

Steps To Success

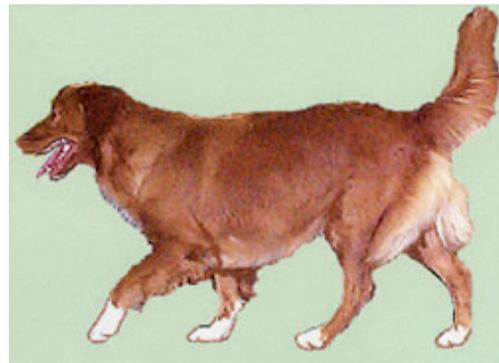
"TAKE 'EM AROUND!"

Gaiting, like stacking, is more involved than first meets the eye. The dog moves around the ring, her attention is on where she's going, yet she's aware at all times of where the handler is and how fast he's going. Her back feet follow her front feet, without weaving back and forth. At the end of the diagonal mat, she focuses either on the handler or the judge. She alters her trot from fast to slow. She responds to tiny changes in pressure on the lead. She understands that the ring is a circle with flat sides, not a rectangle. Ouch! Most handlers don't know that much!

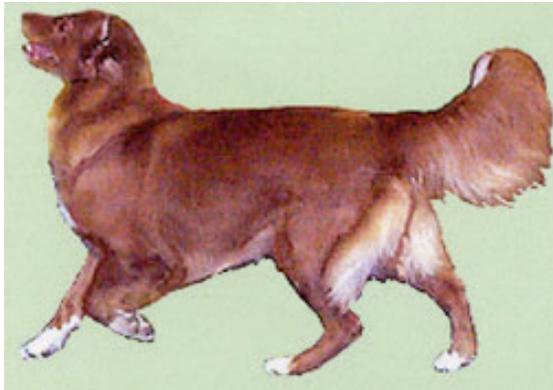
EASY BEGINNINGS

Let's begin with a brief discussion of gait. All show dogs are judged at a trot.

"**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.



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, even though she's being silly and throwing her head back. Also note how much more reach (in front) and drive (in the rear) it gives her. Very pretty.

"**Trot**" is a specific gait. The left front leg and the left rear leg come together and separate as the dog moves forward.

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 them 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're going for walks.

"**Walk**" is a specific gait which can look a lot like a Pace, with left front and 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's 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 when your dog is Walking, Pacing or Trapping 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 or Walk without having to stop and think about what each leg is doing. Watch particularly for the lowering of the front end and the ribcage swinging from side to side in the Pace.

FOLLOWING THE PATH

In free stacking, and in life, you spend a lot of time teaching the dog to watch you. Now you'll teach her NOT to watch you. There are several exercises to help.

With the dog off-leash, walk in a small circle fifteen to 20 feet in diameter, counterclockwise. The dog is in the centre of the circle trying to figure out what the heck you're doing. If you've used this circle to teach her the beginnings of heeling, you can now use it to show her that isn't what you want her to do now.

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 cues she uses to tell that you're doing conformation gaiting, not heeling or loose-leash walking. Look about 10 feet in front of you along the circle, not at the dog. If you look at her, she'll naturally look at you, which isn't what you want. She must be AWARE of you, but looking AT you while she gaits will throw her legs out of alignment.

OK. Counterclockwise circle, left hand out, looking where you're going, doing in the centre, clicker and treats. Now what?

While you're walking, the dog may be standing in the centre of the circle watching you. Toss a treat ahead of you along your path to get her up and moving. She might be coming toward you or following 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 she's that willing to work with you, start clicking her when she's NOT looking at you. If you can do this without looking at her, super. Some of us have better peripheral vision than others. If you can't (most people can't), get a friend to sit outside your circle to click for you, or use mirrors. After the click, toss the treat into the centre of the circle.

Oh! OH! OH! Why would you do that? The dog will learn mat diving! Ah, grasshopper, breath deeply. Be calm. We'll deal with that "problem" later. For now, you're tossing the treat into the centre of your circle for several reasons. First, the food is the primary reinforcer for the behaviour. Eating from the centre of the circle will help take the dog's attention off you which is, after all, what you're aiming for. Second, it takes the dog away from you and gives her a chance to come back toward you and offer you the walking-together-but-not-looking-at-each-other behaviour again. A win-win situation. You can also use this walking circle to teach the dog to lead out in front of you, making her look animated, cheerful and athletic. Once she's going around the circle well, start tossing her treat out in front of her instead of into the centre, and click when she's slightly in front of you and looking where she's going, rather than beside you.

As she gets better and better at walking beside you without looking at you, you can get fussier. Go faster, clicking only when she's trotting. She'll soon see you assume the left-wing-only airplane walk and move automatically out in front of you at a trot.

Another useful exercise is teaching the dog to look ahead of herself from a stationary position, then transferring it to movement. Ask her to stay, walk out in front of her, and put a large piece of bait on the floor. If she can't stay yet, hold her and toss it out in front of her. Be sure she sees it. Go back to her right side and tease her a bit. "See it? Want it? Gonna get it?" When you're SURE she's looking at it, click and let her get it. When you've done this in five different places, put a cue on it. Hearing the cue will get her to look out in front of her. My cue is "Look" and my cue to look at ME is "Watch". I think it's fun to cue Look (she looks out in front), Watch (she looks at me), and Look again. It certainly tells me that she understands where she's supposed to be looking! And it's a spectacular trick.

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 (or put a bit of bait on the chair). Have the dog go farther and farther to get to the chair. Soon she'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 she try to cut the corner to go directly to the chair? Of course she will! If you don't like the path she's taking, turn away from her and don't click her for targeting the chair. With the circle work you've done already, she'll turn with 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 her trot. You want a flat-sided circle. By walking the circle exercise, and by

working the chair exercise, you're teaching the dog to balance the style of circle she's making.

Another factor in the circle that you'll be paying attention to will be how far the dog is from you. She needs to be close enough that you're moving together, yet she should be slightly ahead of you and far enough from you that she appears to have her own personal space and integrity. Another reason for your left hand out from your body at shoulder height - if the dog's spine between her hips is centred under your outstretched hand, she's probably in a perfect gaiting position. The leash between your hand and her neck isn't pulling her off to the side and throwing her gait off. Take another look at the picture above - the position is perfect. The dog is directly under the handler's outstretched hand and a bit ahead, and appears to be totally in control of what's happening, while the handler appears to be "along for the ride".



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

This is a trot: left front and left rear legs are coming together, right front and right rear legs move apart.

The back is flat, the tail correct, expression is cheerful and alert.

This is excellent.

UP AND BACK

So, she can go around in circles. Now she 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 him, and back to him. This away-from-the-judge and back-to-the-judge is called the "up and back" or the "diagonal". What he really needs to see is how the legs move in relation to each other, so you and the dog need to go in a straight line. Wobbling back and forth won't help you. If you don't have an actual mat to follow - and you won't have in outdoor shows anyway - try drawing one on the ground, or putting a couple of strings on the ground to define the borders of an imaginary mat 3' wide.

Wear good shoes with non-slip soles to show your dog, because the mat is not for you. Write this on the fridge, too. 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, 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 (remember 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.



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

The dog is trotting. Did you catch it?

Practising this without a leash teaches you both to think about teamwork.

When you get to the end of your mat (this is the complicated part), stop, then back up to your left until you're 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 centre 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 centre of the mat, and straight back down the centre 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!



Handler is backing up from the right side of the mat to the left to return. Dog went away and will return on the red line.

Because she's been rewarded a lot for trotting, even in this slow turn her body is thinking about trotting.

GIMME THAT RIBBON, BUBBA!

If your dog has a good head and expression, typical of her breed, it's a good idea to teach her to make eye contact with the judge. It's hard to resist a pretty dog who's staring at you, wiggling her 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 her 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 to teach it 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" hand the treat to the dog. Trot her back to the other end, turn her around and go back to the "judge", and have him treat her again. Repeat until the dog really wants to get back to the judge to get the

treat, then begin slowing her down with the leash before she gets there so she can stop and make eye contact with him from a bit of a distance in order to get the treat.



Very nice. The dog is responding to the judge after meeting the leash and using it to walk into a pretty stack.

Here we see an example of the "unimportance" of a good handler. The dog and judge are deep in conversation while the handler appears to be nothing more than an interested bystander.

Use different "judges" and different mats until the dog is truly thrilled to be trotting toward anyone staring at her. When you get into the ring, any motion of the judge's hand will automatically produce an excited and inspiring expression, and most judges will oblige.

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 her tail in the correct position, or for putting her ear up. The last dog I showed in conformation was trained to make and hold eye contact with the judge as he walked down the row of dogs, as well as to walk out in front of me to engage the judge in "conversation" after the diagonal (as is the dog in the photo above). This got the dog's ears up, showed her expression, and established the judge as just another treat dispenser. If you're seriously into conformation, you can even have someone watch your dog gaiting and click when the dog assumes her best, flowing, extended stride in the trot. You, of course, stop and treat, then go again.

SPEED

Let's talk about you. If you're moving a small dog around the ring, you may get away with a fast walk. Otherwise, you're going to have to run. When you run, you're 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. 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. And WEAR GOOD SHOES WITH GOOD GRIP.

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 particular dog to do the diagonal. It's not the same speed as going around. Again, get some help and figure out what the best speed is.

MAT DIVING

I promised we'd talk about mat diving. Here we go. Refraining from mat diving is the same behaviour as Conformation Zen. If you didn't teach it when you were reading the Stacking article, go back and teach it now. Zen reminds the dog that she needs to control herself and give you what you want in order to get what she wants. When she 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's 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 she watches you hard enough she can force you to click and give her a treat, have your helper show her a treat, then put the treat on the floor and cover it with his foot so she can't get it. Let her try. Short of biting your helper's foot, there's nothing she can do wrong. When she finally decides she can't get the bait and starts to move away from it, click and give her a different treat. Start again. Your helper takes the treat out from under his foot, shows it to your dog and puts it back under his foot. When she stops trying to get it, click and give her a treat.

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

With or without a helper, on or off leash, think about what you're telling the dog. She can't have the treat on the floor no matter what she does, but as soon as she stops trying to get it, you're guaranteed to click and give her a freebie. 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 she walk away from the floor bait without diving for it? Click and treat. Can she trot a big circle around the floor bait without diving for it? Click and treat. can she trot a small circle around it? Can she trot over it? Can she free stack on top of it? Can she back up over it?

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. Rather than teach the dog she can pick up anything unless you tell her not to, teach her that she can't pick up anything unless you say she can.

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. Why do handlers profess to love dogs and then demonstrate, by their nasty leash handling, that they have no respect whatsoever for the animal on the end of that leash?

You've been teaching your dog to do the conformation behaviours without the leash. When you put the leash on her, remember that she can already do the behaviours. You don't have to use the leash to keep her with you, to make her start, stop, or turn around, to move her feet, to stand still, or to get her to look at you. The truly beautiful show dog looks like she's doing everything on her own. Your cues are subliminal - a tiny shift of your weight forward or back, dropping or raising your hands a quarter inch. It should look like you're only in the ring with her because it isn't legal for her to be there by herself.

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

Remember when the dog was walking up to the judge after the diagonal, give him 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. That pressure will build up slowly until it smoothly brings the dog to a stop 5' 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's allowing the dog to "meet the rein" rather than pulling back to make the rein grab the dog.



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



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

And if you ride, you know that "the proof of the training is in 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'll know that all those hours of training have paid off.