Handling Skills

There are basically 12 handling skills that you and your dog need to know to get around an agility course. (Your dog of course also needs to know obstacle skills and a release cue, but those are considered separate from handling skills).

The skills can be broken down into three categories: Turns, Sends, and Recalls. These are often used in combination with each other, but each is described separately below.

Turns

A turn is any time you and the dog change direction on course. A turn sometimes involves a change of side (for example, the dog was working on your left side and the turn will place him on your right side). Turns can be at any angle (90°, 180°, 270°, etc.) There are four turns:
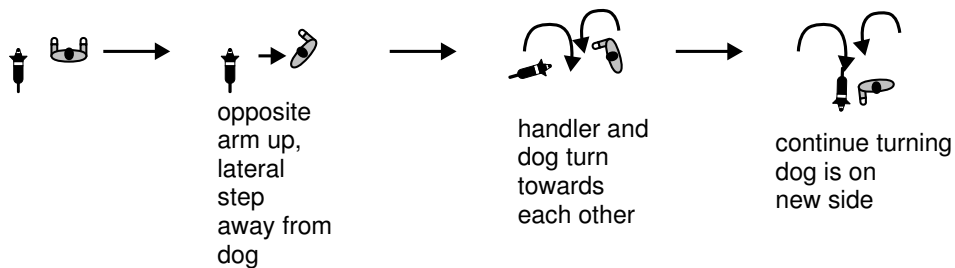
- **Pull Turn**: The handler pulls away from the dog and heads in a new direction, and the dog changes direction to follow the handler. The dog stays on the same side of the handler that he started on.

  Example: 90 degree Pull Turn
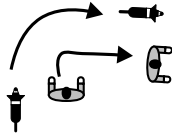
- **Front Cross (FC)**: The handler raises the opposite arm (a collection cue), takes a lateral step away from the dog with the outside leg, then turns into the dog while the dog turns into the handler (there is a moment where they may be facing each other). The dog will end up on the opposite side of the handler than he started from.

  Example: 180 degree FC turn on the flat (dog starting at your side):

  opposite arm up, lateral step away from dog

  handler and dog turn towards each other

  continue turning dog is on new side

  Example: FC combined with an obstacle (usually you are already facing the dog):
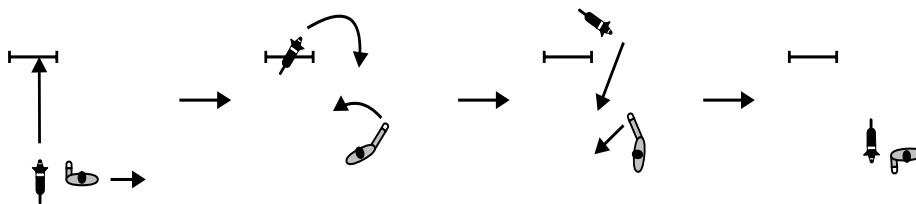
- **Push Turn:** The handler steps towards the dog's path as the dog moves towards the handler. The dog should turn to align with the handler's direction.
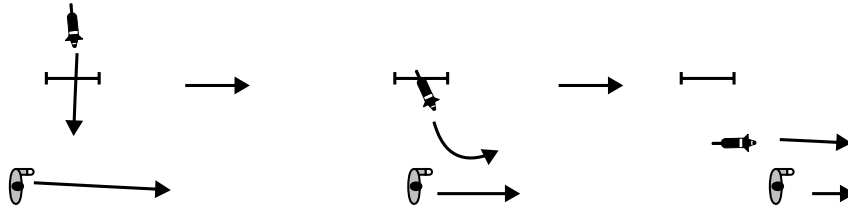
- **Rear Cross (RC) Turn:** The handler steps laterally into the dog as the dog is moving away from the handler. The dog should turn away from the handler (turning his back on the handler momentarily) to move in the new direction. The opposite arm is used at the completion of the turn, but the primary cue for the dog is the handler's convergence on the dog's path and the handler moving laterally in the new direction. In order to avoid the dog turning too early (thus earning a refusal) you must support the jump with forward cues (shoulders forward, inside arm signal, your eyes focused on the jump, and verbal cue to jump or go forward). This will balance your turning cues (lateral motion, location behind the dog) so that the dog understands you want the turn AFTER the jump. If the dog turns before the jump, you had too many turning cues or your dog needs a better send ahead. If the dog spins after the jump (turns the wrong way) you didn't have enough turning cues and/or they were given too late.
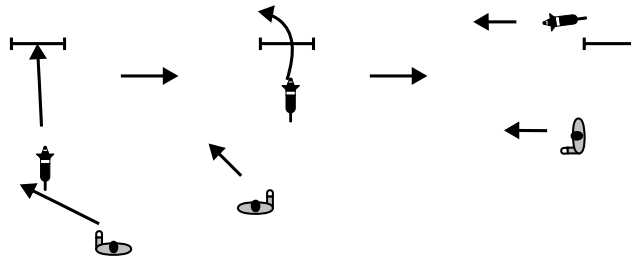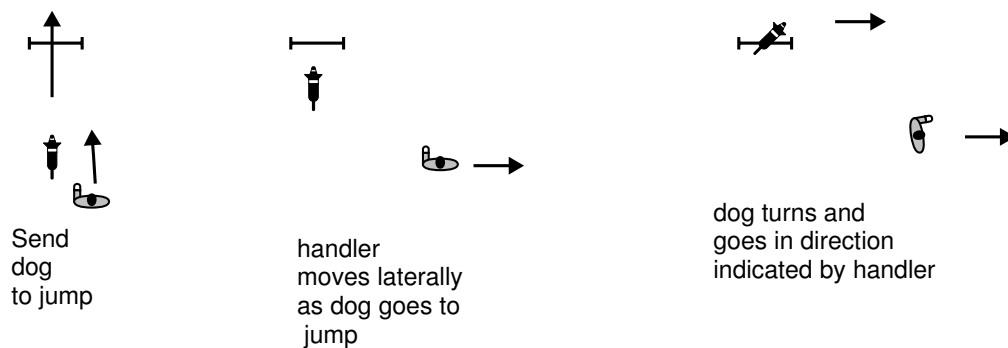
Sends

A send doesn't necessarily mean distance, although most of the time some distance will be involved. A send just means that as your dog is on the way to a jump or other obstacle, you move to cue the next direction, but the dog knows to finish the jump before following your motion cues. If your dog doesn't understand sending, he may decide to abort his attempt at the jump and just follow your cues, resulting in a refusal at the jump. If you fix this problem by waiting for the dog to jump before you give the next cue, then he'll jump with no idea of what you need him to do after the jump, which means he won't know which way to bend over the jump or how big to jump. In order to get him to do the jump but still get him timely information about how to take the jump and what to do next, you need to teach him an independent send. There are two types of sends:

- **Forward Send**: The handler decelerates and turns and/or pulls back the way they came as the dog approaches the jump. The dog will turn back in approximately the direction he came from after doing the jump.

Send
dog
to jump

handler
decelerates
or turns and
goes the other
way

dog turns tightly
and goes back the
direction he came from
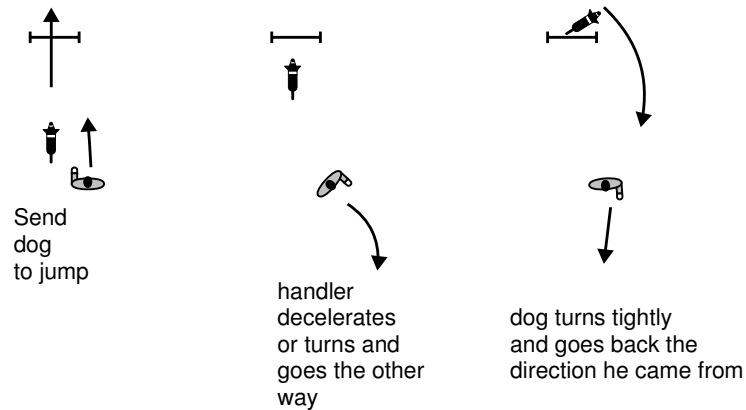
- **Lateral Send:** The handler decelerates and moves laterally as the dog approaches the jump. After doing the jump, the dog will turn and run in the direction the handler went.

Send
dog
to jump

handler
moves laterally
as dog goes to
 jump

dog turns and
goes in direction
indicated by handler

Recalls

Usually referred to as 'recall to heel' or "RTH". The 'heel' doesn't refer to an obedience heel position, but simply means that the dog comes near your side and aligns his body with the direction of the handler's motion. RTH are used any time on course your dog is moving towards you. Always when moving towards you, your body should be cueing the next direction and he should align himself with the direction being indicated. In order to align with the next direction, he will need to collect (i.e., shift his weight to his rear and shorten his stride if needed). Putting the weight on the rear allows the dog to move his front end to turn the most efficiently. It also means he's in control of his momentum and won't run into you! There are six different presentations that your dog may see moving towards you on course:

- **Extension RTH**: The handler's back is to the dog and the handler is moving away. The dog should run quickly to catch up, then collect as he approaches the handler until he sees what new direction or obstacle will be cued.


- **Directed Jumping RTH:** The handler and dog are across from each other and there is a jump between them but offset to one side. The dog should understand to alter his path to go out and take the jump before returning to the handler. This move is commonly used as part of a front cross. In this situation, if the handler were to move to put the jump directly between the handler and the dog, the handler's motion would be cueing the wrong direction after the jump and would result in a wide and inefficient turn. By using the directed jumping RTH, the handler can ask the dog to do the jump while simultaneously moving correctly or being in a correct location to cue the next direction.
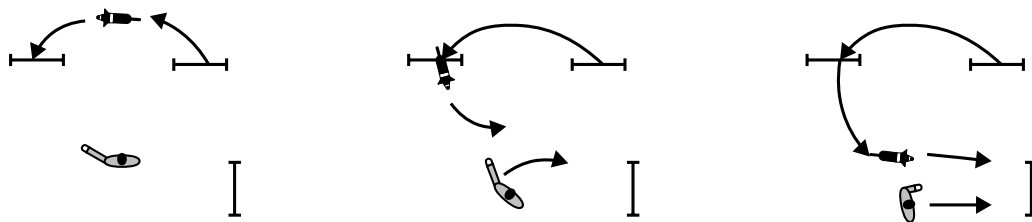

Example of Directed Jumping RTH used in a Front Cross. Dog will jump even though handler is offset to one side.

Dog collects and turns to align with handler's direction

- **Serpentine RTH:** The handler and dog are across from each with a jump between them at a depressed angle (flat to the dog's line of travel, and therefore easy to miss). The dog must alter his path to converge on the handler and take the jump, rather than continuing to run parallel to the handler. Serpentines are a common course scenario and one that can easily result in knocked bars, collisions between dog and handler, or the dog missing the jump if the dog doesn't understand this skill.
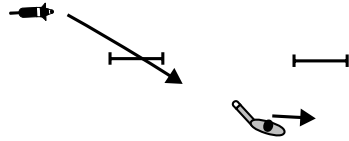
Dog recalls over a depressed angle jump. This requires convergence on the handler's line.
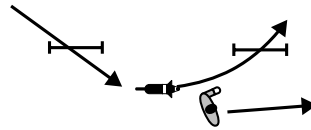
Dog collects and aligns with handler's direction. This puts dog in good position for the next jump of the serpentine.

- **270 RTH:** The dog is approaching a jump from a very flat angle and will execute a 270° turn over the jump. This skill is useful for when the handler needs to a front cross on a 270° turn or ask the dog to take the back side of a jump.
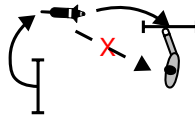
Dog approaches from backside of jump. Dog understands not to take the shortcut (red x).
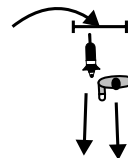
- **Backy-Uppy RTH:** The dog and handler are facing each other, and the dog will pass the handler, turn, and align to the handler's side. This is a similar movement to a 'swing' finish used in obedience. It is important when teaching and using this RTH that the dog not be allowed to pass behind the handler's arm. The dog can pass the handler's body but the handler's arm should move to show the dog to space he is allowed to take. This is useful for wrap turns and anytime you need extremely tight collection.
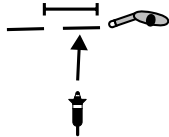
WRONG. Dashed line shows 'do not pass' plane of handler's arm. The dog should not jump in this scenario because the jump is behind the handler's arm. This presentation is useful to cue collection BEFORE dog reaches jump, but must change before dog jumps.
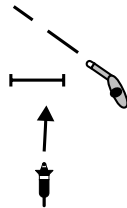
CORRECT. The angle of the handler's arm permits the dog to jump but restricts his arc after the jump, resulting in a tight turn. The arm must move to this location before the dog is at the commitment point for the jump.
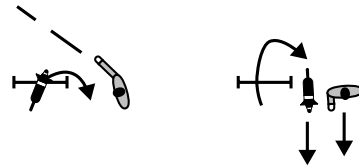
Dog collects and turns to align with handler's direction.

- **Foundation RTH:** The dog approaches the handler at a 90° angle, collects, and turns to align with handler's direction. This is the basic RTH position, and is also one of the hardest as it requires the dog to come directly into the handler and not 'cheat' by diving (i.e. cutting the corner). When the dog 'dives' it means he is probably not collecting. Diving is likely to result in a collision with the handler and/or a knocked bar or the dog going the wrong direction. This RTH may be used numerous places on course to cue collection and also is a good training basic for improving all of the recall positions.
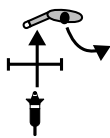
CORRECT. Dog jumps directly towards handler and collects.

Dog turns to align with handler.
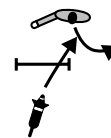
INCORRECT. Dog 'dives' to handler's other side, taking a shortcut on the turn. This is likely to result in a collision or a knocked bar.