

## Steps To Success "SET 'EM UP!"

Most people think a dog is "conformation trained" if she walks on a leash and doesn't sit or bite the judge. The pros 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 her job in the ring, the closer she is to that elusive "Ch" title.

### EASY BEGINNINGS

To begin, the dog needs to be ready to work, standing up, willing to be handled in all her 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's "standing up".

We teach pups to sit - nothing wrong with that, but for showing, we ALSO have to teach the pup to be comfortable standing up. Don't get fancy - observe the butt in the air, click, treat. Are her front feet even? Back feet even? Head up? Who cares? Click and treat when her feet are down and her hips and elbows up.

What do we call this behaviour? Don't call it anything. First, it isn't an end behaviour, it's just a beginning. Second, conformation is a dance cued with subliminal signals. We'll speak to the dog with our bodies, not our voices.

### 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's feet is as individual as the dog is, but there are a few things that remain constant.

You don't control the dog's feet until you control her head. Stick this on your fridge:  
**you do not control the dog until you control her head.**

If you have a small dog, put her on a grooming table. A medium to large dog will do best standing on a pause table. You can work this with the dog on the ground, but you can see her feet better with her up higher. Another tip - conformation is a sport of inches. You'll be moving her head an inch to the right or left. Her foot will move 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 her muzzle in your right hand. Click and treat. Repeat until she's comfortable with you holding her muzzle while she stands unresisting in front of you. Now hold her muzzle and move her head to her left. If she goes with the pressure, click and treat.



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

Usually you can feel some tension in the neck when you begin - do it gently, calmly, click when she releases the neck tension, when she moves her head willingly with you. Keep your touch light - this is fingertip pressure. The dog is releasing her head to you, you're not forcing it from side to side. When you can cup your hand under her muzzle and move her head easily from side to side, look at her center of gravity. When she's standing naturally, she'll have her weight

evenly on her right and left front feet. As you move her head to the left, her weight shifts more to her left foot, taking the pressure off her right. When you move her head to her right, she'll have more weight on her right foot and less on her left. That's what we want.



... or mentally, you don't control the dog's body until you control her head.

**How To Avoid Looking Like A Newbie In The Conformation Ring:** when you lift the dog's front foot, 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 her left front leg, reach over her with your left hand, take her left elbow firmly in hand, lift and move the leg 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 her leg starts from her head. With your right hand you're moving her head to her right, taking the weight off her left foot. She knows how to do this. Now reach over her withers and lift her 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 or a helper. Or maybe you said "yes" instead of clicking. However you did it, be sure that you don't ask for more until she's comfortable with you controlling both her head and her elbow.



Move the front leg from the elbow. Note the dog's weight evenly distributed on remaining 3 legs, and the dog is perfectly balanced.

Finally, put her foot back down. In the beginning, don't worry about WHERE you place it, you're just teaching her to **allow** you to pick it up and put it down. If she was comfortable with the foot where you got it from, put it back there. As the paw touches

the ground, move her muzzle back to the left. This shifts her weight back onto the leg you just moved, anchoring it right where you put it. Click and treat for the weight shift. There are two ways to move her right front leg, by the way. You can leave your right hand to move her muzzle to her left, lean back a bit, and use your left hand to lift her right elbow. Or, you can stand over her, switch her muzzle to your left hand, and use your right hand on her 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. Sometimes you click because she's comfortable with you holding her 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 never, ever, ever touch the back leg below the hock joint.**

When you ask for the weight off a rear leg, it's important that you allow the dog a moment to get ready for the lift. To shift the weight off the left rear leg, move her head to her right and slightly forward. Click the weight shift. When she's comfortable shifting her weight, pick up her left hock with your left hand, put it back down, and shift her weight back onto it by bringing her head back to a neutral position. Repeat for the right hind leg. 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 her power to respond to.



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

## FREE STACKING

Your dog now wants to remain standing, and is comfortable with you holding her muzzle, moving her head back and forth, and lifting and placing her 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", she simply arrives in front of the judge in the best position to show off everything she's got. She looks like the handler is only with her because it's against the rules for her to be there by herself. How do you teach that?

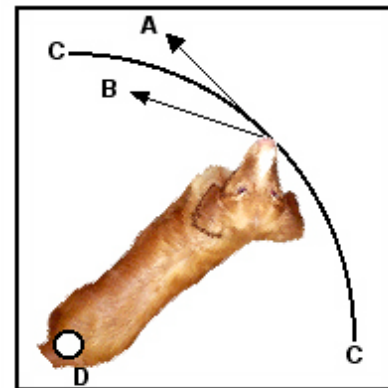
Two words: free stacking. When you can use tiny, subtle signals to tell the dog where to put her feet and what to do with her center of gravity, you have Arrived.

Most dogs don't free stack naturally because a) there isn'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 for our aesthetic preferences. Obviously you must then ask the dog to move her 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 her front foot comes off the ground, right? Unfortunately, when you ask a dog to move forward, she always starts moving with her BACK feet first. Moving the back feet forward isn't going to solve the problem!

### ANCHORING THE BACK LEGS

To move the front feet forward, you first need to anchor her back legs. You can't ask her to move her front feet ahead, but you can ask her to move them side to side.

When you were hand stacking, you physically moved her head to the left, shifting her weight to the left and releasing her 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.



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

You can lure with bait, or you can lure with your hand as a target. I suggest luring with bait at first because you're looking for very subtle movements of the feet.

One more thing you need to know before you start. You're going to be moving the dog's nose in an arc to her left. This arc 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 her nose, and SLOWLY move her nose to her left. Don't watch her nose - watch her right foot. You should be able to see her move her head (that's what peripheral vision is for!), then her weight shifts to her left, then the right front foot starts to rise. Click, and pop the treat in her mouth. Try it again.



Pulling too far forward - left rear foot is lifting

What could have gone wrong? She could have stepped forward with a back foot. That's because you pulled her forward instead of around the arc (nose toward "A" in the diagram).





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

She could have stepped backward with her left front foot or a back foot. That's because you pushed her backward (nose to "B" in the diagram). Or she could have swung her back end to the right as her front end went to the left. That's because you tried to move her nose fast instead of very slowly.

When she's lifting her right front foot well, try the same thing to the right. She's standing facing your right. With your right hand, lure her

nose slowly on the arc to her right. Watch her left front foot. When it lifts, click and treat.

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

### CENTRE OF GRAVITY

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

The next lesson will be shifting her center of gravity forward. She might be the best built dog in the world, but if she doesn't pull her weight forward when she's stacked, she's going to look like she's slouching around the kitchen.

You've taught her to anchor her back feet, and to move her front feet from side to side. Now you need to tell her that **she can't move her front feet straight forward, ever** (unless you're starting to gait, but then you'll be trotting, not watching her). You are now anchoring her front feet. Get her stacked with her feet where you want them, and then lure her very, very slowly forward. Watch carefully. If you pull her too far or too fast, she'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 her back, there is a little dip, called the KNICK (neither "k" is silent). Watch the knick. When she leans forward, the skin around the knick will shift. Yes, you



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



The red arrows point to knicks

can see it even on hairy dogs! Click the shift. What you're really clicking is the dog tightening the muscles that pull her 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 her 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 her center of gravity) forward, flatten the back, and make her look dominant, happy, and terrific. By teaching her to pull forward "over herself", you're teaching her to assume a dominant, winning attitude and raise her tail.

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

Once your dog is securely stacked, there is a neat game you can play with her to keep her stacked and alert in the ring. Get her stacked, stand in front of her, show her a treat, put it behind your back for a second, and if she's still stacked, click and toss the treat. You can toss it to her to catch, or skid it along the floor in any direction and let her 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 she 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 she's placed her back legs, you can reach down and move them by hand or, if she's reasonably well put together in the rear, you can ask her 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 her. Slowly lean and step toward her until she takes a step backwards. Click the first paw moving backwards. This method has the added advantage of building in a cue - lean slightly toward the dog, and she'll back up.

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



Dropping the nose onto the throat. Left front foot is moving back, left rear foot will be next (note head turned to right)

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 her to lose interest. When she does, click, switch the treat from the protected position to your thumb and forefinger, and hand it to her. Repeat until she understands that the treat isn't available, no matter what she does, until you hand it to her 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 a "naturally self-stacking" dog!



As handler slowly steps into the dog, she cheerfully backs up. Note she's walked her back legs into a perfect position - time to move her forward

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



Wow! That was worth training for! Front and back legs are perfectly placed, back flat, weight forward, bright and cheerful - too bad she'll have to be wearing a leash in the ring!