

Close your eyes and picture the perfect teeter performance. What do you see? Is the dog driving to the end of the board at full speed without pausing at the pivot point? Does the dog keep its weight forward? Once in the two-on, two-off position does the dog hold the position until released? Is the dog's teeter performance the same in competition as in practice?

The first step in any training is to know what the finished performance should look like and to set a goal of exactly what you want your dog's performance to be. The second step is to break the training down into pieces, perfecting each before increasing the level of difficulty.

The first dog I trained for agility, twelve years ago, had a teeter performance timed at a mind numbing five seconds. Watching her perform the teeter was akin to watching grass grow. At the time I knew it was bad but did not realize how bad until a well meaning amateur photographer showed me all the really great photos she took of my dog on the teeter during a competition. She bragged she was able to shoot a whole roll of film in the time it took my dog to complete the teeter. The photos showed a dog, in fear for their life, slowly moving across the teeter. At that moment I vowed my next dog would have a better teeter and that I would become a better agility handler and trainer.

My second agility dog, Lana, who is now eleven, has a teeter performance much improved over the first dog. Teeter performance continued to improve with the next two dogs, Reckless and Joy the Havanese. To see video of my four dogs and Silvina Bruera's Border Collie Maja, log onto www.abbadogs.com. Joy, Reckless and Maja demonstrate great teeter performances from mini, midi and maxi dogs. Now that we know what the teeter performance is suppose to look like, how do we train?

When training a dog I cannot emphasize enough the importance of "listening" to your dog's body language. Watch the ears and tail; look for stress panting or yawning, growling or grumbling, barking and overall enthusiasm level. A good trainer does not advance to the next step, or increase the level of difficulty until the dog is 100% comfortable at the current step. Each step may take a week, a month or longer. Keep in mind it is easier to proceed slowly, evaluating the dog's performance at each step before moving on, than rushing the dog or short cutting training and having to go back later to "fix" a problem.

For the purposes of this article we will assume the reader is versed in clicker training. Teeter training begins on the wobble board, preferably the type that accommodates different size balls and thus variable tilts. I begin with a smaller size ball, the tennis or baseball, to keep the movement and slope very slight. Once the dog is comfortable with the slope and movement of the baseball I use a larger softball and progress to a kid size basketball.

Step 1: Using your feet, brace the wobble board so it does not move. Click and reward the dog first for stepping on then walking across the board.

Step 2: Using the smallest size ball and no longer bracing the board with your feet, encourage your dog to step onto the board making it move. Click and reward.

Step 3: Click and reward the dog for walking across the board, sitting on the board, dancing on the board, turning left and right on the board.

Step 4: Teach the dog the two-on-two off position used at the end of the contacts. Click and reward for getting into position then up the ante by only clicking when the dog keeps her weight forward.

Fully train each step on the smallest size ball first then repeat the steps with the next larger ball. Do not skip steps and do not proceed to the next step or to a larger ball until the dog is 100% comfortable at the current level.

While I'm getting a dog used to movement on the wobble board, in separate training sessions, I will get the dog used to running up and down the teeter without movement. Brace the end of the teeter on the table so that there is no movement and encourage the dog to run up and down the board. Start by going from the table down to the ground. Normally, I begin with the table at the 24" height but if the dog is too nervous a shorter table is used and the height of the table increased to 24" as the dog gets use to the slope. Once the dog is at ease going from the table to the ground I ask the dog to go from the ground up to the table. At this stage do not ask for a stop and touch at the end of the board. As Jim Basic says I want the dog to "see wood and run". The stop on the teeter is added later during Susan Garrett's "bounce game".

The bounce game is somewhat of a continuation of wobble board training in that it transfers the movement of the large wobble board with gentle movement to the narrower teeter board with fast movement accompanied with loud bangs. Place the wing of a jump, plastic chair or other item under the weighted side (approach or up side) of the teeter, bracing the teeter so there is no movement in the board.

Step 1: With the board braced so that it does not move teach the dog to jump up, side ways on the board, always facing down, and move quickly into the two-on-two-off contact position. If you have done your contact board training and end of dog walk training the dog should already have this skill.

Step 2: Now move the item bracing the teeter back so there is a very small, 1" – 2" bounce in the board. Click and reward the dog for placing its weight on the board and making the board move. Once the dog is comfortable with the movement, encourage the dog to jump onto the board and immediately move into the two-on / two-off contact position. The dog is now clicked and rewarded for moving quickly into the contact position. Once the dog becomes proficient in controlling the board and driving to the end with a 1" – 2" bounce increase the bounce to 3" – 4" and so on. Before increasing the bounce closely evaluate the dog. Only increase the amount of bounce if the dog is 100% comfortable at the current level. Remember to listen to your dog and watch for

signs of stress. As the bounce level is increased you may need to go back a step or two for a few days.

At this point I've spent weeks clicking and rewarding the dog, literally, thousands of times for moving the board, driving to the end of the board, running across the board and going into the contact position on the dog walk or contract trainer. It is now time to ask the dog to run the entire length of the teeter and go into the contact position.

My teeter has eight height adjustments; I lower the teeter to the lowest position possible and ask the dog to run the entire board, driving to the end into the two-on and two-off position. It may take a week or a month at each height position. With my Havanese Joy I spent a full year teaching the teeter and the behavior requires weekly maintenance. Only move to the next position if the dog is 100% comfortable at the present height. That means, full speed, keeping her weight forward, driving to the end of the board and not stopping at the pivot point. Often I will make a circle of jumps and tunnels to build speed onto the teeter and ask for three to four completions of the circle in quick repetition.

As the height of the teeter is increased some dogs may hesitate at the pivot point before driving to the end. If this occurs go back and do some bounce game touches for a day or so to reinforce the end of the board. Then try the teeter again. For most dogs this will "fix" the hesitation. Joy drove to the end of the teeter beautifully until the number five position when the teeter was at about 60% height. At that point she began hesitating and leaning her weight back at the pivot point. No amount of wobble board or bounce game reinforcements could convince her to drive through the pivot at a full run. I needed to convince her that the reward was at the end of the board and only if she ran really fast to the end of the board.

Step 1: Set the teeter at full height then use a jump bar to brace the teeter so that the board will not move. Verify the board will not move and that the bar will not spring free under the weight of your dog by pressing down on the end of the board (the end in the air) with your arms. The bar bracing the board should not come out from under the board.

Step 2: Load the end of the board with a tasty treat such as canned cheese or peanut butter, something it will take the dog long enough to eat so she does not go flying off the end of the board before you arrive to lift her off the board. Pick your dog up so they can see the tasty treat you have placed at the end of the board. A small note on lures; when using a lure such as food or toys you want to get in and get out quick as possible. What that means is use the lure one or two times to get the dog into the desired position or performance then switch to rewarding the dog. The problem with lures is that too often they are left in place too long creating a dog that will not perform until we "show them the money".

Step 3: Send the dog to the end of the board with you by her side. Once the dog has reached the end of the board reward her for curling her toes over the end of the board. After multiple clicks pick the dog up off the end of the board and set her on the ground. Until the dog drives to the end of the board without hesitation and without leaning back there should be no movement of the board. During this training your position should vary “around the clock” sometimes sending her to the end of the board with you behind, sometimes you are front recalling her and sometimes you are running on one side then the other. Once the dog is driving to the end of braced teeter and understands that the reward is only at the end of the board it is time to add small movement. Put your teeter on the lowest setting and progress back up through the height adjustments.

The next installment of this article will discuss maintenance of the perfect teeter and performance in and out of competition.