

ON YOUR MARK

WHAT IS FLYBALL

Flyball racing is a fast and exciting sport, not only for the spectators and handlers, but for the dogs as well. There are four dogs on a team with an alternate or two. As teams line up, excitement builds. With each dog eager to compete, sometimes it's all the handler can do to hold their dogs. A judge signals the start of the race between the two competing teams. The first dog from each team is released. Each handler is hoping the green light will go on before their dog hits the start and finish line. The first dog is normally released with the first or second caution light, often more than 50 feet from the start line. Racing side by side, each dog races down its lane, flying over a set of four jumps set ten feet apart. At the far end of each lane is a flyball box. Each dog must step on a flyball box pedal releasing a mechanism flipping a tennis ball from the cup. Like Olympic swimmers, dogs bank off the box, hopefully with the ball, if not, the dog must retrieve the ball, and then return over all four jumps with the ball. As each dog makes the turn another dog is waiting eagerly to be released. Dogs are often released more than 50 feet from the start/finish line in an effort to reach top speed as they pass the returning dog at the start/finish line. The lead changes several times as dogs and handlers alike make mistakes. Sometimes dogs chasing loose balls will miss a jump, or get turned around all together and return over the wrong set of jumps. If a dog misses a jump, drops the ball before crossing the start/finish line, or crosses the start/finish line before the dog coming back reaches the start/finish line, the dog will have to rerun. The first team to have all four dogs successfully complete a run wins the heat.

Flyball is an offshoot of scent hurdle racing. In scent hurdle racing the dogs must go over four jumps and pick up one of four articles - the article scented by their handler. Each article is numbered 1 through 4. The dogs wear racing jackets identified with the same number as their article. Flyball, first introduced to the world by Herbert Wagner on the Tonight Show in the early 1970s, caught on. Before long, dog training clubs across the US and Canada were putting on flyball demonstrations at dog shows, nursing homes, county fairs, and schools. Many of the clubs had scent hurdle teams, making the transition to flyball easy and flyball added another popular dimension to their demonstrations. Dog training clubs, most notably Sportsmen's Dog Training Club of Detroit and McCann vs. McCann in the Toronto area, introduced flyball to the Great Lakes area. Other training clubs in the area picked up on the sport and tournaments were soon organized.

NORTH AMERICAN FLYBALL ASSOCIATION

The North American Flyball Association (NAFA), founded in the interest of promoting good sportsmanship in the training and exhibition of dogs competing in flyball, has set forth rules, regulations, and a code of ethics to be followed by all who wish to participate in NAFA sanctioned flyball competition.

The first Flyball competition was organized in the late 1970s. Rules often varied from tournament to tournament. As more and more tournaments were held it became apparent that it would be necessary to agree on one set of rules. The rules finally came to a forefront following several heated debates at a flyball tournament held by the Metropolitan Kennel Club in Toronto, Ontario, on November 3 and 4, 1984. NAFA was founded on November 5, 1984. While the rules have undergone some changes they have remained essentially the same.

In 1985, twelve (12) teams representing nine clubs, competed in four (4) NAFA sanctioned tournaments. Today tournaments are held all across the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia. Tournaments are listed on the web at <http://www.flyballdogs.com/>. You'll also find a quick index with email addresses, frequently asked questions, a directory, breeds, statistics, teams, photos, equipment, training, rules, and more.

TITLES

NAFA awards a certificate of achievement and titles to dogs competing on teams. One point is awarded to each dog competing on a team with a time of less than 32 seconds, five points for a time of less than 28 seconds, and 25 points for a time of 24 seconds or less. As dogs accumulate points they earn titles. The current NAFA titles are:

Abbr	Title	Points	Award Type
FD	Flyball Dog	20	Certificate
FDX	Flyball Dog Excellent	100	Certificate
FDCh	Flyball Dog Champion	500	Certificate
FM	Flyball Master	5000	Pin
FMX	Flyball Master Excellent	10000	Pin
FMCh	Flyball Master Champion	15000	Pin
ONYX	ONYX Award	20000	Plaque
FGDCh	Flyball Grand Champion	30000	Plaque

TABLE 1

SETUP

Each lane is from 10 to 20 feet apart. The start/finish line is 6 feet from the first jump and each jump is 10 feet apart. The flyball box is set 15 feet from the last jump. At the far end, placed behind the flyball boxes, is a backstop. The backstops prevent loose balls from rolling into the spectators, under chairs and into the opposing team's lane. Most teams expect 60 feet or more for a run back area, making the ring 30 feet or more by 120 feet or more.

RULES

The NAFA is the ruling body for NAFA sanctioned flyball competition. A complete set of NAFA rules can be down loaded from the web at <http://www.flyballdogs.com/>. Before you compete in or host a NAFA sanctioned flyball tournament you should have a thorough understanding of NAFA Rules and Policies. Without going into great detail, the following rules apply:

- The handler must stay behind the start/finish line.
- Start and Passing: The first dog cannot reach the start/finish line before the judge signals the start of the heat or if the electronic judging system (EJS) is used before the green light signals the start of the heat. The second dog released cannot reach the start/finish line before the first dog reaches the start/finish line on the return run - the same being the case for the third and fourth dogs and any dogs that must run again. With an EJS a red light will signal an early pass, otherwise the line judges will signal an early pass with a red flag.
- The heats will be restarted for the first false start only, or if the box malfunctions (again first time only).
- A dog must run again for the second false start, an early pass, missing a jump, dropping the ball before reaching the start/finish line, or if the dog is assisted by the handler, a spectator, or the box loader.
- A team will forfeit the heat for interference, if the dog fouls in the ring, if the box loader calls a malfunction and the judge finds the box to be working, or if the box malfunctions a second time during any remaining heats within the race.
- If a team breaks out (i.e., runs faster than their division breakout time) they will also forfeit the heat.

THE RIGHT DOG

Divisions, multi-breed only competition, and the jump height make flyball fun for a variety of breeds. Flyball competition will be divided into divisions based on a team's times, allowing teams to compete against other teams close to their times. Often, competition will also be offered for teams with multi-breeds only. On a multi-breed team all four dogs racing must be of a different breed. Jumps are set four inches below the height of the smallest dog on the team, therefore, many teams have a smaller dog - allowing them to lower the jumps for the other dogs.

Participants vary from Great Danes and Rottweilers to Dachshunds. Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers are popular, as are Border Collies, Jack Russell Terriers, Australian Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, Shetland Sheepdogs, Cocker Spaniels, and German Shepherds. Mixed breeds compete against and with breed champions, field trial champions, and obedience trial champions. NAFA maintains a listing of breeds that have competed on their web site at <http://www.flyballdogs.com/>. The table below shows the top ten most popular breeds competing in flyball and the number of titles earned for each breed.

Breed	No.	FD	FDX	FDCH	FM	FMX	FMCH	ONYX	FGDCH
1. Border Collie	2,752	2,232	2,119	1,858	1,000	577	374	234	84
2. Mix	1,110	989	775	304	162	89	65	28	0
3. Australian Shepherd	761	551	503	411	164	83	44	26	9
4. Labrador Retriever	726	556	480	362	123	56	32	16	7
5. Jack Russell Terrier	655	457	425	355	189	113	70	43	17
6. Golden Retriever	542	375	320	221	48	23	13	8	4
7. Shetland Sheepdog	521	376	334	266	120	68	40	28	10
8. Doberman Pinscher	244	183	161	113	42	17	6	4	2
9. American Cocker Spaniel	228	172	143	106	28	16	10	5	2
10. German Shepherd Dog	202	125	100	76	24	11	4	3	1
Total No. all dogs	11,367	8,355	7,456	5,948	2,556	1,388	824	519	195

Table 2

Neither females nor males have a particular advantage. Males are generally stronger and faster, but females are lighter and can be quicker off the box. With some larger breeds the natural stride can make it difficult for the dogs to get to full speed. Also, large breeds will have a difficult time making a tight swimmer's turn. But that won't keep them from competing.

EQUIPMENT¹

Flyball Jumps

Flyball jumps are solid, white, and are to have an inside width of 24 inches (between the uprights), with the height varying from 8 inches to 16 inches (minimum and maximum heights). The jumps are set four inches lower than the shoulder height of the smallest dog on the team. The jump height shall be adjustable in one inch increments. The uprights are to be no more than 36 inches high, nor less than 24 inches high. Most clubs are now designing their baseboard to be 7 inches high. This allows the club to place a flexible one-inch slat to reduce the chance of serious injuries to dogs.

¹ For information on commercially available equipment check out <http://www.flyballdogs.com/>.

Flyball Boxes

The flyball box can be any design as long as it performs to the desired function; that is, the dog depresses a pedal on the front of the box that releases a tennis ball for the dog to catch (or retrieve). Each team shall supply a flyball box (or boxes). All boxes are to have a mechanical release. Flyball boxes may be painted or decorated as the team wishes. The ball when released must have an unobstructed flight of not less than 24 inches in the direction of the start/finish line. The dimensions of the flyball box shall not exceed 24 inches in width, 18 inches in height nor 30 inches in length. Flyball boxes come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes.

Backstops

The host club shall provide a barrier/backstop (minimum 24" high) at the box end of the run, placed as to prevent missed balls from rolling too far but placed as not to prevent proper observation by the judge or to obscure the spectators' view. A barrier (minimum 24" high) shall extend between the boxes to minimize interference.

Running Surface

Other than grass, the ideal running surface is soft, durable sponge vinyl ring matting. Rubber matting, in addition to being heavy, does not give sure footing, nor does it cushion the shock of landing. Carpet alone can cause severe rug burns after only a few runs; however, carpet with vinyl matting is an excellent surface for flyball. For the most part we train outdoors on our lawn.

Tug Toys, balls, and Frisbees

Probably the single most important behavior is a dog that remains focused on the return run. To many dogs think the exercise is over when they get the ball. Tug toys keep the dog focused on the handler. If the dog loves a game of tug they will drive back over the jumps just for a good game of tug.

Chute, Ground Poles, and Cones

Chutes are great for teaching swimmer turns. Chutes are easy to build and relatively inexpensive. People who do not want to invest in a box can use a chute for training. We use "ground poles" to get the dogs to jump on the chute or box with all four feet. Ground poles are also useful for conditioning and forcing the dog to take off further back on the jump. Cones are used for establishing and working on swimmers turns.

Clickers

Clickers are used to establish a conditioned reinforcement. Initially pair the click with a piece of food (the primary reinforcement). Once established as a conditioned reinforcement, a clicker will be used to communicate to the dog that the response was the correct response, and a treat is forth coming. For many dogs the sound the clicker makes will soon become the primary reinforcement and the behavior becomes the conditioned reinforcement eliminating the need for a clicker. Ultimately the behavior itself becomes the primary reinforcement.

Long Line

You may also need a long line for retrieving and teaching the command come. In the early stages of teaching the retrieve some dogs will not want to bring the ball back. By having the dog on a long line you will guide the dog back. A 40-foot web cloth lead is preferred for corrections.

Leather Lead

I prefer a three-foot leather lead. Although, the more common six-foot leather or a cloth web lead is fine.

Flex-Lead

Finally, you may want a retractable flex-lead. However, flex-leads have limited applications. A flex-lead will retract and allow you to work with the dog without getting the lead tangled up with the jumps or around the dog's legs. Flex-leads are also great for taking the dog for a walk.

Collars and Harnesses

You will need a training collar and a plain leather or web collar - one that does not tighten around the dog's neck when the dog is being restrained. As previously mentioned, sometimes it is all a handler can do to hold their dog. Some handlers prefer flyball collars - web collars with an extra strap or handle sewn on the outside. Many handlers will even use a harness to restrain (or catch) their dog.

Water, Treats, Plastic Bags

You should carry a water jug with you, plenty of treats, and plastic bags to pick up where your dog leaves off. For my Jack Russell, Pyp, I also need welding gloves, a rib protector, leather chaps, and plenty of band-aids.

BEHAVIOR

Flyball is comprised of many behaviors. Tables 3 and 4 identify desirable and undesirable behavior associated with flyball.

Table 3
Desirable Behavior

- Focused and intense
- Quick start
- Drive over the jumps
- Swimmers turn
- Reliable retrieve
- Drive back over all four jumps
- Good pass

Table 4
Undesirable Behavior

- Dog fails to catch the ball
- Dog fails to retrieve the ball
- Dog hesitates at the box, slow or wide turn
- Slow outrun or return run
- Dog cuts the jump
- Bad pass
- Dog drops the ball

Just as there is a distinction between desirable and undesirable behavior, there is a distinction between undesirable behavior and unacceptable behavior. Undesirable behavior is associated with training problems, such as cutting the jumps or dropping the ball. Where unacceptable behavior would include not coming when called, aggressive behavior toward other dogs or people, and uncontrolled play.

There are several ways to correct undesirable behavior. You could correct the behavior with negative reinforcement such as a collar correction; put the behavior on cue than withhold the cue; shape the behavior by reinforcing any and all behavior that is not the undesirable behavior; change the motivation; ignore the behavior and hope it will go away; or focus on training an incompatible behavior.

Putting the behavior on cue and changing the motivation are techniques generally reserved for more serious behavior problems or unacceptable behaviors. Our discussions will be limited to using negative reinforcement, ignoring the behavior, and training desirable behavior that is incompatible with undesirable behavior.

Correcting behavior with negative reinforcement is effective in both undesirable behavior and unacceptable behavior provided the trainer keeps in mind:

- Corrections are never used to teach the dog a new behavior and
- Corrections vary in intensity.

If you are trying to shape behavior, correct *undesirable* behavior by starting with low intensity. For example, I seldom progress beyond a simple "eh-eh" when correcting a dog for going around a jump and then only when I'm satisfied that the dog knows what is expected. On the other hand, to stop or correct *unacceptable* behavior, the correction should be clear to the dog that the behavior is unacceptable. If a dog is being aggressive toward another dog or to a person the dog should be corrected in no uncertain terms.

The other technique to correct unfavorable behavior is to ignore the behavior. If you elect to ignore the behavior, always follow up by training the dog to a behavior incompatible with the unfavorable behavior. If, for example, you elect to ignore the dog when it cuts around a jump, then always follow up by training an incompatible behavior, for example, going over the jump. To

train an incompatible behavior, you may have to back up the training to a point where the dog cannot fail and where success is guaranteed.

REINFORCEMENT

Motivation

Essential in the learning process is the motivation for the dog to modify its behavior. The motivation may be food, the chase, to escape pain, or to simply make their human companion happy. The dog, to satisfy that motivation, adapts or adjusts its behavior, attempting various responses. The correct response whether by accident or by forethought, is then reinforced.

Bribes and Rewards

Reinforcement is not a process of bribes and rewards. A bribe is a means to solicit, to request or plea for a response that has not yet occurred. Rewards occur after the behavior. Since you cannot explain to the dog that the reward is for past behavior, the dog associates the reward with the behavior that is taking place the instant the reward is given.

The same can be said for punishment. Since you cannot explain to the dog that the punishment is for behavior that occurred a few moments before, the dog learns to associate the punishment with the behavior that was occurring the moment the correction was given. Handlers often end up reinforcing or correcting the wrong behavior. Only reinforcement paired with the desired behavior can effectively shape that behavior. The same is true of corrections. Only corrections paired with the undesirable/unacceptable behavior can effectively shape that behavior.

Reinforcement

When training dogs, immediate feedback is essential. If reinforcement is not immediate, any ongoing behavior will be reinforced in lieu of the desired behavior. Furthermore, unless reinforcement occurs while the behavior is ongoing, it cannot be considered reinforcement, but rather a bribe, a reward, or punishment. Although food and toys, even a game of chase, are often used to elicit, draw forth or bring out the initial response, they should never be used to solicit, request, or plea for a response.

Reinforcement serves as both motivation and information or feedback to the dog. Both are essential to the learning process. Positive reinforcement increases the probability that the behavior will occur again. A correction is something the dog will work to avoid. Since reinforcement and corrections are feedback to the dog, it must be timely and predictable. Commands, signals, or cues that are intended to get the desired response must predict positive reinforcement. It is not enough that the dog simply responds to the command, signal, or cue. More important is that the correct response predicts positive reinforcement. Further, failure to respond must predict a correction, or at a minimum, the handler should ignore the behavior or lack of (behavior extinction or time out). Consequently, the dog will learn to avoid behavior that predicts a correction and will look to repeat behavior that predicts positive reinforcement.

Primary Reinforcement

Primary reinforcements are those that reinforce behavior independent of an association with other reinforcement. They are often associated with satisfying some natural instinct or drive. Examples of primary reinforcement include food (hunger), a toy (desire to play or interact) and a game of chase (instinct to hunt). It is important to note that while a ball may satisfy one dog's need to play it may not satisfy another. Therefore, select an appropriate primary reinforcement. Primary reinforcement can also be negative such as a collar correction. All animals have natural instincts to withdraw or escape adverse stimuli, just as you or I would withdraw our hand from a hot stove burner.

Food is an effective motivation in training dogs because food is a primary reinforcement. Since food is a primary drive or motivation for dogs it has the ability to reinforce behavior independent of an association with other reinforcement. Food, unlike praise, generates a specific response; it motivates decision and action. Although praise is an excellent reinforcement, it does not in itself generate a specific response. Praise alone does not motivate decision and action.

Conditioned Reinforcement

A conditioned reinforcement's ability to reinforce behavior results from an association with a primary reinforcement. Conditioned reinforcements are as real and as potent as primary reinforcement. For example, most dogs learn to associate the owner picking up a set of keys with something pleasant. The keys become a real and potent conditioned reinforcement. Conditioned reinforcements are useful in dog training when it is impossible to immediately reinforce the behavior with a primary reinforcement. The conditioned reinforcement acts as a bridge. The trainer signals the dog that "Yes" you are right. Moments later, the primary reinforcement becomes a reward for a behavior that has already been reinforced with a conditioned reinforcement. Although the primary reinforcement has no effect on the behavior being shaped, it does help to establish a positive attitude toward training and reinforces the conditioned reinforcement's ability to reinforce.

The most common type of conditioned reinforcement is praise. In addition to praise I use a clicker as a conditioned reinforcement to signal the dog he is right. I find a clicker more effective than praise alone, since praise often becomes nothing more than noise to the dog.

As previously stated, a clicker can become the primary reinforcement, eventually even the behavior itself becomes the primary reinforcement. For example; for most people money is a conditioned reinforcement, what it buys is the primary reinforcement. However, for some people money actually becomes the primary reinforcement. Eventually even the money is no longer the reinforcement, but the behavior itself becomes the reinforcement. In dogs this can best be observed watching intense Border Collies that cannot get enough flyball. Jack Knox said "if he wants to reward his dog for a job well done he gives the dog more work to do."

Schedule of Reinforcement

The schedule of reinforcement may be continuous, variable or selective.

Continuous Reinforcement

With a continuous schedule of reinforcement the reinforcement is paired with every appropriate behavior. Learning is more rapid with a continuous schedule of reinforcement. Since we desire to establish a correlation between the reinforcement, the command, and the behavior, follow a schedule of continuous reinforcement until the behavior is established. However, once the behavior has been established, constant reinforcement results in saturation and it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to raise the criteria. If the dog is allowed to get used to a schedule of continuous reinforcement, the dog has you trained and will not perform without reinforcement. Therefore, it is essential that once the behavior is established the dog must be placed on a schedule of variable reinforcement.

Variable Reinforcement

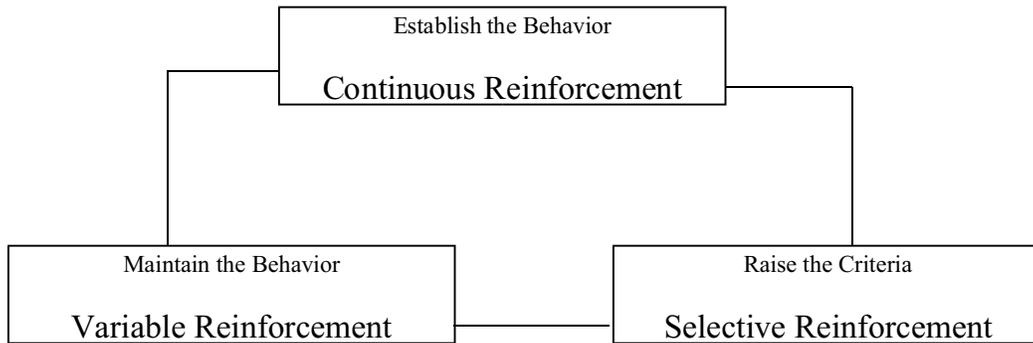
A variable schedule of reinforcement has been found to be effective in maintaining learned behavior. Furthermore, variable reinforcement produces more durable behavior.

Selective Reinforcement

You further shape the desired behavior with selective reinforcement. Selective reinforcement is a process by which you reinforce only your dog's best efforts. No longer is the reinforcement random or variable. Using selective reinforcement you can raise the criteria. The dog trying to get reinforced, will try several responses, ultimately hitting on the one that gets reinforced. With selective reinforcement you reinforce just the responses you like. Eventually the dog will routinely perform the desired behavior, which will lead you to a continuous schedule of reinforcement. When you reach that point, introduce a schedule of variable reinforcement until you are ready to raise the criteria once again.

Selective-Continuous-Variable Reinforcement Loop

Each time the criteria is raised the schedule of reinforcement is switched from variable reinforcement to selective reinforcement. To continually raise the dog's response to a higher level of performance go from variable reinforcement to selective reinforcement to continuous reinforcement to variable reinforcement to selective reinforcement to continuous reinforcement to variable reinforcement, and so on.



Relax the Criteria

It should be noted that getting used to new criteria will often interfere with previously learned behavior. As trainers we must relax the criteria for previous learned behavior when introducing new behaviors. For example, if the dog is comfortable with the jumps ten feet apart, when we raise the jumps for the first time it might be necessary to move the jumps in slightly. Once the dog is comfortable at the new height, we can gradually move the jumps until they are again ten feet apart.

Cues

Food or other primary reinforcement when paired with a particular cue, establishes the cue as a conditioned reinforcement. The cue can be a command such as "Jump," "Come," "Sit," or "Stay," or the cue can be a phrase such as "On Your Mark" or "Lets go for a walk." The cue can also be an object such as keys, a tennis ball, a flyball box or even a jump. In behavior chains, such as flyball, cue can even be the previous behavior.

OPERANT CONDITIONING

In the magazine "American Psychologist", November 1990, B.F. Skinner, stated in a paper, *"In operant conditioning, behavior is reinforced, in the sense of strengthened or made more likely to occur, by certain kinds of consequences, which first acquired the power to reinforce through natural selection."* Operant conditioning is a process of conditioning the dog to respond to cues or signals that reinforce certain behavior. Furthermore, the power to reinforce is through natural selection, whereby we let the dog know when and where to respond using primary reinforcement. Through natural selection various cues or signals become conditioned reinforcement. In effect, operant conditioning is a process of communicating to your dog.

A technique used in operant conditioning is a term called shaping. Shaping is a process by which the trainer first determines how closely the dog is able to perform a desired behavior with minimal assistance. Once the initial level is determined the trainer uses food as a target that will elicit a response from the dog. With each successive effort the trainer further shapes the behavior and each successive approximation or response more closely resembles the desired behavior.

During the learning stage the dog is always set up to succeed as the behavior is shaped in small increments in the direction of the desired behavior. The old school of thought was to set the dog up to fail - thus the trainer is given an opportunity to correct the dog. The dog learns very quickly what not to do, and is left to guess what the handler wants. Even though the dog learns more rapidly than using operant conditioning, the behavior is difficult to maintain without constant corrections. Training dogs by setting the dog up to fail is not effective, it's inhumane, and cruel. While mild corrections are important in helping the dog during the learning process and shaping the dog's behavior, corrections that stop the learning process should not be used to shape behavior.

Shaping Behavior

Shaping behavior² focuses on the dog's ongoing behavior. By observing the dog's behavior, we can begin to shape the desired behavior. If the behavior is not precisely what is desired, we shape the behavior starting at a point where we assume the behavior is yet unlearned. As you shape the dogs behavior remember:

- Choose an appropriate reinforcement.
- Use small reinforcements.
- The behavior controls the reinforcement.
- Corrections must be unavoidable, immediate, and paired with the behavior.
- Reinforce avoidance responses, not escape responses.
- Follow escape responses with avoidance responses.
- Be predictable.
- Raise the criteria in small increments.
- Shape one behavior at a time.
- Always put the current level of response on a variable schedule before raising the criteria using selective reinforcement.
- Plan your shaping program.
- If one shaping technique is not working, try another.
- If the behavior breaks down, repeat the shaping process.
- Avoid interrupting a training session.
- End each exercise on a positive note.
- When introducing new criteria, temporarily relax old criteria.

² Behavior Shaping Laws from Karen Pryor's book, [Don't Shoot the Dog](#)

BEHAVIOR CHAIN

A series of simple behaviors carried out in a sequence is a behavior chain. To maintain long-duration behaviors, i.e., do this for an hour or do this one hundred times, each behavior is actually reinforced by the cue or an opportunity to perform the next behavior. Since flyball is a sequence of responses where each response creates the stimulus for the next response, then we can use the principles of chaining to train our dogs for flyball. The links that make up the “flyball behavior chain” include:

- Quick start
- The outrun (driving over each of the four jumps, single stepping if possible)
- Quick turn, catching the ball (and the retrieve should the dog miss the ball)
- Look for the first jump (directed jumping - particularly if the dog misses the ball)
- Return Run (driving over each of the four jumps, single stepping if possible)

Forward and Backward Chaining

Forward chaining is the process by which the dog learns the first link in the behavior chain first, followed by the second link, then the third and so on. In forward chaining you start with the first jump, add a second, then a third and finally the fourth jump is added to the behavior chain. While forward chaining may be an excellent technique to condition a dog's response for short behavior chains, flyball, being a complex behavior chain, is better taught using backward chaining. That is, we teach the last link first, followed by the next to last link, and so on until the entire chain is learned.

When backward chaining is applied you set the dog up to succeed. Since flyball is a sequence of responses where each response creates the stimulus for the next response then each new behavior or link serves as a cue for the next response. While the first part of the exercise is perhaps initially somewhat unfamiliar to the dog as each new link is added - as the dog responds to each new cue - the links at the end are familiar. The dog knows where the training is going. Thus, the motivation is there to complete the chain. Furthermore, the dog always ends on a positive note.

Rules of Backward Chaining

- Teach the last behaviors first.
- Carry the chain through to the end each time. Never interrupt the chain in the middle.
- Teach each behavior the dog will encounter before it is needed to build the chain.

PRACTICE

When our team gets together we always allow time for the dogs to interact. The dogs are allowed to play together off lead while we set up the jumps and get the equipment ready. While the dogs are playing, we will discuss upcoming tournaments, last weeks practice, and go over what we want to accomplish this week. As discussed earlier, this allows the dogs to establish their natural tendencies toward being dominant and subordinate; the result is the control of aggression within the team. Caution should always be taken when introducing new dogs to the “pack.” New dogs should be kept on lead until everyone is sure that they will fit in.

Start off with some warm up exercises, whether random jumping with three or four jumps, or some agility exercises. This will minimize the chance of injury.

Return runs and outruns are almost always a part of our routine. With the more experienced dogs we will set up two runs for the outrun and return run, working two dogs simultaneously, side by side. Or we might work on passing with two dogs on the same lane. Meanwhile, others will be working with the chute/box on turns.

If we have time at the end of practice we will run the dogs 3-5 heats putting the entire exercise together, noting which dogs pass well together, which are most consistent, and which dogs are the fastest, taking note of release points to get our passing as close as possible. I make notes of any problems that I need to work on and develop a training program to address any problems observed.

Working dogs individual is also a good practice. That way they have several pairs of eyes on one dog and the dogs and trainers will not be distracted by the other dogs.

PREPARING FOR A TOURNAMENT

A week or two before a tournament we begin to concentrate on starts and passing, noting which dogs pass well together, which dogs are most consistent, and which dogs are the fastest. From this we determine the order each dog will run and what teams they will likely race against.

Normally, the dogs most consistently will race against the slower teams. The fastest dogs will compete against the faster teams. I like to run dogs with the least experience last, giving them a clear run back. I prefer to run the fastest dog first, hoping to take an early lead.

RACING

When you arrive at the tournament site, take the dog in the ring before the competition starts. You are not allowed to practice in the ring, but; you can let your dog get familiar with the ring and accustomed to the new surroundings.

I have also observed that the dogs and handlers develop a certain rhythm as they race, therefore; I like to stay with the same four dogs in any given set of races. I might even stay with a slower dog in the third and final heat rather than introduce a new dog that might upset the rhythm the dogs established in the first couple heats. Unfortunately, Some dogs are at their “peak” for only two/three heats and must be rotated out. On other occasions, the four dogs I selected just aren’t fast enough.

If I rotate dogs I prefer to rotate the start dogs. Because of false starts the start dogs are the most likely to get tired first.

Before the competition, start off with some warm up exercises. This will minimize the chance of injury and keep the dog alert. Usually, there will be a flight of stairs at the show site that can be used to warm up the dogs. Most injuries occur when the dogs are doing their warm up races. This is normally after the dogs have been confined to a crate for an extended period of time. Behavior shaping exercise such as heel starts, the finish, heeling, jumping, random downs or sits, about turn, back and call your dog, and other quick turn exercises can be going on while waiting to go into the ring. Be sure to allow the dog some “cool off” time. I like to walk my dogs a round the show site before putting them back in the crate for a well deserved rest.

If possible, introduce new dogs using backward chaining. During the competition you will normally be allowed practice runs. In the first warm up do a few restrained recalls. Perhaps adding an outrun and turn to the second practice run. Later add a retrieve. By the third or fourth set of races the dog will be ready to compete.

Time and video each dog. This will help set the proper release point for each dog. The distance also may vary slightly from tournament to tournament depending on the running surface and the size of the ring. As the tournament progresses our passing coach will advise us on our passing. Most teams release their dogs 50 feet or more from the start finish line. Some dogs need more distance to get to their top speed, others may only need 20 or so feet.

TEAM

Each team will need at least four dogs. Dogs will get tired, and occasionally a dog’s behavior will break down for no apparent reason, and, although uncommon, injuries do happen. It is recommended that you keep a back up dog or two on each team.

You’ll need at least four handlers and a box loader. If you are short handlers and box loaders most teams are willing to lend a hand. It’s great if we have a dozen or so team members to keep times, coach passing, releases, and starts, pick up loose balls, and set up knocked down jumps.

- 4-6 Handlers
- 1 Box loader
- 1 Person to set jump and record times
- 1 Person to set jump and signal start times
- 1 Person to set jump, submit lineups and call passing
- 1 Person to set jump and pick up loose balls
- 1 Person to signal the handlers when to hold their dogs, when to push passing, and when to rerun a dog
- 1 Person to set up knocked down jumps
- 1 Person to help with warm-up (hold dogs and set/remove training devices)
- 1 Person to record beer penalties (both handler and dog errors)

EXERCISES

FOUNDATION EXERCISES (FOR PUPPIES AND NEW ADDITIONS)

- Chase games,
- Tug with old socks,
- Hide-n-Seek,
- Clicker Training,
- Touch the ball and click (later use a tug and only if the puppy picks up the ball),
- Hand and Feet Games,
- Toss the puppy and run,
- Target training,
- Imprinting (new locations and with dirty clothes).

RETURN RUN AND OTRUN

With the uprights set 48 inches apart.

- Introduce dogs to the jump and the command jump (introduce directed jumping)
- Restrained recall (return run) or chase (outrun) without jumps
- Restrained recall (backward chaining w/one jump first, than two, three, and four jumps)
- Restrained outrun (backward chaining w/one jump first, than two, three, and four jumps)
- Restrained recalls/outruns two lanes, switching lanes

Further shape the dogs behavior by adjusting the uprights until they are only 24 inches apart. Finally, adjust point of release until both dogs are 50 to 60 feet back.

Once the dog is doing both the outrun and return run, it time work on getting the dog to keep to the right. This is the introduction to passing. With the uprights set 48 inches apart, place a cone on left to encourage the dogs to run to the right.

Dog will not stay in their lane

Motivational problem. You can try a “time-out” and work on establishing a stronger motivator.

If the dog won't stay in its own lane than it may be a minor distraction issue. In this case I would recommend setting up each lane adjacent to one another. Butting the lanes next to each other and gradually increasing the distance between the lanes will fix minor distractions.

PASSING

As a team sport, the dogs and handlers must work together. The dogs should be able to pass one another without veering, being distracted, or breaking their concentration.

Set up two lanes keeping the lanes only inches apart. Start dogs at opposite ends. Work on both restrained return runs and outruns.

Adjust the uprights on both lanes until they are 24 inches apart. Continue to encourage the dog to keep to the right by placing the cone on the left side. Eventually eliminate the post between the two lanes such that you have only one lane with the post 48 inches apart and start sliding the jumps together until the post are 24 inches apart. The size of each dog will dictate how close the uprights can be without risking injury to the dogs. Obviously if you have two large dogs the uprights will remain 48 inches apart.

It's a good idea to work new dogs with an experienced dog. This minimizes the distractions.

URNS

- Target Training
- Hit wall
- Tug (sit and hit-it, sit-stay and hit-it, hit wall)
- Chute (w/o cone and jump bar, w/ cone, w/ cone and jump bar, w/ cone, jump bar, and ball)
- Shape turn on chute
- Box (w/o cone and jump bar, w/ cone, w/ cone and jump bar, w/ cone, jump bar, and ball)
- Shape turn on box

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- **BUILDING DRIVE**

- Handler starts at the box facing the dog, positioned on the side of the box that the dog turns to. Initially, the dog is positioned back 10-15 from the box.
- Handler and dog are released at the same time. The dog must hit the box and THEN chase the handler down the jumps. (Note: If the dog turns to the left the handler will have to cross over once the dog passes).
- Increase the release point until the dog is going over all four jumps, hitting the box and THEN chasing the handler. The handler will start at various points to make sure the dog actually has to catch the handler.

Once the handler and dog pass (as the dog is going to the box), the handler always runs away from the dog. If the handler turns to face the dog or stops the dog will only slow down. This exercise depends on a strong motivation to chase the handler.

RETRIEVE

Practice the retrieve with and without jumps. Start with one jump and add a second, or third jump. Encourage the dog to bring the ball all the way to you.

CONDITIONING EXERCISES

- Chuck-It
- Swimming
- Power Jumping
- Passing
- Frisbee