Several methods are available to agility trainers to teach dogs to weave. I use a combination of the weave pole channel and slanted poles, a.k.a Weave-A-Matic or WAM. Tracing the exact origins of either of these methods is difficult, but I first heard of the channel method about 14 years ago through the writings of British agility pioneers, Peter Lewis and John Gilbert. Around the same time I also learned of the WAM method through Monica Percival’s writings. Monica coined this term because many dogs easily and rapidly progress in learning to weave using this technique. She designed a base and mechanism for slanting the poles after experimenting with slanted poles stuck in the ground, an idea she attributes to Ruth Hobday, another early agility enthusiast in Britain. Monica called her slanted poles on a base a Weave-A-Matic and the name caught on as a generic term to describe this training technique.

In addition to the ease and speed at which dogs learn to weave on a WAM, there are other advantages to this training method. The dog learns from the beginning to perform the weaves with a continuous style, changing leads at each pole. He also learns to enter the poles on the left lead. The weaving style can either be single-step (the dog switches leads at each pole and thrusts one front leg through each space) or bounce style (the dog switches leads at each pole, but thrusts both legs through each space). The size and length of the dog usually predict which style the dog will prefer. Dogs smaller than about 16” at the shoulder tend to bounce, while dogs over 16” with average or longer length of loin tend to single-step. Medium-size dogs with shorter loin also tend to bounce. And, yes, smaller dogs can bounce through the weaves; I have seen even a 5-lb. Yorkie bounce through the WAM when the poles were set low and she was motivated.

The WAM technique is invaluable to developing a muscle memory to weave all the way through the poles. Dogs that take additional steps on either side or cross their forelimbs are much more likely to exit the poles before completion and execute the weave poles slowly.

Additionally, dogs learn to find the entrances very well when trained to weave on the WAM. The dog must extend and plant his left leg forward of the first pole to properly hit the entrance and prepare for the turn to carry on forward weaving. Since the dog must always enter with his left front foot forward over the first pole of the WAM, he learns to master this skill and begin weaving on this lead from the very beginning.

Disadvantages are that weave training must be put off until a young dog is mature enough physically to repetitively flex his spine, and the occasional dog has trouble transitioning from slightly slanted poles to straight poles.

Training with the weave pole channel can be started at a much younger age since there is no bending of the spine in the
Initial stages of training when the channel is open. The young dog can be taught to race through the channel and get started on his understanding of finding entrances.

I like to combine these two methods, training a young dog to run through the poles and find entrances using the channel, then when he is old enough to begin actual weaving, switch to work on the WAM so that his weaving behavior is quickly solidified. If the dog has trouble generalizing from slanted poles to straight poles, some follow-up training on the weave pole channel with the poles slightly offset can sometimes be just the trick to help at this last stage of training.

My goals in training are to teach the dog to weave fast, reliably, and independently. The dog is trained to enter with the first pole on his left, to drive through the poles as fast as he can, to treat the weave poles as one obstacle, rather than a series of small obstacles (individual poles), and to focus on the job of weave pole performance rather than the handler from the very beginning.

Dogs are trained on sets of 12 poles and with a motivator/target in front of them from the start.

Handlers should refrain from teaching their dogs to actually weave (that is, flex the spine repeatedly) until the dog has matured and the growth plates have closed, due to the risk of injury to the spine. I advise my students to wait until their dog is a minimum of 12 to 14 months of age to start actual weave-motion training. If the proper groundwork is laid, weave training does not take long when performed as outlined here.

**Groundwork for Puppies and Dogs New to Training**

My first objective is to teach the new dog or the puppy to run as fast as he can straight through the open channel of poles. He should simply perceive the weave pole channel as another kind of fun tunnel. There is no risk to the spine and the dog learns that the weaves are fun. He also learns to do them fast, independently, and completely, and to find the entrance from any angle before starting actual weave-motion training.

To accomplish this, you need to first identify what motivates your dog so you can use it to teach him to go fast and straight ahead of you. Is it a tug game? Is it roast chicken?

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**Tug Toy as a Motivator**

If a tug toy, you need to teach your dog to drive toward a toy held in your hand, take hold of it, and tug on command. Once he's doing this, start a play session. Interrupt your play and restrain your dog by taking hold of his collar or applying pressure to his chest, then drop the toy just in front of him. Release the dog to the toy using your command to take hold of the toy to start a game of tug. He should grab the toy immediately and you should resume your tug game at once.

Repeat this cycle adding very small increments of distance each time by moving your dog and restraining him farther from the dropped toy until your dog is driving ahead of you a few feet to grab his toy while you run to catch up and resume the tug game. Taking the dog farther and farther from the toy is important so that he doesn't require the toy to be in motion to be cued or motivated to go toward it. Also be sure to work with the dog on both sides of your body while you're teaching the dog to drive to his motivator.

**Food as a Motivator**

If your dog is far more interested in food than toys then you will need to devise a way to get the food away from your body and still control the dog's access to the food. Using some sort of easy-open container is a good way to control access. Velcro-sealed food pouches especially designed for this are available, or you can use something as simple as an empty plastic water bottle.

First teach your dog to interact with the object to earn the food reward. It can be as simple as touching the pouch or plastic bottle to receive a click or verbal marker (yes), then a treat from the container. Work up to the dog grabbing the pouch or bottle for the click and treat. Deliver the treat to the dog as quickly as possible from the container; keep the open container in contact with the dog's mouth and have the dog facing away from you, not making eye contact. Always emphasize that the treat is connected to the container, not to you. Should your dog start to mouth or play with his food container, all the better; you may be able to transition to a tug game over time.

Once he's eager to interact with and grab the food container, restrain your dog by taking hold of his collar or applying pressure to his chest, then drop the container just in front of him. Release the dog to the container. He should grab the food container immediately and you should open it and give him a treat. Repeat this cycle adding very small increments of distance each time by moving your dog and restraining him farther from the dropped food container until your dog is driving ahead of you a few feet to grab the container while you run to catch up and give him a treat. If your dog should try to take his motivator and run, attach a leash or line to the motivator so that you can get your foot on the leash before your dog gets away with the motivator.

**What's Next**

As you do this groundwork with your dog, make sure he is comfortable with your handling him all over, holding his collar, his chest, his loin, his back. You want your dog to be very comfortable with being handled and physically maneuvered; he should not consider this a break in the fun or an aversive.

Once you've established your motivator in the absence of equipment, and your dog is focused on his motivator and going toward it fast and confidently straight out in front of you, put this behavior together with some simple obstacle training. For example, set your tire at its lowest setting, touching the ground. Take your dog and motivator about 6' beyond the tire. As you move with the dog, play tug or touch and treat (depending on your motivator). Drop the motivator in place and then run the dog around to the opposite side of the tire. When he has refocused on the motivator, release the dog through the tire. Follow behind and reward the dog with a game of tug or a treat from the container.

I like to use this training method on a number of simple obstacles (such as the tire, the tunnel, and backchaining a board on the ground) before using introducing the weave pole channel. This exercise insures the dog's familiarity with the method and that the focus and drive forward to the motivator are in place. See my article, “Four-on-the-Floor Contacts” in CR December 2005.
Training with the Weave Pole Channel

When you are ready to begin training on the weave pole channel, use 12 poles and open the channel to a very wide setting so there is no pressure placed on the dog to flex his spine or change direction within the channel. Backchain the channel to create a fast, straight performance and eliminate the need for wires.

Step 1

Take the dog about 6’ beyond the weave poles and reward with your motivator just as you have been doing on the flat, with the tire and other obstacles. Drop the motivator in place and take your dog to the exit of the channel, on the right side of the poles. Place him in the channel, lined up straight with his nose just beyond the last pole (pole 12). I prefer to pick up and place my dog in the channel rather than walk him into the channel. If your dog is too big to lift, you can place his head first by having your right hand in the collar and using your left hand to place the rear of the dog in the channel. Insure the dog is straight with all four feet in the channel and that his head is focused on the motivator, then release. Your dog should pass by the last pole and go straight to his motivator; you should follow him and reward with a tug game or treat from the container.

Step 2

Next take your dog to the left side of the poles and place him in the space created by poles 9, 10, and 11. This exercise is best done off leash, while making use of the dog’s collar or a grab tab to position him. If you need to use a leash to insure control of the dog then be sure it does not get hung up on anything and stays loose at all times; holding the leash loose above the dog when you release him works best.

Step 3

Continue backchaining the weave pole channel, alternating sides, until the dog can be released from 6’ in front of the channel and run through the channel to his motivator for his reward 6’ beyond.

If the dog veers out of the channel and exits out the side at any time, then go back to the last position in the channel where the dog was successful. Keep training if your dog’s interest in his motivator is still high. If not, end on a successful note and return to training later when your dog is fresh. Whenever you return to weave training after a break always begin at an easier stage than where you ended your last session. If your dog remembers his task well he will progress quickly to where you last were and beyond, and he will not rehearse mistakes. Always avoid rehearsing mistakes by going back to where your dog was last successful and maintaining a high value for the reward you use beyond the weave poles.
Step 4
Once your dog can be released from 6’ in front of the open channel and run through the channel to his motivator for his reward 6’ beyond the weave poles you can begin teaching the dog to find the entry using the around-the-clock method. This exercise is great for working with very young dogs that should wait to begin actual weave training, and for older dogs to help them learn to look for the first pole and find entries from all angles.

Starting 6’ away from the poles, with the dog on your right, send your dog to the poles from the 12 o’clock position (straight in front). If your dog is successful, move with your dog a few inches to your left toward the 1 o’clock position and send the dog again. Each time your dog is successful move a little more around the clock face to your left, maintaining a distance of 6’ from the weave poles. Your goal is to eventually be able to send the dog from the 2 o’clock position; but don’t rush the progression!

At some point your dog will fail to bend around the first pole and he will enter between the second and third pole. Don’t pull your dog out of the weave poles to correct for a missed entry or missed pole; simply don’t reward at the end. Go back to the point on the clock where the dog was last successful and start from there to make your changes in angle, increasing the angle only in very small increments. It helps to “ping-pong” back and forth between doing an entry that the dog presently understands very well and doing a more difficult entry angle. When you have success with the more difficult entry, go back to an easier entry before trying the harder one again. Also start to require a minimum of two successes in a row before moving further on the clock face and increasing the angle to the entry. If you work carefully through these early missed entries while not making the angles too severe and only rewarding correct entries, your dog can reliably learn to put the first pole on his left.

Step 5
Work on the other side of the clock face in a separate training session. Starting 6’ away from the poles, with the dog on your left, send your dog to the poles from the 12 o’clock position (straight in front). If your dog is successful, move with your dog a few inches to your right toward the 11 o’clock position and send the dog again. Each time your dog is successful move a little more around the clock face to your right, maintaining a distance of 6’ from the weave poles. Your goal is to eventually be able to send the dog from the 10 o’clock position; but don’t rush the progression. As in the last step, at some point the dog will fail to make the entry; follow the guidelines above when this happens.

At this stage of the entry training, do not alternate which side of the weave poles you are working on. In each session, work either toward 2 o’clock or 10 o’clock. The dog will best learn what he is to do if the task is broken down this way. Switching sides of the clock presents a very different picture to the dog: when he’s approaching from the left side of the poles, he needs to find the first pole and wrap around it, but if he’s approaching from the right side of the poles, he must find the space between the first and second pole. So for now, take advantage of pattern training and stay on one side of the clock or the other.

Likewise, don’t start alternating the side of your body that the dog is working on until the next stage of training. If you are working on the 3 o’clock side of the clock, start with the dog on your right; if you’re working on the 9 o’clock side of the clock, start with the dog on your left. Starting with your dog on your opposite side in either case entails you doing a rear cross, and the dog isn’t ready to work on that yet.

Step 6
Once your dog has mastered entries from 10 o’clock to 2 o’clock, begin alternating which side of your body you start the dog on. So, for example, instead of always the dog on your left side when you’re on the 9 o’clock side of the clock, sometimes send him from your right side and do a rear cross as he enters the poles.

Gradually increase the distance you and the dog start from the poles with the ultimate goal of being able to send the dog from 15’ away starting from any position between 10 o’clock and 2 o’clock.

If you want a dog that can hit his entry from anywhere, then continue adding more and more angle to the approach; work toward being able to send the dog to the poles from any entry between the 9 o’clock and 3 o’clock positions.

Continue with the around-the-clock training until your dog is proficient and old enough to begin training his body to weave.
Training with the Weave-A-Matic

When my dog is ready to begin the actual weaving motion, I switch to the WAM for training for the reasons discussed at the beginning of the article. As before, you will use a motivator out beyond the weave poles to teach the dog to focus and drive forward through the poles. Again, you will backchain the weaves, working from the exit and alternating sides, until the dog is running down the full line of poles to his motivator placed 6’ to 8’ beyond. This training is best done off leash, so there is no chance of pulling the dog from one side or the other.

Step 1
Lay the poles flat on the ground. Take the dog about 6’ beyond the weave poles and reward with your motivator. Drop the motivator in place and take your dog to the exit of the WAM, on the right side of the poles. Place him in the WAM, lined up straight with his nose just beyond the last pole (pole 12).

Step 2
Next take your dog to the left side of the poles and place him in the space created by poles 10, 11, and 12.

Step 3
Continue backchaining the WAM, alternating sides, until the dog can be released from 6’ in front of the WAM and run through the poles to his motivator for his reward 6’ beyond. Your dog will likely run just off center of the base. Do not be concerned; he will become centered as you raise the poles. He will either learn to plant his feet and bounce through each space, or he will jump the occasional section. Either is acceptable; the important criterion is that he runs straight through the WAM without attempting to veer out of the poles and exit. This behavior indicates his willingness to drive through the obstacle, his confidence level, and his enjoyment of the obstacle.

Step 4
Next raise each pole about 1” to 2” and release your dog to run through the WAM to his motivator. If the dog tries to veer out and run to his motivator, don’t reward; repeat the backchaining process with the poles raised just this small amount. Using backchaining will make your dog feel confident through the whole WAM.

Step 5
Once the dog is driving through with enthusiasm, raise each pole another 1” to 2” and release your dog to run through to his motivator. If he accepts the change and continues to run straight and fast through the WAM, repeat with the dog on your other side. Continue raising the weave poles a couple of inches at a time after working both sides as long as your dog continues to run fast and straight through the poles and as long as you see your dog is maintaining his speed through the poles. If at any time the dog veers out of the WAM, then don’t reward him. Try backchaining the WAM with raised poles.

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.
**Important Training Notes**

- As you raise the poles toward vertical, at some point you will observe a change in the dog’s stride; he will switch from running/jumping through the slanted poles to changing his lead at each pole, either by single stepping or bouncing with both feet. I like to raise the poles from the ground to this point as quickly as the dog’s drive, motivation, athletic ability, and physical condition permit and then proceed from this point a bit more slowly. Highly athletic and driven dogs that are accustomed to training with a motivator may reach this point in a very short period, while others will fare better by working only a few minutes at a time and then returning to increased levels of difficulty after resting.

- When your dog has mastered a given height of the poles he will start to jump through the WAM toward the end. I use this as a cue to raise the poles a bit more. Once the dog has reached this point where he is changing leads through each space he is likely using his muscles in a new way and in rapid succession. Be careful not to overtrain and overtire or make your dog sore. Limit the number of repetitions in a given training session. Five to seven minutes of weave training in a given session is the maximum for most dogs. End the training session while your dog is still driving through and enjoying the weaves.

- As the “V” of the poles gets smaller and approaches a straight line, be sure to tighten them more securely so the dog cannot move them easily out of the way as he weaves. This will help him transition to a straight line of poles.

- When transitioning to straight poles, some dogs are helped by leaving the first pole open just a bit while straightening the rest of the poles to upright.

**Troubleshooting**

Many dogs can successfully transition from the slanted weave poles to a straight line of poles with short and frequent training sessions. Other dogs need help to generalize their weaving skill to a straight line of poles by returning to work with the channel-style trainer where the poles can be slightly offset. Here are two techniques to try if your dog is having difficulty mastering straight poles.

- If your dog is consistently performing the WAM with the poles slanted about 1” off the vertical position, but has trouble getting through straight poles, try this technique: Use a single WAM base (six poles) with the poles slightly slanted and place a channel base as the next six poles with the two lines of channel poles offset just 1”. Work toward straightening the poles on the WAM base and moving the poles on the channel base closer and closer together. If your dog isn’t able to generalize his weaving behavior going from slightly slanted poles to slightly offset poles, straighten the poles in the WAM and close the channel more slowly.

- Work the weave pole channel and the WAM in separate training sessions. Refresh your dog’s memory of the channel by having him run through the poles with the channel just wide enough for him to pass through without weaving to his motivator 6’ to 8’ beyond. When he has remastered this skill (by backchaining if necessary) start to narrow the channel by about 1” at a time to encourage the dog to begin weaving. Be sure your dog can still run straight through the channel on each side in succession before increasing the difficulty. Should he start to have a problem staying within the channel, resolve the problem by not rewarding and backchaining through the channel. As it gets narrower a good rule of thumb is two successful passes on each side in succession before increasing the difficulty. Continue to work with the WAM in some of your weave pole training sessions during this period to insure your dog maintains his weaving style.

**In Conclusion**

The initial stages of both these methods may be trained economically at home using stick-in-the-ground weave poles. Training will, however, go more quickly and smoothly at the later stages with stiffer poles on a sturdy base. Once your dog has become proficient on the straight line of poles, resume your weave training to find the entrance from all angles, from around the clock, and from increasing distances, and with both front and rear crosses at the weaves. This foundation will really pay off in fast, reliable, and independent weave pole performance. Happy weaving!