

# Staying at the Start

By Nancy Gyes

**Question:** My dog normally has a great stay, except when we get to the agility course. In weekly training sessions, I can lead out several obstacles. When we get to a show, however, he almost always breaks the stay before I lead out to where I want to be to release him.

You mean: He almost always breaks the stay before you lead out to where you want to be to release him, and then you run forward, *chasing* him around the course, reinforcing that he was correct in leaving before you called him. This is a common problem for driven dogs that can't wait to get on course, and for dogs who have been taught by their handlers that normal *Stay* commands mean absolutely nothing once they get to a trial!

To begin with, you need to train a stay in every conceivable environment and with many distractions away from agility. I like to train stays in the location where I think the dog is *least* likely to be able to perform the job. After I have established the stay there, the start-line stay should be a piece of cake. For one of my dogs, that meant doing a sit-stay at the swimming pool while all the other dogs were swimming. For some dogs, it might be when you open the door to the backyard and all the other dogs fly out to chase squirrels, and the dog with the issue has to sit-stay for a few minutes while all his friends are running around frantically. For your couch potato dog, it might be doing a sit- or stand-stay in the middle of your bed.

Think hard and choose the situation in which you can *guarantee*, right now, that your dog will *not* do a sit-stay (except at the start line). Train that situation, beginning on leash, until you have a 100% reliable stay.

Now use what you have learned in these situations to help you train the start line in agility practice situations. You have to let your dog go wrong away from a trial so that you can train out the problem. Get your dog hyped up in agility class—wind him up with a toy, or by letting him watch other dogs do agility, or, better yet, do some relay races. Then get ready to start a practice sequence. I walk to the place where I want to leave the dog, command *Sit, Stay*, leave, reach the point where I will call my dog, turn and praise, and *then* give the release word. If the dog leaves before my release command, I take him back and repeat the stay exercise, but he definitely doesn't get to do agility this time. To get to do agility, the dog has to stay without moving from the *first* command. In a class situation, I let the next dog in line do the exercise, and then the stay-breaker gets another try at the exercise. If he stays, he gets to do the drill; if not, he might lose his turn entirely.

At a competition, I take my dog's leash off at the ring gate and heel my high-drive dog into the ring. My philosophy is: If you can't get to the start line off-leash, how are you ever going to get around the ring off-leash with a clean run? On the start line, I walk away from the dog as if he has the best stay on the planet, with confidence and a brisk step. Backing away from your dog, or repeating the *Stay* command, only reminds the dog that you are *not* in control of the situation. I turn and face the dog, smile, breathe, praise the dog from a distance, and then use a verbal release command without moving any part of my body. I technically put myself into neutral. The only signal that my dogs are allowed to move on is a verbal *Okay*. I watch the dog jump the first jump without moving, and then I begin running with the dog.

Most handlers give a physical signal and verbal cue to the dog that he can move off the line. If you do so, you will be teaching your dog that a physical cue is what he should look for as a release command. A bright dog will figure out after very few repetitions what the physical cue is, and he will simply move as soon as he sees it coming. He is not really wrong; you have



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taught him very well what the cues are and he is simply responding to your teaching. If you taught your dog to sit on a verbal *Sit* and a hand signal given simultaneously, wouldn't you be happy when the dog anticipated the *Sit* command when you started to lift your hand? He would be a "good dog" and oh, so very bright. Why would he be wrong to have learned that when his handler walks out 15' and turns to face him (the physical signal and cue), that he is then to leave the line? Add to his confusion by beginning to run immediately when he takes off (the reward) and you will have accomplished teaching him to leave on the minimum of physical cues, such as your starting to look over your shoulder at him, or beginning to raise your hand for a jump signal.

You will need to repair this damage and "unteach" this behavior. What would happen if you simply stood there silently when he broke the line? Most dogs will immediately come to a halt when they realize you aren't coming along.

You need to train this in a schooling situation if you don't want to throw away a lot of money on shows. Going to practice matches if they are available, dropping in on different trainers' classes, setting up equipment at the park with friends, and pretending it is a show situation can help. Make sure you are not adding to the problems by turning into a frantic, out-of-control handler when you get to the show, and especially just before your class. Stay calm at the start and do what you do in training. Trust your dog and believe he will stay. Get to the show early and train *many* stays before you ever get to the ring.

Consult a canine behaviorist if you can't solve the problem on your own. Dogs that don't stay at the start usually have other training issues going on in everyday life. These may need to be solved before you get a handle on your start-line stay. Our resident behaviorist and obedience instructor, Rachel Sanders, sees many of my students for start-line problems. I use her techniques for teaching sit-stays with my own dogs. 🐾

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