

Dog Agility Pre-School

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Start-line Stay Training

Overview: The startline is one of the most important components of a successful agility run yet one of the most difficult or stressful parts of an agility trial, if you observe dogs on the startline. Not a few “break” the stay by standing up, or scooching forward on their bottoms if they are left on a sit, or creeping forward if they are left in a down. However, even the dogs staying in one place show obvious signs of stress. Some yawn, but many look away, glancing from side to side until their human is in place to call them (and they know exactly when that is, so the looking away is NOT losing their attention on the task at hand), or sniff, sniff at the ground beneath them, or reach down to lick their privates.

The ideal performance on the startline should be a relaxed but focused dog, a dog that does not break eye contact with the handler moving away, and a dog that is controlled but ready to drive ahead when released. An ideal startline performance includes a true stay, in which the dog does not change its location even if they can maintain a position.

In this training, however, don’t limit your thinking to a start line. This can be any time when you require your dog to control his impulses and stay stationary yet focussed under high anticipation, high drive, and/or high stress. In agility these include staying on the table and the contacts. Away from agility, you can also imagine your dog sitting while greeting guests at the door.

As in all agility training, we can achieve lack of motion by punishment, suppressing *all* behavior, but that is counterproductive to what we desire, which is a dog ready to explode off the startline, eager to experience the run and the agility equipment.

Reasons why dogs fail to perform (break) a start line stay

1. Does your dog **know her job**? Really? Think about what is involved in any “stay”: a **position** AND a **location** AND a **duration**. In DAPS we work on decomposing every behavior into the smallest reducible units and reinforce each of those independently with specific exercises..
2. Does your dog understand “**on cue**”? To get a reliable stay, your dog AND you have to understand the concept of “on cue”: cue = dog always does it, no cue = dog never does it.
3. Can your dog **control his impulses**? We want a high drive dog for agility, a dog that needs to work and to move and who anticipates the agility run. Staying is hard for such a dog.
4. Is sitting and staying as **reinforcing** as the alternatives? In DAPS training, we do not use corrections, so modifying behavior is always about a comparison of reinforcements. Consider too that a start line stay is an early behavior in a **behavior chain**. It’s well known that the early behaviors deteriorate more rapidly than later behaviors in behavior chains, because they are “farthest” from the reinforcement.
5. Have you reinforced breaking the sit stay by allowing your dog to **backchain to bad behavior**? Because we don’t use corrections, when our dogs don’t do what we want, we tend to be *more* reinforcing after the dog has *not* done the behavior we want it to, in an effort to strengthen that behavior.
6. Is your dog **stressed**? Limbic behaviors can take over even highly reinforced behaviors, because they are not under conscious control. Your dog might be stressed because:
 - a. You act differently at a trial;
 - b. Your dog has not practiced the sit stay in enough habitats, and trials (or even class) are frightening, busy places;
 - c. You’ve trained your dog with positive punishment (corrections) away from agility; P+ is known to cause stress and anxiety in dogs;
 - d. You’ve trained your dog with negative punishment and no reward marks that the dog either doesn’t understand or associates with enough stressors that this training was actually P+ for your dog.

Foundation training for the start line stay:

1. Teach your dog its job:
 - a. Placeboard identifies location;
 - b. Put the behavior ON CUE and the release ON CUE and be ultra consistent;
 - c. Vary the position so that your dog understands it's not just a position but a location (in agility, however, you will use only the sit for the startline stay, as it is the most mechanically powerful position to start a run and it's conveniently also a calming behavior.)
 - d. Release after randomly variable durations—your dog never knows how long before you release.
 - e. Raise criteria by adding distance, distractions, anticipation, and varying the habitat;
 - f. Include a jump or other equipment as part of the habitat, but ignore it.
2. Keep 'staying still' reinforcing and don't link it to a specific behavior chain:
 - a. Put the stay on a variable reinforcement schedule, if you reward with food or C/T without release.
 - b. Vary what you release your dog to do: hand touch, tug, throw toy to back, to side, to front, race to placeboard, weave between legs. In this way you are preventing the sit stay from being the first behavior in a predictable behavior chain. Don't release to equipment including Susan Salo jump homework until you get 90+% correct response.
3. Teach your dog to control its impulses, i.e., the fastest way to the reward is to wait patiently:
 - a. Use the 1-2-3 game to release from the sit stay;
 - b. Practice many impulse control and mother may I behaviors at home and at many points in your dog's life.
4. Observe your dog for stress and work to lower stress:
 - a. note whether your dog is performing any stress behaviors before breaking the stay;
 - b. change habitats and record whether your dog is performing any stress behaviors or more or fewer stress behaviors in certain habitats.
 - c. review your training and use of punishment, either negative or positive. Punishments of *either* kind can produce stress.
5. If your dog breaks the start line stay, be careful what you do—do not backchain reward to undesired behaviors:
 - a. If your dog is making more than 2/10 mistakes, you must return to an **earlier stage of training**. If you have added a cue, you will want to replace your working cue with another cue when your dog is more proficient the ideal startline stay behavior you want.
 - b. If your dog breaks a startline stay in class or practice, don't just re-cue but **break the behavior chain**. Use an NRM, make your dog do some other behavior correctly, and then set up the startline stay again. However, don't get into a habit of this—this option is just a band aid. You need to go back and train if your dog is breaking more often than once in a while (95-98% reliability) once you decide it's "on cue". You can have someone hold your dog while you do your exercise in class that day...and go back and train. Don't put your dog in a startline stay again in class until you have a reliable stay in practice.
 - c. If your dog breaks the startline stay in practice, you can try **P-**. Mark the break with your NRM and put your dog back in a time-out location (we call it the "bummer room" which may or may not be his crate). Work another dog for the time-out, if you have one. Be sure to make the time-outs short...immediately give your dog a chance to be right and earn a reward. You can call the bummer room a name, or announce it's the other dog's turn, and just say that after your NRM. Again, don't use this option often, as it is just a bandaid. You need to go back and train the behavior you want. Even P- can suppress more behaviors than just the one you're targeting and can demotivate a dog.
 - d. If your dog breaks a startline stay in a trial, you have limited options. You can **re-cue** the sit without changing your position. You can go back to your dog and re-cue the sit but then run from the startline. Or you can pull your dog off the line and excuse yourself from your run, which is not P- in this case but only management. Management isn't wrong, as it prevents your dog from practicing undesirable behaviors, but it is not training. You need not to enter trials if you do not have a proficient startline stay and do not want to run with your dog.

Theory concepts:

- **On Cue = Under stimulus control:** Review 8/24/06's notes (Session 1, class 4). For this lesson, I will raise your criteria: Once you introduce a cue for a new behavior to your dog, your next step in training is to put this behavior ON CUE in the strictest sense. Never reward the behavior when you do not cue it (the easiest part in theory but difficult in practice). Cue a behavior only ONCE and expect your dog to perform that behavior 100% of the time (OK a very high criterion for you!) What do you do when your dog doesn't do the behavior when you cue it? After the training session, you'll need to review your training and set up tests to make sure your dog understands this cue and behavior (DASH). Immediately, however, you're faced with a decision: do you re-cue? Maybe your dog was distracted and didn't recognize the cue (not likely). Try negative punishment to see what your dog does. Make it clear that you are taking away the opportunity for a reinforcement by ending the game. Wait a few seconds and see if your dog responds to the cue.
- **Negative punishment:** Punishment = something that reduces the frequency of a behavior. Negative = taking something away. You take away the opportunity for a reward. For P- to work, these criteria need to be met: 1. the P- is delivered within seconds of the behavior you want to suppress (breaking start line stay, not sitting, etc.); 2. the thing removed must be truly rewarding from the dog's perspective; 3. the P- such as a "time out" must not last for more than a minute or two (dog's attention span); in other words, the opportunity to earn a reward must be represented almost immediately. If a time out or other such P- lasts longer, you are not training but rather managing. Managing is a useful training tool, but it does not strengthen or suppress behaviors; and 4. the dog must understand what is happening in steps 1-3.
- **No Reward Mark.** A NRM is an event marker that is the mirror image of the clicker: it marks an event that has caused an opportunity to be rewarded to go away. A NRM is a way to communicate to your dog that it has not made a choice that leads to a reward. NRM's can be useful therefore as a form of communication. However, NRM's can be in themselves punishing in the same way that cues that lead to an opportunity for a reward can be in themselves a secondary reinforcer. A NRM can be helpful to your dog if you use NRM's sparingly. After all, your dog should not be making many mistakes... a maximum of 2 out of 10 behaviors should be "wrong". If you choose not to use a NRM then your silence can become a default NRM and that sometimes interferes with your training. If and when you use a NRM it should be cheerful and neutral. The word NO is a poor choice for a NRM. If I ever hear a DAPS student going AAACHHH at a dog, I might apply a P+ to the student. Please avoid NRM's with negative connotations for you, so you can deliver them cheerfully. For example, avoid WRONG, prefer Oh-Oh, or Oops! Or make up something silly or otherwise meaningless.
- **Variable (random) reinforcement.** "Variable reinforcement" means that you don't always reward a behavior even when the same criteria are met by your subject. You aren't really able to truly randomize your reward delivery without a computer and random number table, so we simply mean you don't reward every behavior. There is controversy about this. Variable reinforcement is intentionally dancing on the edge of extinction. A behavior may escalate and intensify right before it goes extinct from lack of reinforcement. This is known as an **extinction burst**. Two year old children perform these spectacularly when they begin to challenge their parents, who refuse to give in. A red-faced screaming, fist pounding temper tantrum by a child when the parent withholds a toy and insists on school or bed time is an example of an extinction burst. If you're trying to make a behavior go away, you have to outlast the extinction burst. However, if you want to strengthen a behavior to the strongest degree, you can try to wait to reward your subject in the midst of an extinction burst. The problem is you might miss the burst and just get extinction, or a behavior can weaken from lack of reinforcement. So using variable reinforcement is risky and using them effectively takes good timing on your part.