

Up Contact Training

By Nancy Gyes

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If there was an agility fairy godmother, and I was to be granted one wish, I would choose to eliminate judging up contacts on all three contact obstacles. It isn't often that a dog misses the yellow when he gets on the dogwalk or teeter—maybe only five or six dogs out of a 100 are capable of striding over the yellow on a regular basis. Even more rare is the dog that misses the up contact on the A-frame. Of course, even though it isn't often missed, and rarely has anything to do with safety on the equipment, it is still a fault in USDAA agility and also on the international agility scene.

The dogs that normally miss the up contacts are rarely the ones that can afford the waste of time to slow down to trot through the zone, or whose momentum you want to inhibit by repeatedly stopping them on their approach to the contact. The typical scenario is one in which a dog over 21" tall, and probably more commonly 23" to 28" tall, of average competition speed, begins missing the up contact on the dogwalk. Golden Retrievers, Flat-Coats, German Shepherds, Belgian Malinois and Tervs, large cross-breeds, and the occasional long-strided Border Collie who is at least 21" tall will be your typical dogs that have a problem with the up contact. It isn't common to see a really fast dog missing the up contact, though of course, there are exceptions to the rule.

A few times every year, one of my students comes to me with the lament that his or her dog is one of these unfortunates. Hopefully, this is a student that has just begun agility training and has not yet started to compete. To evaluate the severity of the problem, I normally meet with the student privately to test the dog's propensity to miss the yellow.

I start the test with the A-frame. When you try this test, make sure you adjust the A-frame to the full competition height of 6'3". USDAA is the only organization in the U.S. to judge the up contact on the A-frame, so it would be useless to evaluate the dog at a lower height. When we see this in class with a beginner dog on a lowered frame, we usually ignore it. We won't be able to discover if the dog misses at 6'3" until the dog is trained to do a full-sized A-frame. I have known dogs that will miss the up contact every time the A-frame is lower than 6', but never miss it at full height.

Have someone watch you put your dog over the 6'3" frame to see where your dog hits the ramp. If you have no one to watch you, get your dog's feet wet before he climbs so that you can go back and look afterward to see where his wet feet mark the front of the A-frame, or shake some baby powder lightly on the area in the top foot of the yellow zone and look for

the impressions his feet make. Put your dog over the 6'3" frame at least 10 times. Approach the A-frame at full speed and from a variety of angles. Do a few, and then rest your dog so that he is at full impulsion again. If you have missed a few out of the 10 A-frames, you do indeed have an up contact problem.

Do the same test with the dogwalk and teeter, at full speed and from a variety of angles. The test won't be as valid if your dog is tired, so be sure to do a few then take a break and repeat. Watch for and make notice of your dog's take-off spot on the ground in front of the equipment. This will be useful information as you work on a technique for your dog to touch the up contact. Remember that only one of your dog's feet needs to touch the up contact zone. Some beginners are confused when they see their dogs' front feet stride over the yellow and are not even aware that the back feet are making plenty of contact with the yellow.

If you have a large, heavy dog without a lot of impulsion, and your dog only misses one dogwalk out of 10, I would probably experiment with some "speed bumps" and hoops and not take the dogwalk technique any further unless the dog's propensity to miss reaches higher than 20%. If you slow down this type of dog to get the up contact, you will be losing precious seconds of time, which might be the difference between a Q or an NQ, and you will be encouraging a lack of momentum on the contacts.

For the dog that only occasionally misses the up contact on the dogwalk or teeter, I would use the speed bump or hoop methods to help raise the percentage of accuracy.

For the A-frame up contact I would first use the Harris Contact Runner method, or try the speed bumps, or both.

Speed Bumps

Place a jump bar or tiny cavaletti approximately 18" to 24" before the dogwalk or teeter, and 36" before the A-frame, to act like a ground bar for a jump. Alternatively, lay a 24" square piece of hard plastic just before the dogwalk. Many dogs who miss the up contact on the dogwalk and teeter take off for their leap over the contact quite close to the bottom of the equipment. After you have performed the up-contact test with your dog, you will know where your dog's take-off spot is within inches. You will be trying to get the dog to take off for the contact before the ground bar; in essence, encouraging the dog's stride to end solidly in the yellow zone.

You might need to make the bar a few inches high so the dog can't ignore its presence. Alternatively, increase the size or depth of the plastic barrier. Again, use your helper or instructor as eyes to see where the placement makes a difference for your dog. Since each dog's stride is different, I can't give you an exact measurement for the placement of the bar.

These techniques will help your dog to establish muscle memory, habituate the early jump onto the dogwalk or teeter, and help the dog to land squarely in the yellow. They will make the most difference for the dog that only occasionally misses the up contact, and forming good habits will help to eliminate most of the misses. If you have a young dog that occasionally misses, or you think has a propensity because of size or breed, and you want to encourage good behavior from the start, use the ground bar every time you train to try to prevent the bad habit from ever forming. To wean your dog from the ground bar, minimize the size of the bar or paint it green to match the color of the grass or surface where you do your training. Then you can progress to using a much smaller dowel or piece of thin wood before you fade the bar away entirely.

Hoops

Hoops will *not* teach reliable up contacts all by themselves, but they can be used to help your dog develop muscle memory on the equipment. More than that though, they give you an opportunity to run your dog at full speed without stopping him on each piece of equipment when you work training exercises and don't want to slow him down to work your up contacts. Hoops should be approximately the same height as your dog at the withers. Place them about a foot in front of the dogwalk and teeter, essentially right in your dog's take-off spot. If your dog is capable of ducking under the hoop and missing the yellow, you need to lower the height of the hoop or place it closer to the contact. Using the hoops will allow you to have 100% accuracy on the up contacts without slowing down your dog or stopping him to work your up contact. Once you remove the hoops, however, do not expect the dog to have a really reliable technique. The hoops are a visual aid, which would have to be faded, and reinforced by training some kind of body motion (such as the dog dropping his head and shoulders) in order to work even when they aren't there.

Using the Harris Contact Runner for the A-Frame Up Contact

Work your dog in circles on approach to the A-frame. This will cause your dog to get on the A-frame on a slanted approach and help him learn how to climb properly without having to launch up onto the A-frame. Without describing in too much detail, you simply want the dog to load onto the A-frame on the corner closest to you, traverse slightly off center so that he is at the apex farther away from you, and then again get off on the corner closer to you. You are making a slight arc from inside corner to outside apex. (For more information on the Contact Runner, see *CR V7*, #6.)

Targeting on a Contact Trainer or Full-Size Equipment

For the dog that is missing most of the up contacts on the dogwalk and teeter, this is the most reliable method I have found for training up contacts. You will need to stop your dog every time he uses the dogwalk or teeter for a very long time before you can even think of fading away the stop. If you have a one-year-old dog missing most of the up contacts, this means training the touch technique and stopping him solidly on the contact in every practice and every competition for at least a year or longer. Only after a year could you begin asking the dog for a stop, but not actually enforce that stop in competition. Every dog is different and some dogs will habituate the technique and eventually not need to be stopped. Some dogs will *always* need to be stopped in order to be 100% reliable.

Step one—Teach your dog to run to a target and hit it with his front feet or nose. (This is most effectively done with a clicker, but you can do it with treats on a target if you don't understand clicker training.) I use a visible target to begin with, usually a 10" square of rubber matting, carpet, or mouse pad. Get a reliable run to the target before you place it on the

trainer, slant board, or actual equipment. Keep the dog on leash, and run with the dog to the target, mark the touch by click and treat, or by allowing the dog to eat his goodie off the target. Name the target something you are willing to use as your climbing command, like *Touch*, as this targeting command will be replacing your word for teeter or dogwalk. Before you progress to putting the target on the board, you should be able to send your dog ahead of you to the target, ideally from at least 10'.

Step two—Once your dog understands *Touch* and will run with you to the target and stop, you are ready to place your target on the trainer. Place your target just above the first slat on the board, and keep the dog on leash as you give your target word. When the dog gets to the target, click and treat, or allow your dog to eat his food lure which was placed on the target, then release the dog with a specific verbal release like *O.K.*, which will allow the dog to travel over the piece of equipment. I like the dog to be in a bowing position, with his front end lowered at the target. His front feet are on the target or close to it, if you have taught a nose touch. His body is straight and his back feet are off the contact.

I want the dog to travel to the up contact as if he were running to a flyball box, and then freeze momentarily until I release him from the position. When you give your release word, the dog is allowed to travel straight over the trainer and off, or straight over the actual piece of equipment. I like to use the contact trainer because it allows you to work in your living room or back yard away from agility equipment, and you can do many, many more repetitions than you can if you use the full-sized piece of equipment. If you use the full dogwalk and release the dog to come off the equipment instead of traveling across, it is possible to have that behavior appear in competition if you adjust your position even slightly. Your dog will be twitchy about your crossing behind while he is totally stopped, thinking that you are moving to release him from position. I like to release the dog straight over the trainer.

You should practice only on leash to begin with, and then once you have moved to off-leash work, try crossing behind and varying your position as the dog gets on the trainer. To get in as many repetitions as possible on a full-sized piece of equipment during training, you will need to release the dog from his position without actually climbing the full dogwalk or teeter. Give your release word, and then take him off the board and begin the process all over again. You can get 20 target touches in during the time that you can complete three or four full-sized contacts. The advantage of a contact trainer is that you can quickly release the dog and have him travel straight over the equipment after his touch, more effectively simulating what the dog will actually do on a full-sized dogwalk or teeter.

Step 3—Once you have perfected it on the trainer, or doing target touch and release off the board, you are ready to use it on regulation equipment. Your target word will now be your command that sends your dog to the piece of equipment, or you can add the target word to your existing climbing command, like *Scramble*, *Touch*. Continue to use your visual target for a short period of time. Start to expect the same behavior without the target present. You may need to fade your target by making it smaller or using it randomly. If you are using a clicker, this is easier than if you need to fade the food lure. If you are using a food target, stop putting the food on the target, and begin giving the food from your hand once the dog has gone to his target position. Remember to always release your dog with a specific command to finish climbing once he has assumed his position at the target. I say, *O.K.*, *Climb* to release the dog to go over the equipment.

The up contact, just like the down contact, needs constant reinforcement and training throughout your competition career. Choose a specific technique, be consistent, and reward the desired behavior often, and your dog will have a clear understanding of the job he must perform. 🐾

Editors' Note: This article was originally published in the USDAA Dog Agility Report.