

by bringing his head back to a neutral position. Repeat for the right hind leg.



Again notice the dog's weight evenly balanced while the hind leg comes up.

Again, click and treat each tiny step. The dog needs to be completely confident that your cues to "shift and lift" will be calm, reasonable, and within his power to respond to.

FREE STACKING

If you've gone through the first section on hand stacking, your dog now wants to remain standing, and is comfortable with you holding his muzzle, moving his head back and forth, and lifting and placing his feet from the elbow and hock.

One of the most beautiful thing about show dogs, however, is the wonderful, subliminal communication between handler and dog. The ultimate show dog doesn't get "stacked", he simply arrives in front of the judge in the best position to show off everything he's got. In truth, he looks like the handler is only with him because it's against the rules for him to be there by himself. How do you teach that?

Two words: free stacking. When you can use tiny, subtle signals to tell the dog where to put his feet and what to do with his center of gravity, you have Arrived.

Most dogs don't free stack naturally because a) there aren't usually a herd of gazelle half a mile from the ring that they can look at, and b) most dogs are most

comfortable with their back feet slightly too close to their front feet. Obviously you must then ask the dog to move his front feet a step or two further forward to separate them from the back feet. Sounds simple. Ask the dog to move forward, and click when his front foot comes off the ground. Unfortunately, when you ask a dog to move forward, he always starts moving with his BACK feet first. Moving the back feet forward isn't going to solve the problem!

Anchoring The Back Legs

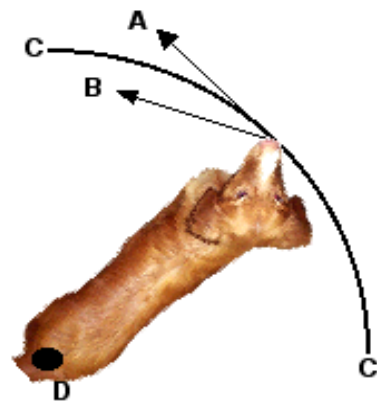
In order to be able to move the front feet forward, you'll need to first teach him to anchor the back legs. If you can't ask him to move his front feet forward, you can ask him to move them from side to side.

When you were hand stacking, you physically moved his head to the left, shifting his weight to the left and releasing his right leg. You're going to do the same thing now, but you're going to lure the head to the left rather than moving it physically.

You can lure with bait, or you can lure with your hand as a target. Usually, I suggest luring with bait, at least initially, because you are looking for very subtle

movement of the feet, which will probably be easier to get with food.

One more thing you need to know before you start. You are going to be moving the dog's nose in an arc to his left. This arc



A = too far forward. B = too far back. C = the correct arc. D = the center of the arc.

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is centered at the base of the dog's tail.

Start with the dog standing comfortably, preferably on a table, facing to your right. With your right hand, put a piece of bait right on his nose, and SLOWLY move his nose to his left. Don't watch his nose - watch his right foot. You should be able to see him move his head (that's what peripheral vision is for!), then his weight shifts to his left, then the right front foot starts to rise. Click, and pop the treat in his mouth. Try it again.

What could have gone wrong? He could have stepped forward with a back foot. That's because you pulled him forward instead of around the arc (nose to "A" in the diagram). He could have stepped backward with his left front foot or a back foot. That's because you pushed him backward (nose to "B" in the diagram). Or he could have swung his back end to the right as his front end went to the left. That's because you tried to move his nose fast instead of very slowly.

When he's lifting his right front foot well, try the same thing to the right. He's standing facing your right. With your right hand, lure his nose slowly on the arc to his right. Watch his left front foot. When it lifts, click and treat.

Practise until the rear is well and truly anchored. You can move his front feet right or left with your lure, and the rear stays where you left it.

Center Of Gravity

Now you can begin to ask him to move his front feet forward. Not so fast! I didn't mean FORWARD forward, I meant SLIGHTLY forward on the arc! He'll move LEFT and forward, RIGHT and forward if you ask him slowly, until his front feet are where you want them.

The next lesson will be shifting his center of gravity forward. He might be the best built dog in the world, but if he doesn't pull his weight forward when he's stacked,



Pushing too far backwards – the right front foot is lifting and will move back instead of sideways.



Pulling too far forward – right rear foot is lifting.



Just right – head has turned to the right, weight has shifted, left front foot is just about to lift.

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he's going to look like he's slouching around the kitchen.

You've taught him to anchor his back feet, and to move his front feet from side to side. Now you need to tell him that he can't move his front feet straight forward, ever (unless you're starting to gait, but then you'll be trotting, not watching him). You are now anchoring his front feet. Get him stacked, get his front feet where you want them, and then lure him very, very slowly forward. Watch carefully. If you pull him too far or too fast, he'll step forward and you'll have to pull the lure away quickly and start again.

What is it exactly that you're watching carefully?? Just forward of the center of his back, there is a little dip, called the knick (neither "k" is silent). Watch the knick. When he leans forward, the skin beside the knick will shift. Yes, you can see it even on hairy dogs! Click the shift. What you're really clicking is the dog tightening the muscles that pull his weight forward.

If you have a breed that needs to have the tail up in the ring, there is another benefit to tightening those muscles. The muscles which hold a tail down are part of a set which pull the dog backward, roach his back, move the center of gravity backwards, and move the dog into a submissive or fearful position. The muscles which raise the tail also pull the dog (and his center of gravity) forward, flatten the back, and make him look dominant, happy, and generally terrific. By teaching him to pull forward "over himself", you are teaching him to assume a dominant, winning attitude and raise his tail. If you don't want his tail up, you're going to have to hope he's built properly and can hold it correctly!

That Dog's A Mind Reader!

The next trick is making the whole event subliminal. There's not much point in free stacking if you have to get down on

your knees to stick your hand in the dog's face. I expect that by now the dog will be staring at your hand whenever he has the opportunity, in case it contains a treat. Good! Walk him into a stand, and try placing his front feet by simply moving your hand from side to side, instead of luring with a treat. Watch his feet, click and treat when the feet lift, just as you did when you started training him to stack. With a little work, you should be able to keep your hands at your waist and move his front feet by simply moving your right hand left or right a few inches. Eventually you will be able to simply look at one foot and the act of looking will produce a head tilt or shoulder motion enough to tell him to move that foot. People will be amazed!

Once your dog is securely stacked, there is a neat game you can play with him to keep him stacked and alert in the ring. Get him stacked, stand in front of him, show him a treat, put it behind your back for a second, and if he's still stacked, click and toss the treat. You can toss it to him to catch, or skid it along the floor in any direction and let him chase it down. Start again. Gradually take longer and longer to get the treat behind your back, and longer and longer to click after the treat is hiding. The dog knows the treat is coming, but doesn't know when, or where it's going to go, so he stays alert.

Setting The Back Legs

Teaching the dog to back up gives you control in several areas. If you aren't happy with how he's placed his back legs, you can reach down and move them by hand or, if he's reasonably well put together in the rear, you can simply ask him to back up a step, and proceed to free stack from there.

There are two ways to teach backing. The simplest is to stand in front of him, slowly lean and step toward him until he takes a step backwards. Click the first

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paw moving backwards. This method has the added advantage of building in a cue – lean slightly toward the dog, and he will back up.

The other method is to lure him backwards with a treat at his nose. Lower the treat slowly toward his throat (not down to his chest, or straight back, but down onto his throat). Most dogs will step backwards. Click, and treat. This method produces a hand signal – not so subtle, but it gets the job done.

Practise moving his head to his right or left before you ask him to back up. Does it make a difference in which back foot he moves first? Try it in the other direction. Zowie, you now have control over his back legs too!

Conformation Zen

One final trick. It's frequently necessary for me to hold bait in my hand and show the dog's teeth to the judge at the same time, so I teach Conformation Zen. Food held between my thumb and forefinger is available to the dog. Food held in my last three fingers is NEVER available. Hold a treat protected in your last three fingers, put your hand down where the dog can worry at it, and wait for him to lose interest. When he does, click, switch the treat from the protected position to your thumb and forefinger, and hand it to him. Repeat until he understands that the treat isn't available, no matter what he does, until you hand it to him from your thumb and forefinger.

That's "all" there is to stacking. You'll know you're a success when people start telling you how lucky you are to have naturally self-stacking dogs!

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