

When Things Go Wrong

By Sandy Rogers



We all want to have a good plan of action when we step to the line to compete or train our dogs; but, no matter how great our plan of action, things can and do go wrong. What we do when the best-laid plans get foiled can have a huge effect on our dogs' training and attitude. The fact is this is yet another area where handler habits get established, for better or worse.

What do you do when the dog blows the poles, drops a bar, blows a contact, runs past a jump, or incurs a refusal? These things happen—and they happen to everyone—but what you do after they happen can be the difference between keeping training fun while facilitating learning or making your dog overly frustrated, a dead end street to learning. Often there is little time to think, so good habits are what you need to rely on. We all spend a lot of time practicing our handling for when things are going right, but we also need to practice the handling we'll use when things go wrong. Not doing what is best for your dog when mistakes happen can result in making what could have been a small error into a much bigger problem or an issue in your training program.

There is much to be gained by knowing what to do when the dog goes wrong. We can

- Make the split-personality types (those that don't run at the same speed all the time) run faster more often.
- Give the over-the-top-crazies a way to keep their brains from oozing further out their ears.
- Give the slow pokes a reason to RUN!
- Prevent those in the middle of the pack from becoming slow pokes or frustrated crazies.
- Make training less frustrating.

You may think I'm only referring to the dog here, but I'm not!

Developing, maintaining, and modifying what you do when your dog goes wrong will benefit your relationship with your dog because it builds trust and understanding instead of creating confusion and frustration for either of you.

Highs and Lows

My advice to handlers when handling errors occur depends on the dog they are handling. What is good for the goose is not always good for the gander, as high-drive dogs and low-drive dogs require a totally different approach. Dogs that can fluctuate between high drive and low drive must have handlers who can adapt to the dog they have that day (or minute). I know that is a huge challenge, but many folks are in that boat. It is truly like handling two different dogs, and lots of people handle more than one dog; it just requires more planning.

If the root of your problem is drive (too much or too little), it will influence the way you fix the error. For example, you may have an over-the-top dog that would benefit from doing a sit and then heeling back to the start when an error is made. No need to scold; all commands should be given in a calming tone and you should stick to your guns to get the response you require. This may engage the dog's brain and help him focus. If he is not proficient at heeling (or, heaven forbid, you can't even get him to sit), asking him to do either in that scenario will make his brain explode even more. You may have to take a real break (leave the sequence for a bit) to get his brains back into his head. I certainly would not be tugging and jacking this dog up any higher. If it is calming for your dog to hold a toy, you may be able to let him use the toy as a pacifier; otherwise, simply switch

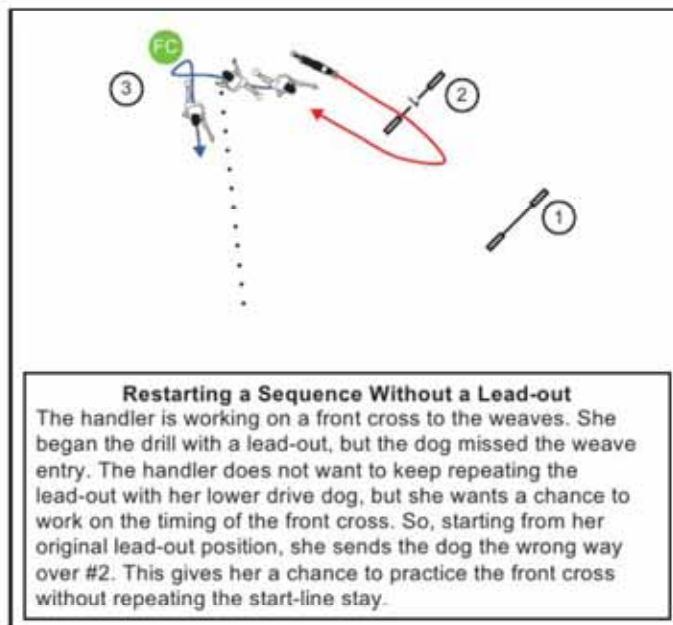
to food, which can be calming. I would try to tone it all down a bit and then invite a thoughtful dog back to earth to continue the session.

If your dog is lower drive I recommend you keep him moving in one easy direction while you're sounding happy and sweet. The object would be that he does not even know there was a mistake made. You train with an upbeat attitude above all else, keeping everything fun and making it all as easy as it can be for him. Simplify everything down to the actual matter at hand and break the work down into easy steps. Sometimes doing a few tricks before going back to "work" can make the world a happier place. Don't rush this dog, let him figure out what you want, one cue at a time.

Making Matters Worse

Knowing what kills and builds drive in dogs will help every handler become a better dog trainer. Here are a few drive killers that directly relate to fixing errors.

- **Start-line stays:** Do they build drive? They do *not* for most dogs; so, if your dog is lower drive, don't fix an error by going back to the start line to do another stay. If the stay is the error, you may need to perfect that behavior outside of agility. My favorite option to avoid doing additional sit-stays is to re-start the drill mid-sequence from the position I want to be in (usually the original lead-out position) and then send the dog back to the last jump I'm past. Yes, the dog ends up taking that jump in the "wrong" direction but I can stay ahead to handle as I had wanted to in the first place and I did not have to ask for another sit-stay.



- **Telling the dog "oops" or "wrong:"** Some dogs work well with these marker words. I am not against them in every scenario, but I use them less and less in my own training. Lower drive dogs often can't handle these "downer" words at all and higher drive dogs sometimes don't care enough for it to matter. If people do use them, avoid having the words sound as peppy, happy, and light-hearted as saying "good dog" would. I value my voice inflection to a very high degree and my dogs know more about being on the right track (or not) because of my voice inflection than my actual words. Your voice inflection for your marker word should not be peppy or scolding.
- **Scolding yourself:** These moans and groans accompanied by a dramatic head throwback are designed to let your classmates and teacher know that you know you made a mistake. But these negative words and sounds are the kiss of death for many dogs. Usually they happen when the dog just took your incorrect cue perfectly well. Stop doing it. It serves no real training purpose. And it is not fair to the dogs. Sorry, this one is a big pet peeve of mine.
- **Overusing line-ups to the leg:** When dogs make mistakes, just stopping the forward momentum is upsetting their apple cart. The stopping often creates a side change if you don't have a plan to immediately pull them around you (see "Making a loop" below) and then you may need another side change (line up to your leg) to set the dog back up to re-start. Many dogs get sick of line-ups or they aren't trained well enough that line-ups are easy for them to execute. Adding line-up into an error in progress can be disaster. If you need to do a line-up to set up your dog again, be sure to take your time and give a clean, clear line-up cue and give the dog a chance to execute the cue. Reward your line-ups! Let your dog know that you know line-ups are not always the most fun (and work hard at home to make line-ups very fun and easy to do whenever you can).
- **Cheerleading to excess:** I know it is designed to keep them pumped up, but cheerleading often results in stress and confusion when piled on top of some errors. Use it like salt in the soup, just enough to improve the flavor but not too much to spoil it. Watch the dog; is your encouragement working or not?

Easy Handling Tips

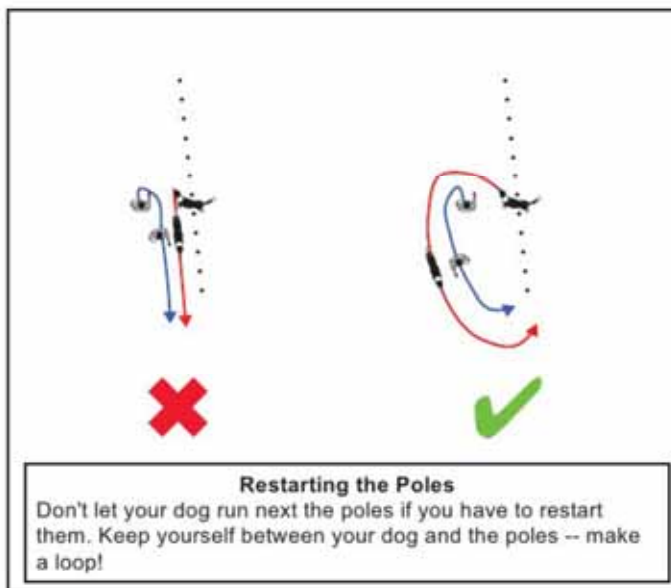
- **Making a loop:** Making big, easy loops is my favorite way to reset the dog after an error. I make a nice easy loop back to the start (how far back depends on how much momentum I need to add or remove for success).

Every dog is different. Experiment with what keeps your dog working nicely after an error is made. The point is to be consistent.

I will take off-course obstacles if they are in the path unless I choose to heel the dog past obstacles with a clear cue, like the one I would use in Snooker. But I don't recommend heeling novice dogs past obstacles, let alone running past them. Novice dogs need to learn to take obstacles when you are running next to them. This is a classic example of how going back to fix a simple little obstacle error can teach the dog the wrong thing. In this case, the dog is learning that sometimes we just chase Mommy (or Daddy) and don't take the silly obstacles. The chase Mommy game is fun, but it can teach dogs to go around obstacles. Make super easy and energetic loops for the lower drive dogs, and controlled and low-key loops for the higher drive dogs. The loop created to reset your dog should not include obstacles that the dog is currently struggling with—don't open another can of worms! Above all else, you are trying to avoid creating more errors or misunderstandings than you already have.

- **Restarting the poles:** Too many handlers rotate into the dog (do a front cross) and then run back to restart with the dog running right next to the poles. Now the dog is learning to run next to the poles instead of do-

ing the poles, a kiss of death for baby dogs. Handlers should keep themselves between the poles and the dog. Make the loop; keep the dog on your original side.



Developing, maintaining, and modifying what you do when your dog goes wrong will benefit your relationship with your dog because it builds trust and understanding instead of creating confusion and frustration for either of you.

LET'S GO DESIGN www.letsgodesign.net
The True 4-Season Convertible Dog Walking Utility Jacket 307.699.3121

Perfect Gift!

Blue
Limited Edition
Sizes: S-XXXL
Also Available in Black & Red

Fully Lined Jacket
Bitter/Cold Weather

Converts into:

Lightweight Shell
Unpredictable Weather

Lightweight Vest
Warm Weather

Fleece Liner Jacket

Fold-In Hood With Visor

Cinch Waist Cord

Lots of Pockets Inside & Out

Belt/Leash With Clips

Coil Key Chain

Special Treat Liner Pocket

Rear Water Bottle Pocket

Extractable Pick-up Bags

Reflective Piping

**Waterproof
Seam Sealed
Wind Resistant
Lots of Pockets**

Using Loops to Reset Your Dog After an Error

You have set up this course to train on. Here are some loops you can do to keep the flow for your dog as you re-attempt obstacles you may have had a problem with.

Dog pops out of the weaves at #7:

- Dog on left: Pull sharply to #15 and then do the poles or include the wrong side of #6 on your way (remember the problem was not the entry).
- Dog on right: Pick up #4, #5, and #6 to get back to the poles.

Dog misses weave entry:

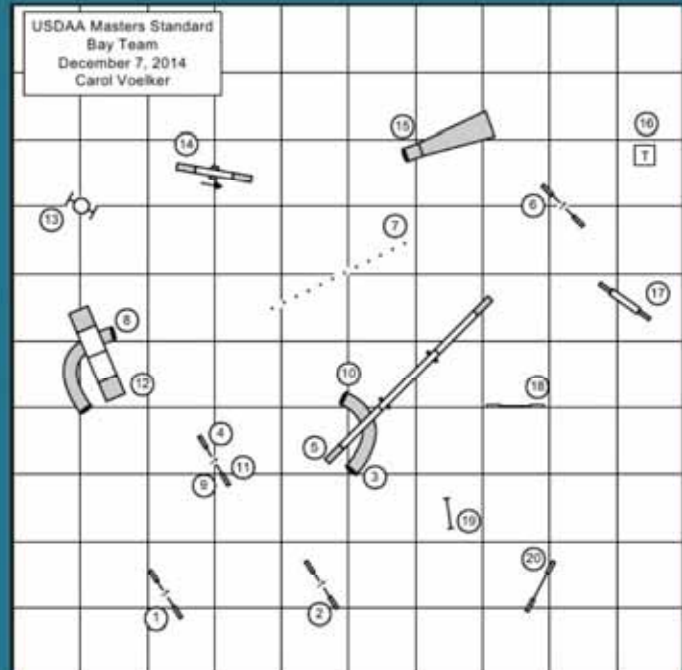
- Dog on left: Pull slightly away from weaves, front cross to put the dog on your right and avoid #15. Send the dog over #6 and then front cross so you have dog on your left to re-attempt the poles.
- Dog on right: Pull to keep the dog on your right, take #6, and then pull the dog back to re-attempt the weaves

Dog misses down contact on dogwalk at #5:

- Dog on left: When you are ready to re-attempt the dogwalk, do #18, #19, and the wrong side of #2. If you don't want to take the dog off the side of the dogwalk, take #6 to #18, or #6 to #17 to #18, and then do #19 and the wrong side of #2.
- Dog on right: Do #6, #7, and #4 and then re-attempt the dogwalk.

Dog misses down contact on A-frame: When you are ready to re-attempt the A-frame, front cross to #8, take #9, and then front cross back to the A-frame.

Dog misses teeter contact: Heel dog quickly back on your left—not all loops include obstacles. If you want to re-attempt it a few times, change the angle of the tire and send to it.



- **2-on-2-off contacts:** If the dog does not stop at all, I have him lie down. So many folks do this at trials every fourth Sunday (inconsistently), but never in class. I do not yell at the dog, I just tell him to down (they do not resent it because it is normal communication for us) and he must wait for a release word to get up (critical). Then I make my loop. I would never down a dog that is low drive or just learning, only a seasoned dog.

If the dog did stop in the correct position and then released himself, I would do a "short one." This means pulling the dog all the way around me (no side change) and having him hop up onto the side of the obstacle at the point where he is able (depends on the size of the dog). Be sure you have pulled the dog around you far enough that he is facing the correct direction before hopping on. Give him your end-position command, not a "hop on" command. Once the dog puts himself back into the correct position you can do some proofing reminders and give lots of rewards. Then I would start over and put the obstacle back into sequence by making a loop, of course!
- **Dropped bars:** I don't believe in scolding dogs for knocked bars. They are either not able to jump high enough or they have not been trained to run fast, jump high, and turn all at the same time. More often than not they are not fit enough to be perfect jumpers. I do worry that if I ignore the dropped bar entirely that the dog may not be getting fair feedback from me. It is a very slippery slope. I simply stop moving, reset the bar and take it again. If I can reward before the next obstacle I do, I always verbally congratulate the dog when he clears the bar.
- **Running around jumps:** I simply dive-in like a warrior princess and push the dog back around to the correct side of the jump. If I blow it and he takes it the wrong direction that is okay, the point is to get over the jump! Be super sweet about it with the sensitive ones. Hurt their feelings and pay the price. For the super sensitive ones you may need to ignore it and just keep going.
- **Refusals because of "early" turn cues:** My current favorite subject. Please! No hate mail! I think we have taken "screw-up cookies" too far. In this case, I'm refer-

ring to giving the dog a reward for taking a turn cue instead of the jump. I use screw-up cookies lots of times, especially when a green (inexperienced dog) takes my new turn cue instead of the jump in the early stages of training. "Yes! You have now learned to not miss my turn cues! Good dog!" However, if we give cookies and parades every time the dog turns off a jump for his entire career, at what point are we saying, "If my timing isn't perfect don't take the jump even if I am in a logical position". I see folks training refusals left and right with "screw-up cookies." If I am in a reasonable position to a jump, I want my dog's default to be to take the jump, not pull off of it. If I start a turn cue a tad too early and the dog starts to turn off the jump, I immediately dive in and get him over that jump. Then he gets an "almost-was-a-screw-up-cookie" and I made my point, which was get over the jump! I never just turn away from the jump when the dog pulls off and walk away to restart.

- **Tables:** Tables are easy for dogs to hate so I treat my table training with respect. If the dog does not down (needed for USDAA) I don't harass the dog on the

table. The table is a happy sacred place in my land. I simply pop the dog off, do some fast and fun downs on the floor next to the table, use my super yummy treats, then immediately pop him back on the table and get the down that way.

Experiment!

Every dog is different. Experiment with what keeps your dog working nicely after an error is made. The point is to be consistent. It will strengthen communication and lessen confusion. Once you know what to do and have good habits in place, dealing with errors will be no big deal to either you or your dog; they will be an easy part of training and learning.

It is wonderful to be writing about errors in training now that training has evolved to a place where I barely have the need to address punishment. Agility, at the end of the day, is tricks for treats; it's a game and nothing more. Nothing to do with obstacle training or handling should require you to punish your dog. 🐾

Sandy Rogers has been teaching obedience and agility since 1991. She founded ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California in 1999. Her dogs have competed in all the USDAA and AKC National Championship finals multiple times in four jump heights. Sandy and Jack Russell Terrier Quill competed on Team USA at the World Agility Open in 2011, 2012, and 2013. They won the individual gold and silver medals in 2012 and bronze in 2013. Quill won the USDAA Grand Prix in 2013, placed third in 2007, and placed second at the 2012 and 2014 AKC Nationals. Border Collie Brink placed third in the Grand Prix in 2000 and won 16" Speed Jumping in 2007 and 2008 and Performance Grand Prix in 2007. Sandy has two DVDs available: Training the Extreme Dogs and One Jump Two Jump.



ultimateagility

Ultimate Agility strives to provide the best in online agility and dog training education.

Providing online courses for the agility and dog sports enthusiast. Daily lesson plans designed to give you a written step-by-step process including video clips of ourselves and our dogs as well as students working multiple breeds demonstrating the lesson. Access to a live forum where you can ask questions and take part in discussions with other members of the Ultimate Agility community. Using the very best in today's technology to ensure we give you the greatest possible learning experience.

What some of our customers say,...

Agility is a new sport for me and this is so CLEAR - glad I started here on this course. Great lessons!

I am finding your lesson plans really great for me as a novice - its great to have structured lessons that are easy to follow and are progressive.

Most certainly I feel, already at this point, that the course has been worth every penny. I am extremely grateful that Greg and Laura have provided informative answers to all questions posted by myself and other Ultimate Handlers.



www.ultimateagility.com