



Foundations for Dog Sports Class

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA

When I was asked to teach a Foundations for Dog Sports class at my training club, there were no prerequisites and no curriculum for the class. I had a few ideas about what I wanted to teach but planned on using the first night to gauge the skill level of the dogs and handlers, and learn what each team's goals were. I wound up with quite a range of students, from younger pups with very experienced handlers already competing in sports with their older dogs to dogs and handlers brand new to any kind of training, who did not bring treats and had never heard of a clicker. Needless to say it was not the smoothest class, but it was certainly a learning experience! If a sport foundations class is something you are considering bringing to your club, there may be a bit of a transition period during which you will figure out where it fits in with the classes already offered, but I do think that it is extremely beneficial once it is worked into the class structure properly.

In subsequent sessions I got better at figuring out how to modify the exercises so that dogs of varying skill levels could benefit, and what kinds of prerequisites were needed so that the class would be manageable and beneficial for everyone. Each class is a bit different, and the order of exercises or amount of time spent on each will vary depending on the group, but as with anything, you will learn how to make it run smoothly once you get used to the specific needs and challenges of the particular class.

Each club is unique in terms of what classes are offered and what is taught in each, which means that where the dogs are coming from and heading toward will be slightly different. The sports I often mention and use as examples when discussing particular skills are:

Agility
Flyball
Rally
Disc
Freestyle
Obedience

Requirements for entry:

- Vet clearances consistent with the other classes at the club. There are no specific requirements for being physically fit, etc., because we will not be doing full height obstacle work or asking the dogs for anything too physically taxing.
- Experience with clicker training (handlers have taught and dogs have learned a few simple behaviors using marking and rewarding).
- Previous experience working in a group setting with other dogs.

There is no age limit in this class because the obstacles are not at full height and there will not be any demanding physical exercises. Most dogs who come into the class

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are at least one year old because the prerequisite classes prevent very young dogs from enrolling.

I do not care if the handler has knowledge of sports or a specific sport in mind. It is important to me that the concepts and skills taught in the class and the training relationship developed will be beneficial to everyone, even if they never pursue sports.

I teach this class in a 1300 square foot facility, with one training assistant. We have up to eight dogs in the class at a time.

My goals by the end of the session:

- Dogs who are focused, and eager to learn and work with their handlers.
- Handlers with good mechanical skills and knowledge of how their dog is best set up for success, as well as awareness of and management options for any areas of difficulty for their dog.
- Teams who are able to begin work on complex skills, often off-leash, with distractions.

The curriculum for this class is varied, but the general concepts I want to make sure we cover include:

- Crate training
- Focus/attention
- Impulse control
- Body/spatial awareness in relation to the environment and the handler

There are a number of exercises geared toward learning these main concepts, and toward the end of class the dogs should be using actual obstacles and games to start more advanced work applying the basic concepts introduced throughout the session.

Cratework

Goal: dog is confident and comfortable in the crate and views it as a place of rest and relaxation.

One of the key concepts we go over in class is that dogs are most successful in competition if they are mentally and physically prepared, and not stressed, exhausted, over-stimulated or anxious. One of the most important skills I believe all dogs can have, especially dogs who will be travelling to different venues for competition is the ability to be relaxed and comfortable in a crate, regardless of the environment. Not only are crates a safe way to transport dogs and confine them when you cannot be walking around with them, they are also a great way to give your dog a safe spot and a mental break.

When I introduce the idea of “cratework” I often feel some disappointment from students whose “dogs are great in the crate at home.” Many students had visions of their dogs running through tunnels and flying over

jumps on the first night, so crate training (not to mention many of the focus and attention exercises) seems boring to them. I always explain the importance of each exercise and give an example of how it will be useful. I do a bit of cratework every night for a short time and I also try to mix up more “fun and exciting” exercises in between some of the ones that seem less interesting.

- The same steps for crate training at home are applied; many dogs will need to learn in the new location as if it is their first time. Going at a pace that is appropriate for the dog is crucial.
- In addition to normal crate training I also encourage “crate waits” where the dog does not exit the crate until verbally released even when the door is open.
- Handler rewards the dog for remaining calm with distractions outside the crate until the dog is able to remain calm regardless of the environment and while the handler is at a distance.
- I also discuss selecting the proper crate, interactive toys/ food inside the crate, crate covers and considerations for where to put your crate.

Focus/Attention Exercises

Location changes

Goal: to make handlers mindful about helping their dogs move through the environment and staying engaged with their dogs, encouraging the dog to focus on handler even between exercises.

This is not so much a specific exercise, but rather something I discuss with the students. I want them to remember to reward their dogs for remaining attentive even when just walking toward another part of the building or a piece of equipment, and certainly past other dogs/people. I tell them to reinforce at whatever rate is necessary to keep their dog on a loose leash, even if in the beginning that means letting the dog eat out of their hands consistently as they move from one area to another or past something their dog is particularly interested in. This concept is automatically incorporated when obstacles are set up in the room and dogs are rotating between them, but during exercises where the students could work anywhere, I will still call out “location change” so that they can practice this before they are trying to do it around obstacles.

Eye contact

Goal: dog defaults to eye contact whenever s/he wants something, without a lure of food in the handler's face.

- Hold a treat out to the side of body and wait for the dog to make eye contact. Click/treat when dog's eyes meet handler's eyes (for dogs who have a harder time taking their eyes off the food, wait for them to look anywhere other than the food and gradually shape eye contact).

- Vary where the food is held and also use toys or anything else the dog wants to look at.
- If a dog has a strong enough sit- or down-stay, handler can toss a toy/treat away from the dog in his stay position, wait for the dog to offer eye contact, and then release him/her to get the toy. If the stay is not yet strong enough, a toy/treat can be tossed beyond the length of the leash, and when the dog offers eye contact, allowed access to the item.
- Handlers can also reward eye contact with a treat followed by access to a tossed item. It is good to vary the source (handler's hand versus floor) and type of reinforcement (food versus toy; sometimes the dog gets the original item, sometimes a different reward, sometimes both).

Entering/exiting new areas (a good exercise to do when dogs are readily offering eye contact)

Goal: dog orients to handler whenever they enter a new environment or cross a threshold.

- Set up a few different boxes with ring gates and also use the entrance to the building.
- Have students allow the dogs to pass through the threshold/entrance but then stand still once they enter and wait for the dog to orient to them.
- Click and treat for orientation/eye contact and then move with the dog so s/he can explore the area if desired.

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Leash unclips/take a break

Goal: dog views the leash coming off as a sign that the handler will become fun, not a cue to take off. Dog chooses handler over environment.

- This exercise is best done in a small confined area without many distractions; a box made of ring gates is perfect.
- Unclip the leash and then jackpot the dog regardless of what s/he does, with handfuls of treats either directly into the dog's mouth or on the floor at the handler's feet. A toy is also great if the dog is interested in playing.
- Before the dog disengages, the handler tells the dog "ok, go" to signify that the dog may go explore/sniff. Handler rewards the dog heavily when the dog returns. Repeat.

Open bar/closed bar and rate of reinforcement

Goal: handlers become aware of environmental changes and distractions and compete with the environment by upping their rate of reinforcement. Dogs begin to predict that distractions in the environment mean their handlers become generous.

- I approach the dog and handler while they are working on another exercise and come close or make some interesting noises ("what a pretty dog, hi sweeeetie!"). Handler increases rate of reinforcement so that dog remains focused despite the temptation of directing attention toward me.
- I walk another dog near working teams and they adjust rate of reinforcement as necessary.
- Teams practice heeling past each other, increasing the rate of reinforcement when they are closest to other teams (bumper cars!).
- When dogs are good at staying on a mat I will play open bar/closed bar and have the handler only reinforce when a distraction comes close to the mat.

Recalls

Goal: dog is eager to come when called.

- I often practice this exercise behind a partition one at a time while other students practice cratework.
- I begin with restrained recalls by holding the dog myself by a leash/collar/harness and having the owner show them a handful of treats or swing a toy and then run. When I see the dog is looking at the handler and eager to move toward them, I release. Eventually we also practice having the dog loose in the environment without being held. Keeping the environment small (partitioning with gates) and boring is important to set the dog up to succeed.

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- Handler rewards dog lavishly, then grabs the collar while continuously rewarding, and then releases the collar, still rewarding.

Impulse Control

Toy play/tug

Goal: to have an additional reward that is a bit more exciting and promotes play with the handler. Also begin discussion about arousal and stimulation and how much is helpful versus too much.

- I usually begin this exercise at the end of one of the first nights of class as an additional reward for having worked through the class. It also lets me gauge the play drive of each dog and whether s/he is comfortable enough in the building to play.
- Handlers try to engage the dogs with the toys. Small tosses or quickly moving the toy along the floor are often good ways to get the dogs interested.
- Once dogs are playing, students offer the dog food in order to trade for the toy and see if the dog will go back and forth between food and play, or if they become solely focused on one or the other.
- Students get the toy back (trade for food or just try to capture it when the dog lets go) and then ask for something simple like a sit, and reward by delivering the toy. Special attention is paid to whether the dog is able to concentrate on performing cues after being aroused through play.
- Students whose dogs are not interested in toys are encouraged to make up some games by tossing food.

Drop it/get it

Goal: to develop cues so that handlers can dole out play as they desire and to make sure games are under control and safe.

- Handlers get dogs tugging and pull on the tug, creating tension and talking to their dogs in playful voices, then suddenly become still and quiet. When dogs eventually release the toy, even to re-grip or

sniff it, handlers mark and reward by immediately re-engaging in active tugging with the dog.

- As dogs get better at releasing the toy when the handler cues a break through body language (pausing from play), handlers begin to say “drop it” along with the body language cue, and “get it” just after marking the release in order to re-engage in play. Gradually handlers build more time between drop it and get it, and begin to move the toy around before allowing the dog to bite the toy, as well as removing the toy from the dogs’ reach if they attempt to grab the toy before they’re told to get it.
- If the dog is able to go back and forth between food and play, another option is to trade with food. Handlers put food near the dog’s nose and then mark and feed when the dog spits the toy out. Handlers begin to say “drop it” as the hand with food approaches and gradually work away from showing the dog the food, instead using the verbal cue and rewarding with food after the dog has released the toy.

Anticipation games

Goal: to build drive for toys while also proofing the behavior of waiting until invited to bite the toy.

- Handlers hold toy and say “ready, set, go” and then “get it” (exact cues are up to the handler) until dog begins to understand that “ready, set, go” precedes play.
- Handlers gradually make the toy more exciting during the “ready, set, go” and remove the toy if the dog grabs for it before being told to “get it.”

Stays

Goal: to introduce higher level distractions for proofing stays.

- Handlers ask dogs to stay. Exact position (sit, down, etc.) is optional and practicing each position is encouraged.
- Handlers work up to throwing food, tossing toys, running and clapping, etc.

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- Handlers are encouraged to sometimes reward dogs in the stay and then release them without additional rewards, and sometimes release them to the reward (such as a tossed toy). Value is sometimes placed on the stay itself (when dog is rewarded during stay), and sometimes placed on the release from stay (when released to get the reward), because exploding out of a stay can be helpful in sports (for example, release from a pause table).

Leave it

Goal: dogs are able to come away from something they were moving toward.

- Handlers hold food in a closed fist and click and reward the dog for moving their head away from the fist. When behavior is reliable, the cue “leave it” is added as the dog moves toward the fist. Gradually handlers use an open hand, food on the floor, tossed food, etc.
- Handlers vary between
 - o rewarding with the item being left.
 - o rewarding with another item followed by access to the item being left.
 - o rewarding with another item in a direction away from item being left in order to have the dog forget about what s/he left.

** I intentionally have students practice stays with potent distractions just before leave-its in order to demonstrate the difference between remaining still and not moving toward a distraction (stay) and coming away from a distraction the dog is already moving toward (leave it).*

Body Awareness and Spatial Awareness (Location vs. Position)

Nose target

Goal: dogs are able to touch something with their noses regardless of the location of the object.

- Handlers hold a target (e.g., a lid from a container) in their hand and present it to the dog, click and treat when dog touches with his/her nose.
- Handlers hold the target still and dogs show understanding by touching the target without being prompted (i.e., be sure handlers are no longer wiggling the target or moving it toward the dog to get the nose touch).
- Handlers hold targets on the ground and gradually remove their hands from the target until the dog nose-touches the target without the handler holding or motioning toward the target.
- Handlers vary the location of the target and increase distance.

Body target (go to mat/place)

Goal: dogs are able to place themselves on a mat regardless of the location of the mat.

- Handlers put mat on the floor and click and treat the dog (the reward should be placed on the mat) any time the dog orients to or shows interest in the mat (sniffing, moving toward, or looking at the mat are all good first steps).
- Handlers move dog away from mat and let the dog move back toward the mat and mark and reward by tossing or placing food on the mat whenever the dog orients to the mat.
- Handlers gradually shape the dog to lie down on the mat and stay, varying the placement of the mat in relation to themselves.

Hind-end awareness, pivot

Goal: dogs become aware of their hind ends through moving their back legs independently from their front legs.

- Handlers encourage dogs to “perch” on an object (such as an upside-down food bowl) with their front feet and then reward continuously for remaining in position.
- Handlers encourage dogs to turn while perched so that they must pivot without moving their front feet off of the object. Dogs are clicked and rewarded any time a hind leg moves.
- Gradually dogs are able to pivot in a full circle by moving their hind legs while only moving front feet minimally as they are stabilized on the perch object.

Body Awareness in Relation to Handler’s Body

Get-in/heeling

Goal: dogs are able to walk alongside handlers on the left (Rally or obedience) or the right (heeling on both sides is encouraged for agility, freestyle, etc.).

- Handlers stand still while luring the dog into “heel” position at the side and then reinforce continuously while standing still in position (dog can sit or stand).
- Handlers begin to move, holding their hand or a target out if necessary and clicking and rewarding continuously any time the dog is in the “sweet spot,” which is the area where the handler has decided s/he wants the dog to heel.
- Handlers and dogs move together and incorporate turns and changes in speed.
- Shaping heeling is also encouraged through turning and changing direction while walking with dogs.

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Get out – practicing beginning handling

Goal: dog is able to leave handler to go around an object such as a cone or jump standard.

- Handler stands with a cone right in front of her (with no room for the dog to pass between handler and cone) with the dog at her side, and leans away from the dog. Dog is rewarded for moving around the cone in the direction the handler is leaning. Handler’s body movement is usually enough to induce the dog to move in the desired direction. If not, a hand target can be used. Repeat on the other side.
- Gradually the handler moves farther from the cone while the dog still goes around the far side of the cone to get to the opposite side of the handler.
- Handlers begin to pay attention to their body language by motioning toward the cone with the right arm if the dog is starting on the right and vice versa. Handlers are also beginning to think about which hand they are rewarding the dog from and which direction they are facing when the dog returns.



Beginning Obstacles

As I mentioned above, these exercises are good to intersperse with the less exciting ones, to keep class engaging.

Travel boards

Goal: dog is able to confidently walk along a plank.

- Handlers reward dogs for any contact with the plank, eventually shaping the dog to step on it with all four feet.
- Handlers move with or lure dogs to walk while standing on plank.
- Nose targets may be placed at the end of the plank and handlers may begin to teach “two-on, two-off” if that is their eventual desired contact behavior.

Wobble boards

Goal: dogs are comfortable with something moving underneath them.

- Handler rewards dog for any contact with board until dog will put his/her whole body on the board.
- Handler eventually only rewards dog for contact/movements that cause the board to rock or shift.
- Gradually increase from boards that barely wobble to ones that really rock, or modified (low) teeters.

Tunnels

Goal: dog is able to be sent through a straight or curved tunnel without being held or lured.

- Tunnel is closed so that it is very short. One person holds dog on one side while handler crouches down on the other side and calls the dog through the tunnel.
- Once the dog is comfortable going through the tunnel, the handler sends the dog through without another person holding him/her by motioning or tossing something through the tunnel. It is fine for the handler to begin by holding the dog by the collar/harness just outside the tunnel and dropping a reward on the other side.
- Gradually the tunnel is stretched out to full length, and then eventually curved.

Low jump

Goal: dogs learn how to jump over a slightly raised bar and handlers continue to consider handling skills.

- Handler stands against the jump standard with the dog on one side and leans toward the other side (picture the get-out, only now with another standard and a bar pointing straight away from the handler). Dog is clicked for jumping and food is tossed on the floor on the landing side of the jump. Repeat in both directions.
- Gradually handler varies body position and practices motioning toward the jump with dog on either side.

Beginning Mini-Games

These exercises are especially rewarding for handlers.

Calling and sending

Goal: dog is able to move away from handler or return to handler despite the distraction of another dog playing the same game at an appropriate distance.

- Two handlers stand a short distance away from a mat or crate and practice sending their dog to the body target and/or recalling the dogs from a stay on the body target (often gates are used in between dogs when we first begin this exercise).
- Gradually the handlers can increase distance from themselves and the body target and decrease distance between working pairs.
- Game should be played with all variations:
 - o both dogs are sent.
 - o both dogs are called.
 - o one dog is sent while the other is called.

Mini-course races

Goal: a fun game to give the teams a sense of accomplishment. Often played on the last night of class.

- A few obstacles are set in a straight line and the dogs begin in a stay and are then encouraged to perform the sequence of obstacles (example: dog starts in crate then goes to plank, tunnel, mat, jump).
- Handlers pay attention to where they are in relation to their dog, frequency of reinforcement, anticipation from stays, etc.
- Competition is introduced as teams are encouraged to complete the sequence quickly. Sequences can be performed alongside another team or timed if performed one at a time.

In Conclusion

Depending on the skill level, needs, and goals of each team and the chemistry of the class, the exercises can all be done to varying degrees of fluency and in different orders. I have found that certain exercises work really

well when splitting the class up, both in terms of making use of space (one dog practices recalls while the others practice cratework) as well as using some exercises to facilitate others (dogs practicing heeling can be used as stimuli during open bar/closed bar for dogs on mats).

Each class should be catered to the needs and the skill level of the students. Emphasis should not be placed on the actual behaviors involved in the sports (which will be taught in later classes) but on creating a functioning team where the dog and handler feel confident and comfortable staying connected and working together through whatever task they set out to achieve.

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA, began training professionally in 2007 and has continued to expand her knowledge and expertise through experience and education and close relationships with other professionals in her field. Marisa teaches and trains at Y2K9's dog sports club and also runs her own small business, "Philly Dog Training." She lives in Philadelphia with her three dogs and usually a foster dog from the PSPCA.



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