

Elicia Calhoun Seminar for Mobility Challenged Handlers

PART 1

At an early winter seminar, Elicia Calhoun taught front crosses to a gathering of nimble, athletic handlers, and me. I could not do the front crosses smoothly and effectively when I tried to do them the same way other seminar participants were being taught. My frustration fueled the initiative to create a seminar exclusively for handlers with disabilities. Elicia graciously rose to the challenge.

Many of the participants had met before in cyberspace (on the Agility on Wheels e-list) but few of us had met in person. Participants came to New Hampshire from as far away as Michigan and South Carolina for this exciting, first of its kind, event.

Classes and seminars geared to novice handlers may adequately meet the needs of a handler with disabilities. However, as those teams progress into the advanced level and beyond, their training and handling diverges exponentially from that of “able” handlers. Fancy foot work may be impossible or dangerous; utilizing crosses, pivots, and changes of hand for signaling differs greatly for handlers on wheels and for those ambulatory handlers challenged by balance and speed.

On their registration forms, participants noted how their particular disability created specific training/handling challenges. Those challenges became the foundation upon which Elicia developed the content of the seminar. Topics included:

Distance work as a foundation skill for mobility challenged handlers. We all wanted to refine our distance work: sending a dog forward, laterally away from the handler, left and right.

Training contacts for dogs whose handlers cannot get to the contacts in time to supervise.

Offering the dog clear information using alternatives to body language, when the handler’s hands are encumbered by power wheelchair controls or mobility aides (canes, crutches, etc.) or when

the handler's ability to control her own movement of body parts is inconsistent or lacks fluidity.

How to refine body language: using the wheelchair/scooter/cane as an extension of the handler's body, knowing how the dogs cue off the position of the chair or cane and using that information to the team's advantage.

All aspects of weave pole performance, i.e. entries, exits, handler's position relative to the dog's, and speed.

"Walking courses" and planning handling strategies for courses while conserving limited physical energy and battery power.

Many of the dogs seem to recognize when their handlers are not feeling well or are in pain. The dogs alter their performance in relation to their perception of the handler's fluctuating levels of well-being.

There were only eight working teams at the seminar; there was enough time for every team to practice new skills without long waits for a turn. Elicia struck an excellent balance between talking and doing, keeping everyone alert and ready to learn. Two days was simply too little time for all we might have covered. Everyone left wanting more; Elicia promised to return!

Throughout the seminar Elicia emphasized one concept that came up in every exercise: **INDEPENDENT OBSTACLE PERFORMANCE**. Many participants had heard this idea before, but for most, Elicia brought the concept home with a new clarity and applicability to every aspect of agility training and handling. Truly understanding what **independent obstacle performance** could mean to physically challenged handlers on course, had the power of an epiphany.

Attitudinal Shift: Elicia's good nature and upbeat attitude brought us up short at the very beginning when she urged us to stop telling ourselves "I can't keep up with my dog." Instead she suggested that we say: "I can send the dog to the obstacle, it has been hard, but **I can do it**".

Elicia offered us this simple wisdom: accept the changes in our dogs' behavior, that occurs on our bad pain days, as a gift signifying the depth of the human/animal bond we share. Don't seek to banish the signs of their apparent compassion; rather we should cherish it. Our dogs' awareness of and responsiveness to our physical condition is both humbling and empowering: it is a strength to appreciate not a problem to fix.

Elicia tried out all the different adaptive equipment, mid-wheel drive and rear wheel drive power chairs, a three wheeled scooter, and a cane; applying her knowledge of engineering to help each handler get the most out of his and her equipment. Like "walking a mile in someone else's shoes" driving our equipment gave Elicia a very personal perspective on the specific challenges handlers with disabilities face in the context of agility.

We got to watch Elicia's dog Suni, quizzically trying to figure out how to read Elicia as she sped and lurched around the course on wheels. Suni's reactions taught us and reassured us, too. Speedy, confident Suni moved hesitantly, confused by the difference in Elicia's body language, waiting and watching to know for sure where she should go next. In fact Suni moved with the same caution and uncertainty many physically challenged handlers see in their own dogs.



Elicia tries out a three-wheeled scooter. (photo 1)

Signaling:

One handler's mid-wheel drive chair rocks forward whenever it comes to a sudden stop, causing the handler's body to lurch forward as if shot from a catapult. Instead of seeing that awkward movement as a liability, Elicia

suggested capitalizing on the handler's body's forward thrust to propel the dog into the mouth of a tunnel, or over some other obstacle.



Elicia tried driving a mid-wheel-drive chair; she noticed that when the chair stopped her body was thrust forward toward the tunnel. (photo 2)

Another handler uses her cane for balance and stability. She had previously used the cane in the same hand regardless of the dog's position. When the dog was on her left side, and the cane always in her left hand, this handler gave arm signals across her own body with her right arm/hand; thus creating a cacophony of mixed information (feet going one way, shoulders going another). Elicia suggested changing the hand that holds the cane to the offside whenever the dog changes sides. She also suggested that the handler use the cane more to support herself and maintain an upright position, instead of leaning forward to offset the balance challenge caused by signaling with an outstretched arm. These seemingly small changes allow the handler to give clearer signals with her dog-side arm.



Cindy Arnold using her "counter arm" to signal Rocky (photo 3)



Here Cindy uses her dog-side arm to signal Rocky, while maintaining upright posture with the help of her cane. (photo 4)



Mike Masters uses his arm, the momentum of his chair and his voice to give Nalla an absolutely clear message about where they are going. (photo 5)

Elicia stressed six components of a signal:

- Direction of your feet or position of the wheelchair relative to the obstacle ahead
- Direction of your shoulders for ambulatory handlers, the position of your knees for a handler in a wheelchair, and the position of the front wheel for a handler in a three wheeled scooter.
- Trajectory of your momentum
- Direction of your arm/hand movement
- Your verbal cue
- Timing

When signaling the dog the arm should start at the dog's height and then reach up toward the height of the obstacle, i.e. for the A-frame use a big, high sweep of the arm, for the tunnel keep the arm signal low. Keep the arm in the position of the signal until the dog commits to the obstacle. Keep moving even if you are moving slowly, the handler's momentum is crucial to keeping the dog moving.

“Working space” is Elicia's term for an invisible bungee-cord leash that is the comfortable working area between the dog and the handler. If the handler wishes to push the dog farther an outstretched arm will extend the space by one arm's length. One can “push” the dog out past this “working space” temporarily, but like a bungee cord it will snap back into place. Even if the handler cannot stay abreast of the dog, she can put pressure on the working space by using lateral arm movements or even a foot extended laterally. If the handler uses a cue like “come” or “here” while moving into the dog, it will hold the dog at the farthest part of his working space.



Elicia uses a pole to demonstrate how one can move into the dog and extend the working space. (photo 6)

In some seminars Elicia uses a pole held between two handlers moving through a sequence to demonstrate how working space can expand and contract, and yet stay relatively constant while dog and handler work together.

Elicia reminded us to watch our dog's eyes to be sure they are locked onto an obstacle; once they are the dog is clearly committed to that obstacle. She said to use peripheral vision for obstacles but direct vision for watching the dog, in other words keep your eyes on your dog.. Handler movement, verbal cues, and arm signals help sustain the dog's commitment. Elicia added that by watching the dog's eyes the handler knows when the dog has committed to the next obstacle. As soon as the dog has committed to an obstacle the handler should move to her next position on the course. Knowing when the dog has committed can allow both the handler and the dog to save time on the course by shortening both the dog and the handler's paths.

In the next article in this three part series I will describe the part of the seminar which focused on "independent obstacle performance".

Elicia Calhoun is in the final stages of producing her new book and video, both will be released very soon.

Barbara Handelman is list-owner for the Agility On Wheels e-list (agilityonwheels@yahogroups.com). The list welcomes all handlers with mobility challenges, their training partners and instructors. Moon, Barbara's five-year-old Aussie, finished his NADAC Novice Outstanding title this year and will soon take the plunge into Open competition. Luca, her two-year-old GSD, Service Dog has just started his competition career. Discover Barbara's new dog training services at www.DogTrainingatHome.com. She is offering individualized e-mail evaluations, lesson plans, and video demonstrations geared to empowering physically challenged individuals to train at home