

## Elicia Calhoun Seminar for Mobility Challenged Handlers

### PART 3

#### **Directional cues and self-control:**

In order for a mobility challenged handler to compete successfully in agility, the handler must be able to send the dog away from her position and out to obstacles ahead of them on course. Lead-outs and sends are essential foundation skills for handlers with disabilities.

Elicia offered one exercise that teaches the dogs both self-control and send-outs. The words “ready, steady,” trigger anticipation, and can be drawn out to sound like “reaaaaaady, steeeeeeeady.” If the dog anticipates the “go” or other release cue, he must return to the handler’s side. Employing the self-control needed to wait out the count is excruciating for the more driven dogs. One can see them trembling with excited eagerness as they hold their position. It takes that kind of self-control for a dog to allow the handler to lead out as far as the handler chooses to go. Even some novice agility dogs, working with handlers with disabilities, wait at the line while their person calmly leads out four or more obstacles.

For the less driven dogs, this game teaches dogs to eagerly anticipate moving out or away from the handler. For dogs who are not toy motivated, Elicia suggests throwing a food tube or closed bait bag to peek the dogs’ interest and develop drive.

When sending a dog to move in a straight trajectory forward and away from the handler, Elicia uses the verbal cue “go”. To teach the dog to move away laterally, Elicia uses the cue “out”. The dog starts from a position next to the handler’s side, parallel to the handler’s body, facing front. The straight positioning of the dog is crucial for the dog to understand the cue relative to the handler’s body. The start position is the same regardless of whether the dog will be sent forward or laterally to the side.

Elicia advises playing this game on the flat, away from agility equipment, until the dog is proficient with the concepts of “go” and “out”, and freely moves away from the handler on cue.

The game progresses as follows:

### Stage 1

- Handler holds the dog's collar with the dog side hand, says "ready, steady, go"
- Handler throws the ball, hesitating just a nanosecond before releasing the dog with the word "go" (Elicia calls this stage "throwing the ball then the dog")
- Start by throwing the ball 5 feet, then 10 and 15 feet, until the dog is comfortable moving 20 feet away from the handler. The dog should be comfortable with the game at each of these distances before moving on to the next stage.



**Elicia demonstrating "throw the ball then the dog: dog is, at this stage, on the opposite side from the throwing/signaling arm.**

### Stage 2:

- Handler positions the dog by her side, this time she does not hold the dog's collar.
- The handler says "ready, steady, go", the dog must wait for the word "go" before leaving the handler's side, you are still building the dog's self-control and the ability to wait at the start line!
- On the word "go" the handler simultaneously releases the dog and throws the ball with her dog-side hand. (Elicia calls this stage "Throw the dog and the ball together".)
- As you throw the ball, follow through with your arm movement, as a pitcher would when throwing a baseball. The follow-through becomes an extended arm signal that the handler sustains as the dog locks onto his target (in this case, the ball). Be careful to limit extraneous hand and arm movements that diminish the effectiveness of the intended hand/arm signal.
- Again, start by throwing the ball 5 feet, then 10 and 15 feet, until the dog is comfortable moving 20 feet away from the handler. The dog

should be comfortable with the game at each of these distances before moving on to the next stage.

### Stage 3:

- Handler positions the dog by her side, but does not hold the dog's collar.
- The handler says "ready, steady, go" the dog must wait for the word "go" before leaving the handler's side, you are still building the dog's self-control and the ability to wait at the start line!
- On the word "go" the handler releases the dog, hesitates a moment, and then throws the ball with the dog-side hand. Initially, the goal is to have dog make even the smallest forward movement before the ball is thrown. (Elicia calls this stage "throw the dog, then the ball".)
- As you throw the ball remember to follow through with your arm so it becomes an extended-arm signal sending the dog forward. Be careful to limit extraneous hand and arm movements that diminish the effectiveness of the intended hand/arm signal.
- Start by throwing the ball only a foot or two, then progress as before to 5 feet, then 10 and 15 feet, until the dog is comfortable moving 20 feet away from the handler before the ball is thrown. The dog should be comfortable with the game at each of these distances before moving on to practicing the send to agility obstacles.

**Elicia demonstrates "throw the dog then the ball" note how her throwing arm becomes an extender-arm signal.**



To teach the dog to move away from the handler in a lateral direction, the game is played with the same three stages. Elicia uses the verbal cue "out" for the lateral send. The follow through with the arm is equally important

with this phase of the game, as the dog will follow the handler's arm in the direction she throws the ball.

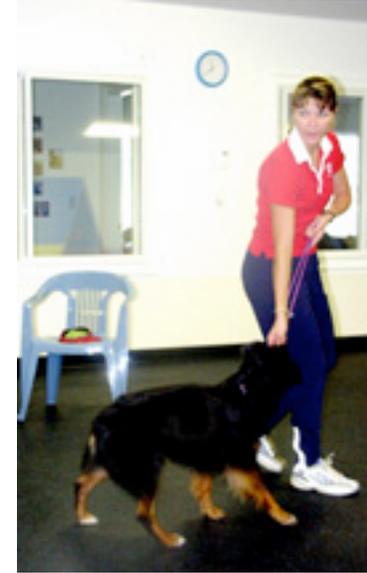
## **Food Hand Game**

Elicia's "Food Hand Game" (FHG) teaches dogs to focus their attention and watch the handler's hands first for a food reward and then later for cues. It also builds the skills needed to teach dogs to take "right" and "left" directional signals. The game can be played by ambulatory handlers as well as handlers in wheelchairs or scooters. The FHG is a great way to build attention as a foundation skill for puppies. The Food Hand Game includes three positions:

- **Focus Mode:** (functional heel or side) Use hand closest to the dog. Hand is at dog's nose height and by the handler's leg.
- **Neutral Zone:** (functional front) Ambulatory handlers use both hands, handler's driving a chair or scooter use the hand not used to drive the chair. Handler feeds from both hands (if they are available) and moves backwards while feeding the dog.
- **Release Mode:** (sweep) Hand begins in focus mode and sweeps dog to move in the direction and height indicated.

For a handler on wheels using the touch stick to build the focus skills may work better than using her hand as the target. Some dogs may not be comfortable, nor safe, coming in close enough to the chair to touch the handler. An ambulatory handler with a short dog might also chose to use the touch stick for the dog to target rather than her hand.

**Focus position, note that Elicia's in a position that would allow her to sweep her hand out to send the dog to his right.**



**Focus position using target stick and hand comes around the dog's head**



**Neutral zone**



**Suni is following Elicia's hand, in focus position, as Elicia moves forward**



**Elicia positioning Iceman to work on “right” and “left” cues starting with the dog in front of the handler.**



**Step 1: Focus Position in a chair using a wall to help position the dog**



**Step 2: Elicia Teaches the “release” from a chair. She sweeps her hand behind the dog causing him to turn his head and body to follow her hand which remains outstretched.**

## **Learning Courses and Planning Handling Strategies**

Elicia gave us an excellent handout called “Course Analysis and Handling Checklist”. In the handout Elicia outlined stages of preparation for running a course. She included:

- 1) Mental Preparation
  - a. Get a feel for the flow
  - b. Choose what works for the team (not what works for everyone else)
  
- 2) Verbal Commands
  - a. Plan what to say
  - b. Plan where you will be when you to say it
  
- 3) Body Signals
  - a. Plan shoulder movement
  - b. Plan hand signals
  - c. Plan handler positioning
    - i. Know critical locations on the course and your ability to get to those spots in time to assist your dog
    - ii. Find spots where you can move strategically by sending your dog away to the next obstacle sequence

d. Is the path you've chosen smooth and flowing?

The handout goes on with suggestions that would entail running the course several times without the dog. However, for purposes of this seminar that advice changed. Handlers with disabilities have serious energy limitations. Physical stamina and cumulative pain limit ambulatory handlers' ability to repeatedly walk or run a course. Handlers on wheels have finite battery reserves. I carry a spare set of chair batteries to trials. Even with two sets of batteries I must limit the time I spend on the course planning my handling strategies. Weather and course terrain are factors that further limit battery longevity.

Moving through the course repeatedly builds what some call "muscle memory"; a phenomena that occurs when one repeats a pattern of movement until it becomes an automatic response to a specific set of external cues (position and order of the obstacles). However, using auditory memory and visualization along with movement utilizes several functions of the brain; thus helping to build working memory of the course without repeatedly moving through it. Elicia suggests the following strategies for creating an integrated working memory of the course.

- 1) Use course maps effectively to limit the time and energy expended during "walk-throughs."
- 2) While reading the map *say the commands out loud*.
- 3) Being mindful of *the order* in which the handler gives information to the dog is essential. There is a big difference between "go on hup" and "hup go on".
- 4) Visualize moving through the course, be specific about seeing changes in posture and positioning of your hands, feet, shoulders and knees (if you are seated).
- 5) Use your voice to create a verbal leash that maintains your connection with your dog and your control, even when you are at a distance from the dog.
- 6) Keep moving, even if you are moving slowly the dog gets information from your momentum and trajectory.

The seminar ended with the handlers' heads swimming with abundant training ideas. No one wanted to stop when the jam-packed two days ended. We are thrilled that Elicia agreed to come back next July.

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

The next Agility On Wheels seminar with Elicia is tentatively for July 17-20, 2003. For more information contact Barbara at [Barbara.Handelman@Valley.Net](mailto:Barbara.Handelman@Valley.Net). Reserve your place in this seminar early, there are only 8 working slots. There will be lots of room for auditors.

Barbara Handelman is list-owner for the Agility On Wheels e-list ([agilityonwheels@yahogroups.com](mailto:agilityonwheels@yahogroups.com)). The list is not limited to wheelers, but also welcomes ambulatory 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](http://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.

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