

Teaching Weaves Using Channels and Guides

By Nancy Gyes



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The channel-and-guide (wire) method of weave pole training is a reliable one used by thousands of handlers and dogs around the world—and for some teams it is the easiest to learn. In my variation of the technique, I use a combination of guide wires and x-pen panels with the channel. The x-pens are eventually set in a square pattern around the poles as shown in **Figure 1**. This closed “fence” prevents your dog from making a mistake when you introduce the poles and it allows the dog full range of motion of his legs as he drives through the poles.

I recently used this method to teach my youngest dog, Panic, and I have included the approximate time schedule I used for his training. Because the method requires intense immersion, I did not plan to start my weave training until I knew that I could dedicate time to practice twice a day for at least three weeks. If you cannot practice that often, or you have a dog that tires quickly or gets bored easily, it will take longer. Every dog learns at a different rate and has a different training history with its handler.

What You Need Before Getting Started

Equipment Required

- **12 channel weave poles**—The poles must be able to be offset by at least 4" and you must be able to move them closer together in 1/2" or 1" increments. They must also stay in position after being adjusted.
- **10 weave pole guide wires**

- **4 eight-panel exercise pens**—The height is unimportant, though I normally use 24" high pens. The x-pens should be high enough to encourage the dog not to jump out.

Note: If you have a tiny dog, you can use just one x-pen on each side, plus two extra panels to make up the additional gates as in **Figure 2**. Another option is to use short garden rickrack fencing to make your pens.

- **Additional hardware for securing the x-pen panels**—If you have a powerful dog that is going to push on the x-pens, you can tie the corners of the x-pen panels to the poles or cut pieces of double-sided Velcro to strap each panel to the corresponding pole.

Minimum Groundwork Required

Before I start any weave pole training, I have already taught the dog some basics:

- **Obedience**—Your dog can reliably come, heel, sit, down, and stay.
- **Handling tolerance**—Your dog enjoys being touched, even “scruffed,” as part of play.
- **Comfort with crates or pens**—You will be using x-pens and wires, which resemble cages and pens.
- **Toy-target training**—Your dog will run excitedly to an object like a toy or a Tug ‘N Treat.

- **Tug and play**—Your dog likes to play with you, or is highly food-motivated.
- **Ready, Steady, Go**—You have some words and actions that excite your dog that you use for training.

Avoid Mistakes

To avoid mistakes in your weave training, keep the following in mind:

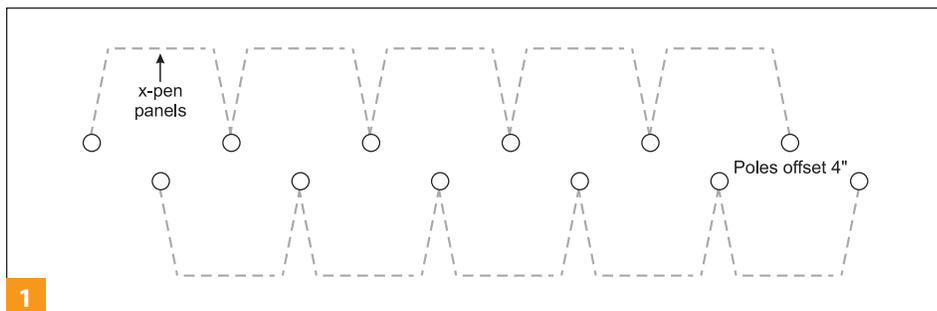
- **Get rid of the aids quickly**—Using wires, x-pens, and offset poles for more than a few months is *too long*. Many handlers start a dog when he is barely six months old on channel poles, with or without wires. Because they are in no hurry with this young dog, they leave the channels open and/or wires on sometimes as long as six months to a year. Now the dog is dependent on the aids (wires and channels), and it is difficult to wean the dog off the channels and wires and get him to weave independently.
- **Be consistent with aid removal**—Follow the instructions on how to remove wires, or at least record your own method that you will follow. Don't advance with removal of wires or closing of the poles if you are not thrilled with the dog's skill level.
- **Don't start too young**—Don't start weave pole training with your dog before you have done some groundwork, your dog is old enough to use his body confidently, and he has developed some overall athletic ability and balance.

Step 1: Basic Movement

Setup

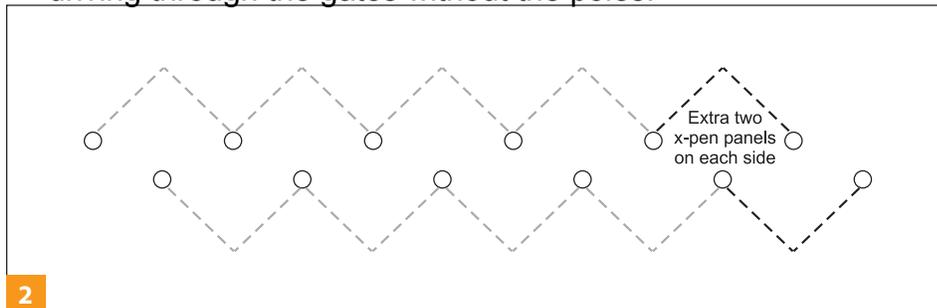
Set up 12 poles offset by at least 4"-5" in an area where you have a good approach to all sides of the weave poles from a minimum distance of 20'. Place x-pens all along on one side of the poles as shown in **Figure 3**. On the opposite side of the poles, set up x-pens around just the last two poles. I usually start training with the dog on my left side. This means that the full set of x-pens would be on the left side of the poles as illustrated.

Make sure you set your poles and x-pens up correctly for the dog to enter with his left shoulder at the first weave pole.

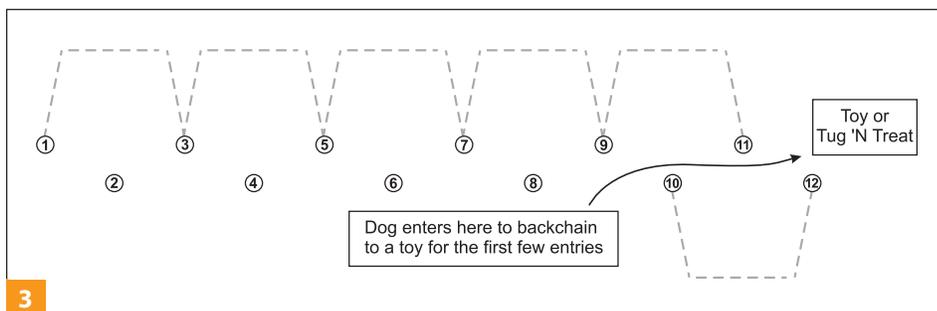


1

Don't place the poles into the pens until the dog is driving through the gates without the poles.



2



3



What Age to Start Weave Training

I never start weave training until a dog is at least one year of age, and his body and brain are developed. For mid-sized dogs like Border Collies, one year of age has been my rule. For large or giant breeds, I wait a bit longer. Even for small dogs, which mature physically at an earlier age, it is not a good idea to push the one-year starting age. Some dogs are only achieving total body balance by that age.

I start a physically-developed dog that is ready to work the poles in a "one-foot" method. That is to make only one step, with one foot on each side of the pole base. It looks like a dog is swimming through the poles, not hopping side to side with both front feet together on the same side. This is possible for many medium- to large-sized dogs and some long-bodied smaller dogs. For small dogs, the style looks similar but is not "one footing" since the distance between the poles is too great for most small dogs to one-foot. Small dogs need to use both feet on one side of the poles with a crossover step at each gate. Nevertheless, you can still expect them to have a running style with a lowered head position, and they'll move through the poles in close to a straight line.

I try to teach poles to a dog as quickly as I can, training incrementally each and every day until the dog has a clear understanding of the job. It has not taken longer than one month to teach my last four dogs to weave. That is, to begin with some sort of aids (or lure and guide) to a finished product of the dog's weaving on both sides of me, going away from me, weaving toward me, and weaving with at least 10' of lateral distance. If training can be accomplished in such a short period, I feel no need to rush to get started.

Training

You are going to backchain the poles, one gate at a time.

Show your dog the setup and guide him to the entry, which because of the x-pen setup is between pole #9 and #10 (see Figure 3). Throw your toy or Tug 'N Treat to the end of the poles, get your dog excited, and release him to the toy.

After a couple of repetitions, if the dog is eagerly driving to get to the toy, open up more x-pen panels on the right side of the poles so that your weave entry is now between poles #7 and #8 (see Figure 4).

Keep backchaining by adding x-pen panels until you have all the panels in place (see Figure 1). Continue throwing the toy to the end of the weaves and releasing the dog to run through the poles to the toy.

If your dog is not comfortable in the poles or keeps jumping out of the pens, go back a step. When your dog will confidently stay in the poles and drive to the toy, continue backchaining.

Step 2: Adding More Difficulty

Now begin adding speed and distance to the poles while they are in this configuration (that is, x-pens on both sides of the poles). Work through each of these exercises:

- Send and run with your dog into the poles from at least 10'-20' away every time you practice
- Do a different entry and exit each time you practice
- Change your position every pass through the poles
- Do all the "round-the-clock" entries—don't forget rear crosses at the entry
- Practice different exits from the poles: front crosses to obstacles, running by the end of the poles, pushes to obstacles
- Put lateral distance between you and the dog
- Send the dog ahead of you to his toy
- Do recalls through the poles
- Add a jump/tunnel before the weaves within a day or two
- Add complexity to the obstacle(s) in front of the poles (straight and curved lines into poles)

Note: You'll add this complex handling skill work at each step in your weave pole training before progressing to the next step.

As soon as dog has the desired weaving style and is traveling through the poles/x-pen setup as fast as you think he is capable, time your poles, record the speed, and move on to the next step.

With Panic I did 40 sets of poles over two days with the x-pens: 10 sets in the morning and 10 sets in the evening for two days.

Step 3: Adding the Wires

The goal is to add weave pole wires and fade the x-pens.

Setup

Install the 10 weave pole guide wires on the poles inside of the x-pens as shown in Figure 5.

Training

Time the poles. If the dog does the poles at the same speed as he did at the end of Step 2, leave the wires and x-pens set up this way for 20 repetitions (one day). If, however, the dog is slower with the wires on, take off the wires on one side as shown in Figure 6. Time the dog's performance again. If the dog is still slow or worried about the wires, remove all but one wire. Over a couple of days, attach one wire at a time, then check your time again. If the speed is still *much* slower, try a higher level of motivation or consider using a different weave training technique.

Once all the wires are on and the dog is traveling through the poles at the desired speed, remove the x-pens over the next 20 repetitions (one day). Starting on one side of the poles, move the x-pens slightly off the wires, in small increments, until they are just a flat wall behind the wires as shown in Figure 7. Once you have removed the x-pens from one side, repeat the process to remove the x-pens from the other side of the poles.

Time your poles with the wires and record the speed. If it is exactly the same as your speed with the x-pens, move to the next step.

Make sure you can do all the different handling maneuvers in Step 2 that you were capable of performing with the x-pens on.

Step 4: Removing the Wires

Start with all of the wires positioned between the dog's hock and shoulder height.

Over the next 40 repetitions (two days), remove *one pair* of wires (a wire from each side, but not necessarily in the same spot). To accomplish this, do the following:

- Gradually lower the wires to the ground—lower the wires by 1/2" every two repetitions of the poles.
- Open up the wires—take off only one end of each wire, leaving the other end of the wire attached to each pole.
- Remove the wires, one at a time.

Start with the wires at pole #5 and pole #8 as shown in Figure 8. Repeat this procedure to remove another pair of wires over the next 40 repetitions. Continue until you have removed all of the wires (10 days):

- Pole #3 and pole #10
- Pole #4 and pole #7
- Pole #6 and pole #9
- Pole #1 and pole #11
- Pole #12
- Final wire removal at pole #2

If the dog skips out at any time, put the wire back on in that location for another day, and then try to remove it again.

Time the weave pole performance (with all wires off, x-pens off, poles still offset by at least 4"-5"). The dog's speed should be the same as it was with the wires on. And, and don't forget your entry/exit and handling drills!

As you train, look for:

- Dog's head position lowered (driving through poles)
- Slalom position with single footing if dog is physically able (larger dogs)

Step 5: Bringing the Poles Closer Together

- Bring poles closer together—3" apart
- Put all wires back on
- Position wires at hock height
- Remove wires by working through the same process as in Step 4
- Practice all the handling and entry/exit drills that you started in Step 2

Time the poles. Do not progress to the next level until dog's speed is almost the same as at the previous level.

Step 6: Continuing to Close the Poles

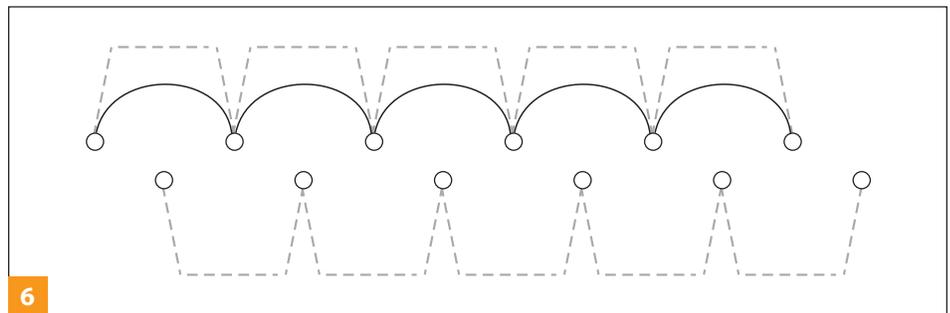
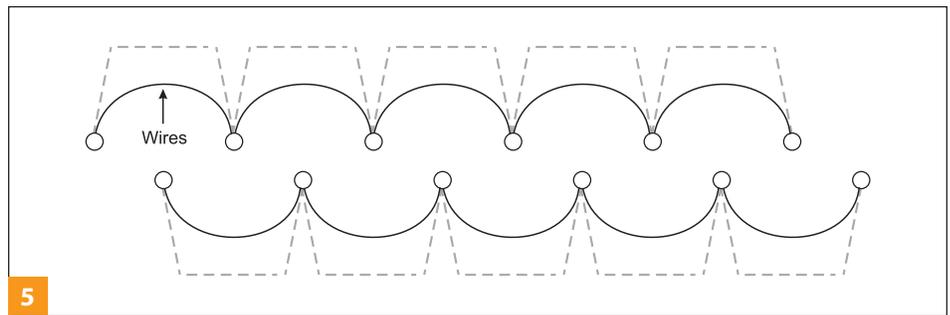
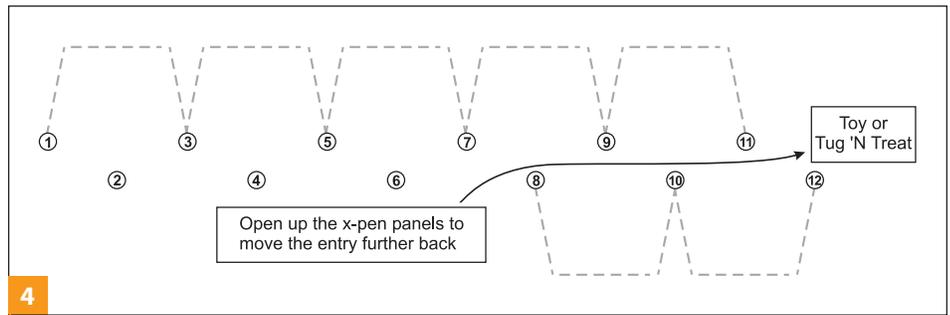
- Bring poles closer together—2" apart
- Put all wires back on
- Position wires at hock height
- Remove wires by working through the same process as in Step 4
- Practice all the handling and entry/exit drills that you started in Step 2

Time the poles. Do not attempt to close the poles any more until dog's speed is almost the same as at the previous level.

At least once a week you should be able to reduce the channel width between the poles. If you cannot practice consistently each day, however, the time it takes you to close the poles will be longer.

If your dog's speed through the poles on an open channel is 2.0 to 2.3 seconds, your goal time for closed weaves will be about 3.0 seconds. If your dog can travel through the open channels at about 1.6 to 1.8 seconds, your goal time for weaves should be as low as 2.3 to 2.5 seconds.

Continue this process until the poles are in a straight line and the dog's speed and style through the weaves is still optimal. At this point, you are ready for advanced weave pole training. 🐾



you may be more successful pulling the gates off the poles as shown by the red line. Keep the pen attached to the first pole.

