



# IT'S YOUR TURN!

## CUE #3: THE FRONT CROSS —PART 1

By Sandy Rogers, photos by Laura Tsuk  
except where noted

The front cross is a turn the handler makes in front of the dog in order to change sides. Front and rear crosses are the meat and potatoes of agility handling, yet many handlers strongly prefer one over the other. This is because they typically find themselves either ahead or behind their dog on a regular basis. The trouble comes when the handler is not in that familiar spot and has to execute the cross that is not in her comfort zone. I think every dog deserves a handler who can execute both the front and rear cross well. Here I'm going to encourage you to do what it takes to get some killer front crosses into your bag of tricks.

### THE SUCCESSFUL FRONT CROSS

When all is said and done your front cross should have accomplished the following:

- Put you on the other side of the dog's path
- Put you on the correct path to the next obstacle
- Created an opportunity for your dog to accelerate, or told your dog to collect and turn tightly

What do you need to achieve this goal?

- Consistent cues to produce well-trained behaviors
- A dog that has already learned the lack of motion cue
- A training program to routinely strengthen the behavior
- Strong understanding of the lines of the course
- Ability to identify where the turns are on the course
- Good timing
- The physical ability to turn correctly while moving

### TWINKLE TOES

I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard a handler tell me that she hates front crosses. If you do agility, hating front crosses is on par with hating to draw breath. You need to be able to do front crosses at least once in a while, so you might as well bite the bullet and learn to do them well.

One reason some folks hate front crosses is the difficulty they have with the mechanics. Turning while running isn't easy for many of us; it takes both balance and coordination. If you are a bit short on either of those skills, there is good news; it is easy to get better at both, really easy. You don't have to transform yourself into a premier athlete; you just have to improve enough to make your front crosses a little bit easier for you. Very little effort will make a significant dif-

ference in your ability and it will increase your confidence as well. There are many trainers and programs to strengthen balance and coordination skills, no matter what your limitations may be. Handlers with bad knees can be taught ways to rotate that will lessen the stress on the joints.

### IT'S ABOUT TIME

The timing of when to start the turn cue is critical. Good timing is directly related to good observation skills. To execute the front cross at the best possible time you must be aware of your and your dog's position at the same time (easier said than done). Strong observation and timing skills don't grow on trees, but just like all other skills they can be developed.

The goal is to have the ability to watch the dog while he is running and react when you know it is the right time to do so. This requires you to be able to focus on exactly where the dog is. Start to teach yourself this observation skill by watching other dogs first, then it will get easier to observe your own dog. It just takes practice. Nancy Gyes taught me the best timing exercise I have ever known. When I got my first very fast dog it was obvious that my reaction time was terrible while handling sequences and course work. Nancy saw that I could not sort it out while doing sequence work. This exercise is what we spent the rest of that lesson working on and it had a huge impact on me. As Brink worked, my only job was to focus on his location in the circle and speak at specific points. The key for me was to watch his front paws.

You need to be able to do front crosses at least once in a while, so you might as well bite the bullet and learn to do them well.

### Handler Timing Drill

Set up a circle of four jumps. The dog should be able to take three to four strides between each jump.

First speak to the dog when he is over the top of each jump, at the apex (highest point of the dog's jumping arc). Next, speak at the halfway point between jumps. Then speak when the dog is landing after the jump, and finally when the dog is planting his front feet on the last stride just before the takeoff to the next jump.

#### Tips

- You can say any word you want (book, car, ice... anything)
- Keep working each step until it feels easy; then try the next step
- Give your dog a break whenever he needs it

Then practice giving a verbal cue or physical turn cues at the correct distance before each jump. Don't give the cue on every jump; vary it.

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## FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

Being able to identify the dog's best path and where the turns are in course work is another skill that takes practice but is totally necessary for successful front crosses. I have two suggestions for you if you think you might not be so good at path and turn placement identification. One is to seek out someone who is good at it and ask that person to teach you. You need to know that this person may not be a great dog trainer. There is even a chance that she may not be a good handler. This skill is based on an understanding of geometry and I have worked with beginner students who are brilliant at seeing the dog's path and seasoned veterans of the sport who struggle with it.

The second suggestion is to draw the dog's path on the printed course maps. Then video a bunch of dogs in your jump height doing that course and see how close your drawing is to what actually happened.

Remember, there will be places where you will need to change the path (like on the approach to the dogwalk for safety reasons) and you might discover that the chosen path is determined by a weakness in your training program (like shaping the entry to the weave poles for a dog with weak entry skills).

## TEACHING THE FRONT CROSS

### Groundwork

The groundwork can be done with puppies and can be done anywhere, anytime. Don't overdo it and bore your dog. You want snappy responses with enthusiasm when you turn.

Simply walk with your dog on either side of you and rotate into the dog. Your in-place turn will put you on the other side of the dog. The dog does nothing but come with you. Reward when the dog gets excited about not missing the turn. Have fun and make a game of it.



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### Add One Jump

I'm going to suggest that you teach your front cross as a physical cue rather than a verbal cue. That means in training you won't be calling your dog before or after the jump (if you do, you are just practicing verbal recalls).

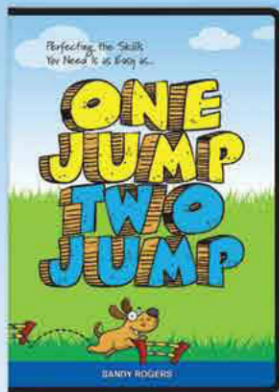
I train two physical cues separately and then I use them both together when needed later. I also add the verbal recall in competition and sequence work whenever needed.

Susan Salo  
Jumping  
DVDs

Just because a dog CAN jump...

doesn't mean that he knows  
HOW to jump.

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The first physical cue is a strong hip rotation given before the dog takes the jump. Start the training by standing at the jump stanchion, facing away from the jump. Both you and the dog are on the takeoff side of the jump. The dog is facing the opposite direction you are; he is facing toward the jump. Tell the dog to take the jump. Because you and the dog are facing opposite directions, your dog may be reluctant to take the jump. You may have to give some strong verbal encouragement to get him to do it. The dog does not have to start on a sit-stay, just pop him over the jump. He will wrap the stanchion and end up on the same side of you that he started on. Use your outside arm to cue and encourage the dog to take the jump; this is the on-side arm if you were facing the same way as your dog to start. Since your hips are rotated your arm is coming across your body. A well-trained verbal *Jump* command comes in handy here. Once your dog will pop over the jump easily with you in this position, this step is complete and you are ready to begin doing the drills.



The second physical cue emphasizes an arm change. I teach it separately from the full hip rotation because I want the dog to know both. If I teach them at the same time I won't really know that he has learned each one.

You and the dog are on the takeoff side of the jump, both facing the jump. You motion for the dog to take the jump with the arm that is closest to the dog (it's okay to use a verbal jump or release cue). Just before the dog jumps bring up your other hand; this is an active motion since you will step and turn slightly as the dog jumps. As the dog lifts to take the jump, finish your front cross and reward.



With both exercises practice rewarding both in a stationary position (beside your leg) as well as throwing a toy or bait bag while you are running away from the jump to keep it fun and get your dog driving out of the turn.

Perfect your front crosses on one jump. Next month we'll work on lead-outs with a front cross as well as tackle two-jump front cross drills. 🐾

*Sandy Rogers has owned and operated ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California, since 1991. Her Border Collie, Brink, finished in the top five placements four times at USDAA Nationals in the Grand Prix and Steeplechase finals. In 2007 he won both the Speed Jumping and Performance National Standard and won Speed Jumping again in 2008. Brink won the Purina Incredible Dog Challenge Regional two years in a row. Her Parson Russell Quill took 3rd in Grand Prix finals in 2008. Sandy's USDAA champions in the 12", 16", and 22" classes are also all high in trial obedience dogs. Contact Sandy at [acedogsports.com](http://acedogsports.com).*