Rear Crosses with Drive and Confidence

Article and photos by Ann Croft

Is it necessary to be able to do rear crosses on course to succeed in agility? I liken the idea of doing agility without the option of a rear cross to trying to play tennis with only a forehand and no backhand. Sure, you can play the game and experience success, but there are times when that backhand would really come in handy and take your game to a new level. People whose dogs run much faster than they can are typically eager to learn rear cross skills, while those whose dogs tend to run at heel or behind them are less eager to incorporate this skill. Teaching the foundation skills that precede training of the rear cross itself can turn a dog that is willing to drive ahead into one that is able to work ahead. These skills can also enable the dog that hangs back behind his handler to enjoy moving ahead and may free him to run at his full potential.

Primary Dog Skills Needed

There are two primary skills that the dog needs to successfully respond and perform correctly when his handler uses a rear cross at jumps: he needs to be willing to drive ahead of his handler and he needs a cue that tells him a turn away from his handler is coming up after the jump.

Driving Ahead

To help a dog learn to focus forward and drive ahead of his handler, I first like to learn what motivates the dog that can be physically separated from the handler. If all of the dog’s rewards come from his handler’s body, it is very difficult to teach the dog to look and drive ahead. Useful items may be a tug toy of any sort, or a container such as a pouch or plastic bottle filled with the dog’s favorite treats:

- Teach the dog to drive ahead a few feet to his stationary toy placed on the ground when you give a cue, such as Go. Follow behind him and reward with a game of tug when he reaches the toy.
- Alternatively teach your dog to interact with his food pouch or bottle to receive a food reward from inside. Then teach him to drive ahead a few feet to the food pouch or bottle placed on the ground when you give a cue, such as Go, and then catch up and reward from the container.

Use your new game of sending your dog to his toy to teach him to send ahead to obstacles. Simply place your motivator beyond the exit of any obstacle. For example, at the tire take your dog around to the front of the obstacle, release him when he is focused on the motivator at the exit end of the tire, and follow behind to reward. Do this for single jumps, the tunnel, the weaves, and so on.

See my articles, “Four-on-the-Floor Contacts” in CR December 2005, or “Achieving Fast, Reliable, and Independent Weaves” in CR February 2007, for a more detailed explanation. The important concepts to keep in mind are that the motivator should be stationary, the dog should be focused on it when released, and the reward should come where the object was placed, out in front. Don’t ask for a retrieve or for your dog to turn about and return to you for his reward. And if using food, be sure to always give the treat from the container and not from your pocket.

Turning Away

The second important skill for your dog to master before starting rear cross work is to understand and respond to a cue that means turn away from you. It is easy and natural for your dog to turn toward you when sequencing obstacles because he naturally likes to keep one eye on you while he runs. Your body position and the direction you are going aid him in turning in your direction and to follow you. It will help your dog in early rear cross work if you teach him a verbal cue to turn away from you so that he can learn that although your body position may not appear to agree, you would like him to turn away.

I like to teach the dogs to turn to the right and to the left as two separate behaviors, each with its own cue. Dogs seem to learn these two behaviors very easily although some people seem to have difficulty instantly identifying right versus left. I think this is because the dogs learn that a directional cue simply means a specific behavior just like Sit and Down do. Right means turn the head and the body a particular way; Left means turn the head and body a different way. In contrast, people tend to think about right and left as two alternative sides or directions, and we sometimes have to think a moment to know which is which. If you are one of those people and are concerned that you may make a mistake and call out the wrong direction on course in the future, don’t worry. You will have time in the walk-through to identify the correct direction and associated verbal cue and rehearse it before you run.
Teaching Right and Left

I like to teach dogs the verbal cues *Right* and *Left* with as little hand and arm motion as possible. Minimizing motion helps keep you from inadvertently teaching the dog that a particular presentation of the hand or arm means to turn away from you. Excess motion can easily lead to confusion in the future when you mean to direct your dog forward and he thinks he reads your arm signal as turn away.

One way that works well is to first teach your dog a hand touch. The dog touches his nose to your palm, you mark it with a click or verbal marker, and reward by bringing a treat to the palm. Do the hand touches with either hand, in front of you, by your side, and so on. Name the behavior, *Touch*, for example. Also teach your dog to be comfortable standing by your side in heel position on both sides of your body. Once your dog is very comfortable with both of these behaviors, you can put them together to teach your dog *Right* and *Left*.

Choose one direction, left for example, and teach that in your sessions until the dog has some understanding of the cue for the behavior to turn left. Begin with your dog standing comfortably on your left side in heel position, do a couple of simple hand touches in front of and just to the left of his head. While the dog is waiting patiently for another hand touch opportunity, drop your hand from above down by his loin, lightly touch him, and say *Touch*. He will likely turn his head away from you, see your palm, and continue the turn to do his hand touch; mark it when he does, and deliver his treat to your palm with your right hand.

Over the next few repetitions add the word *Left* before saying *Touch*, then drop the word *Touch*, saying *Left* only. Once he is turning a full 180° to your left palm with reliability and ease, add a pivot of your body so that you end up parallel to your dog with him on your right as you deliver his treat from your right hand. Drop the aid of the left hand presented for a hand touch by the loin as quickly as possible. Once your dog has some mastery of *Left*, repeat the process on your right side to teach *Right*. You can also try the same method using a target stick or wand your dog has been taught to touch lowered down by your dog’s loin instead of your palm.
Introducing the Rear Cross

I introduce rear crosses at obstacles other than jumps once the dog has mastered the desired obstacle performance and can be sent a few feet ahead to the obstacle. Multiple-stride obstacles, such as tunnels, weaves, and contacts, are ideal for introductory work on rear crosses because they don’t require the use of a cue other than body position for the dog to turn in the correct direction once he has completed the obstacle. The dog can see or hear that you have changed sides and he has multiple strides as he completes the obstacle to change his lead to turn in your direction. His drive and understanding to complete the obstacle will help him to accept your rear cross and help you learn about timing your cross to come after your dog is committed to the obstacle.

At Tunnels

Tunnels are ideal for introducing the dog to your change of side with a rear cross. Begin by sending your dog to the tunnel from about 6’ to 8’ in front and reward with his motivator about 6’ beyond the tunnel. Repeat, this time making a very shallow rear cross once the dog has committed to the tunnel. Increase the angle of the send and the cross by following the “round the clock” method of entry work outlined in my weave article mentioned above; just substitute the tunnel for the weave poles. The round-the-clock training to teach the dog to find entries independently is very useful for all obstacles, although you won’t need to make the angles of approach as severe for the contact obstacles and the tire as you might for the tunnels, weave poles, and jumps.

At Jumps

Teaching the rear cross at jumps requires the dog to understand that he is to take the upcoming jump and land turned in the new direction. The dog needs the information that a turn away is coming up before he sets up to take the jump. I begin training rear crosses at jumps with a dog that has a good send to the jump, accepts rear crosses at tunnels, weaves, and contacts, has already learned how to jump and turn (see “Training Bend Work” by Susan Salo in CR January 2007), and understands the Right and Left directional cues.

To start the rear cross training at jumps, pick a turn you want to work on (to the left, for example) and stay with that throughout the session. First, warm up your dog with a couple left turns away from you on the flat without a jump. With your dog standing on your left side, command Left, and after your dog begins his turn, pivot toward your left to finish with your dog on your right side and deliver the treat with your right hand.

Next, work toward getting your dog to do his turn behavior around a jump upright. Position your dog very close to a nonwinged jump without a jump bar (a ground bar is okay) and very close to the left upright. Stand close to him and release with his jump command (mine is Up) followed by Left (Up, Left, for example). After your dog steps forward and turns toward the upright, rotate to finish with your dog on your right as you have been doing and deliver the treat with your right hand. You should not cross the plane of the jump as you work through the exercises.

If your dog has trouble with this very first step, repeat a couple of left turns on the flat, away from the jump. Then set him up again in front of the jump (very close to the jump and also very close to the left upright) and try again. If he still has trouble turning left around the upright while you stand to his right, but will easily turn left on the flat (with no upright), try patterning him for one or two repetitions simply to turn to the left around the upright while you stand to his left so that he turns toward you rather than away from you. Then set him up on your left side and try again to have him turn left around the upright on the command Up, Left.

Next position yourself and your dog so that you can take a step forward on the foot closest to your dog as you command Up, Left. Continue to follow through by stepping around with your right foot, finishing with your dog on your right.
Once you have moved the second jump a sufficient distance so your dog can land and prepare for the second jump comfortably, add a small amount of height, 4” or 8”, to the first jump, and then proceed to add an equal amount of height to the second jump.

Next place a second jump perpendicular to the first jump with the left uprights of both jumps touching. Set your dog up again— he should step forward to turn around the left upright and step over the second ground bar. Pivot to pick up your dog on the right while stepping forward toward your left so that your dog’s turn is gradually reduced from 180° to 90°. Remember not to cross the plane of the jump as you complete the exercise.

Move the second jump forward and to the left a few inches in equal increments and repeat.

Again, move the second jump a few more inches forward and to the left in equal increments and repeat. Add a little more forward momentum as you approach the jump setup by allowing room for a couple of steps toward the setup as needed.

Continue to move the second jump forward and over to the left, adding distance to your approach to the first jump (and height as necessary) to increase forward momentum, until the jumps approach a normal distance your dog will encounter in course work. Be sure as you work through the exercises that you are giving your jump command followed by your turn away cue before your dog reaches his takeoff point for the first jump. For example, command Up, Left as soon as your dog is committed to the first jump, but before takeoff. As you add distance to the first jump, you may need to add your command to go forward to get commitment to the jump: for example, Go, Up, pause momentarily while the dog commits to the jump, then Left.
**Putting the Rear Cross into Course Work**

Thus far we have been focusing primarily on the skills needed by the dog to execute a rear cross: to go forward and commit to a jump, and to respond to a verbal cue so that he takes off and lands turning in the proper direction. The handler has been focusing on the timing of her verbal cue and cross. Now it is time to add obstacles leading into the cross to help the dog generalize his new skill and to help the handler gain experience cueing an upcoming rear cross.

Add two jumps to the setup you have been working on in the configuration diagrammed in Figure 1. Use the jumps labeled #1 and #2 in Figure 1 to review the work you’ve done thus far. Then add one jump into the rear cross by doing the sequence in Figure 2. Set your dog up, lead out a short distance, and release him. Maintain a parallel position to your dog’s path while allowing him to pass you. Then stepping forward, send him to jump #2 with Go, Up, then Left, and cross as your dog commits to the jump just as you have been doing.

Practice moving into your rear cross by adding another jump to the sequence as shown in Figure 3. Note the path of the dog between jumps #2 and #3 in Figure 3a should be a relatively straight line. When planning a rear cross you want to identify this straight line, and align yourself parallel to it to send your dog to the jump and then cross behind him. Compare the path of the handler in Figure 3 to the path illustrated in Figure 3a, which shows a common handling error. The handler cuts the corner and hurries to the jump where she is crossing (#3 in this case), thereby bisecting the dog’s path. This error usually leads to the dog's stopping short or turning prematurely off the jump. Also, don’t pull to the right to execute a rear cross to the left as shown by the handling path in Figure 3b. This maneuver will likely result in your dog's future confusion when you actually want to go to the right, and meanwhile adds yardage and lost time to your rear cross.

To gain further practice finding your line and executing rear crosses, move jump #2 and repeat the sequence as shown in Figures 4 and 5.

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**When to Do Rear Crosses**

A rear cross is very helpful in sections of a course where you don’t think there’s a possibility to get into position for a proper front cross. An improperly timed front cross will add yardage and send your dog on a loopy path, while a properly timed rear cross may allow a better path and maintain speed for your dog. In some cases a dog’s turn after the jump may be tighter with a rear cross than with a front cross. Simply walk both ways in the walk-through and see which feels best. Remember: you can rehearse your verbal cue and don’t have to think of it on the fly. Over time you will probably find the need for the verbal cue diminish as your dog becomes accustomed to your changes in path selection, and your speed into the turn will serve as a cue for the upcoming turn. Initially, however, a verbal cue for a turn away can truly help a dog gain understanding of this handling maneuver and help him turn away with drive and confidence.

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Ann lives in San Diego, California with her two Boston Terriers, Chance and Prix, and four Border Collies, Caper, Trigger, Flurry, and Kit. Her Bostons, Mystic (1992-2004) and Chance, achieved many agility firsts for their breed. Chance, Caper, and Trigger are all double agility champions, MACH and ADCH, and have all been AKC Nationals finalists with Trigger placing second overall in 2003. Trigger and her teammates won the 2004 DAM National Team Championship. Ann now teaches full time at her training center, Paws on the Wind Dog Sports, and is also an AKC and USDAA judge. Learn more at www.pawsonthewind.com.