



The Agility Advisor

The Agility Advisor: Julie Daniels on Training

THE GRID

Grid work is taken directly from the world of performance horses, and it's used for the very same reason. It makes the dog stronger and improves his forward impulsion over jumps without letting him be sloppy. The dog must jump each jump with the next one in mind, as there is no room for a stride in between--a grid is for "bounces." It requires the dog to collect himself, to round his back and tuck his feet over the jumps. The grid demands careful placement of the feet, so it requires thinking and planning on the fly (see pictures). The expert grid dog is very hard to fool about where his feet are in space, and he's a very strong jumper. He can save many a tight situation with his skills, and can switch from extension to collection on the fly.

All the cautionary words about low heights while the dog is learning apply especially to grids. Pictured is Spring performing an advanced grid, well into the "don't try this at home" category! This grid requires a concept jumper who has worked up to this level of difficulty. Spring is very experienced, and I used clicker training to help her figure out this particular grid.

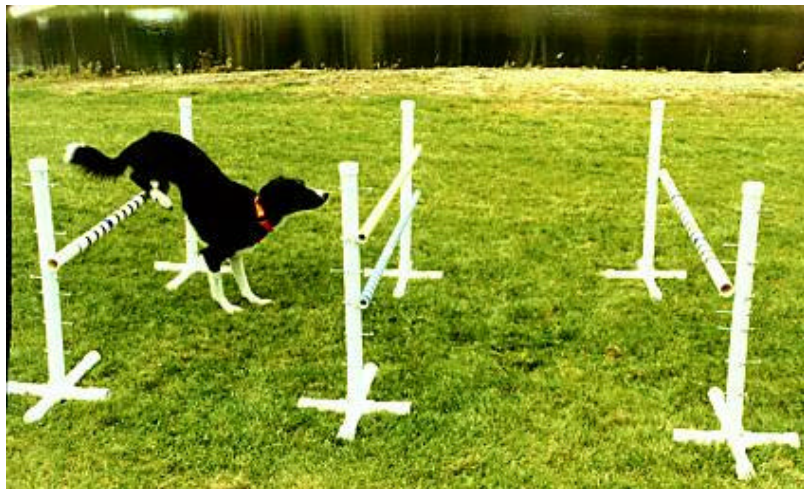


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

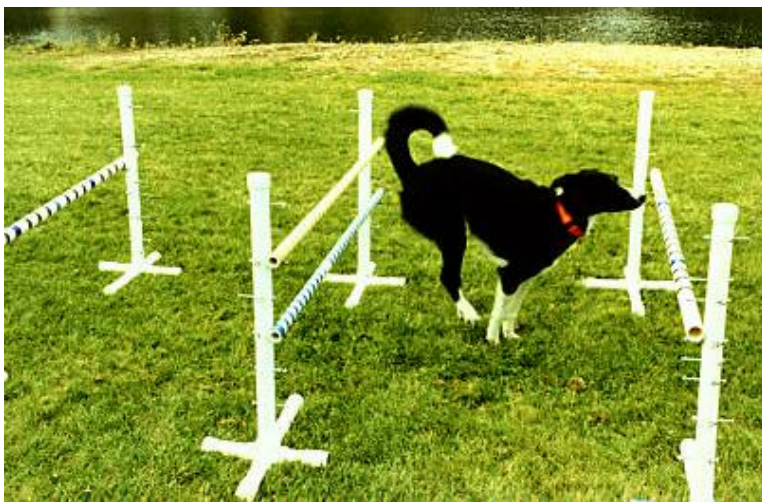


Fig. 4

About the grid in the pictures:
This grid measures 7' from the center of the first bar to the center of the third.
From the first to the second jump is 3'3".
From the second to the third is 3'9".
The first and third jumps are set at 20" high,
and the middle one is 24". All heights
and spacings are variable."

To introduce your agility dog to grid work, use low jumps or cavaletti, preferably those which are 5' wide. (See the note at left.) Use jumps without wings. The “easy” cue is helpful here to advise the dog to take only one at a time. As your dog’s trainer and handler, stand to the side between jumps #1 and #2. Show your dog the cookie in your hand. Invite him to jump, and point at the ground where the dog should land between the 1st and 2nd jumps. That is to say, be proactive in your body motions to help the dog get this right. Draw the path, so to speak, and lure him over the one jump and out of the elementary grid sequence with the cookie, all in one smooth motion. So the dog begins by jumping only one jump and curving out of the sequence. Work both sides, so he can turn in both directions. Click as the dog’s front feet hit the ground in the correct space. Don’t worry if the bar comes down while the dog is working on his body movements and you are working on your handler movements. First, get comfortable with the attempt. Then, click only for attempts that leave the bar up. Be generous! It’s difficult work and it will take time.

When the dog is adept and happy at jumping the first jump only, then you can add the second jump by standing between the jumps #2 and #3. Show him the cookie, draw the path, and lure him out of the grid after jump #2. Again, be very generous and don’t worry about a bar falling until you both have your coordination worked out. It is difficult to coordinate four feet in this spacing, and it is difficult for you to handle the dog smoothly without getting in his way. So relax and let yourselves improve gradually without any criticism. If you haven’t set too difficult a grid, it will all come together.

As heights increase relative to spacing, using a clicker to mark correct placement of the feet is much more useful than criticizing the dog who needs more practice. You need control of the “easy” cue, and you need to remember to mark the element of difficulty that is most helpful to that particular dog. Click when the good thing happens! Give the reward right then! Perfection through an entire grid comes later.

Some elements of difficulty to vary include spacing, angles, number of jumps, jump height, evenness of spacing from one jump to the next, handler assistance, handler position, which element to click, fading the “easy” cue and handler movements, etc. Remember, what DO you want? Build the skill piece by piece. Become adept at choosing appropriate increases in difficulty for your own dog, and vary only one variable at a time. The best trainers, like the best parents, try to make their authority gradually less and less obvious by encouraging their students to think for themselves. Your dog is your student. This is an advanced, difficult job—it’s not for a novice agility dog! You will need to break it into small increments and be very generous with your encouragement, shaping the dog’s skill while keeping his enthusiasm and confidence high.

It’s a long way from Starters to Masters, and many challenging skills will be learned along the way. When you and your dog build a broad base of skills, then you are ready to answer the complex questions of upper level courses, and ready to learn what the run can teach you each time you walk to the start line. As with any team sport, a great deal of quality practice and mutual understanding improves your chances immensely.

Julie Daniels

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