Motion-based Handling System Overview

A "handling system" is simply whatever method of communication (cues) a particular dog and handler team have worked out between themselves so that the handler knows how to tell the dog where to go and the dog understands clearly what the handler is asking the dog to do.

Handling cues can be broken out into 'natural' cues and 'trained' cues. Any handling system, whether a formal system or just a 'this is what I always do' type of system, is composed of a combination of the natural cues supplemented with specific trained cues. The natural cues are fairly universal in all systems, but trained cues may vary widely based on the handler's system, handling style/preferences, and/or physical limitations.

- **Natural cues** are those which most dogs will naturally respond to without specific training in what the cues mean, provided the dog is paying attention and is motivated to play agility with the handler. For example, if you run in a particular direction, most dogs will run in the same direction. Natural cues may be further refined by training and practice so that the dog responds more quickly and more confidently to the cue.

  Because these cues are natural to the dog and not trained, the handler may not be aware of all of the cues the dog is responding to, or all of the cues the handler may unintentionally be giving. This is why a high percentage of errors in agility are due to miscommunication with the natural cues. Understanding and practicing the natural cues will help the handler use them more effectively. An instructor focusing on observing the natural cues will probably catch the reason for most of the errors occurring in class and be able to tell the student how to fix them.

- **Trained cues** are those which require specific training for the dog to understand how to respond, for example a verbal command to do the tunnel instead of the a-frame that's right next to it, or a dog who has been trained to cut behind the handler's back on a particular hand signal, or a dog who has been taught 'left' and 'right' commands. Because a lot of time was put into teaching the trained cues to the dog, most handlers use and understand the trained cues pretty well and will make fewer errors with them than they do with the natural cues.

The basic role of the cues is to tell the dog as he approaches each turning obstacle (jumps, straight tunnels) or exits each non turning obstacle (contacts, weaves, curved tunnels):

- which way is he going next (turning vs going straight, if turning, how much of a turn)
- if jumping, how should the jump be taken (extended or collected)
- how should the dog be running (extended or collected)

We are looking Linda Mecklenberg's Awesome Paws Handling System (APHS) because it relies heavily on the natural cues, which are the most likely ones our students will know. WAG's focus will be on the natural part of the system, although students will be learning some of the trained cues in Level 1 as well. There are six basic types of cues – these are summarized on the next page.

The 6 Handling Cues

Motion (natural)
Motion is the primary and strongest cue that most dogs will respond to. Errors in handler motion are the cause of most handling-related dog errors on course.

Motion may be further broken out into the following:
- Presence vs absence of motion (is the handler stopped or moving?)
- Direction (which way is the handler going?)
- Speed (is the handler accelerating, decelerating, or maintaining a constant pace)

Shoulders (natural)
For most dogs, the direction the shoulders are pointing indicates which way the handler may be going next, so shoulder cues are related to motion cues. For example, if your shoulders are pointed at an obstacle, the dog may still go there even if you have stopped forward motion.

Location (natural)
Location refers to both the handler's position relative to the dog and the handler's position relative to the next obstacle. Location and motion cues interact, as motion will usually cause a change in location (i.e., if you move laterally you will end up farther away from the dog and/or obstacle).

- Location relative to dog (is handler ahead of dog, behind dog, or lateral to dog)
- Location relative to obstacle (is handler on landing side or take-off side, is handler near the obstacle or at a distance, where is handler in relation to the midline of the jump?)

Arms/Hands (trained)
Hand or arm signals may get some natural reaction from the dog, as the dog may perceive hand motion forward the same way he would read body motion forward (the hand goes where your body can't). But most hand signals (opposite arm collection, turn away cue, go forward cue, get out cue, etc) are trained. Variations on hand/arm signals include:

- which arm (arm nearest dog or opposite arm)
- hand/arm position (inactive at handler's side, or extended to the side or forward)
- arm motion - held steady or arm being extended or withdrawn

Verbal (trained)
Verbals include the dog's name, which he learns in normal day to day interaction, and also verbal cues trained specifically for agility, such as obstacle commands or directional commands.

Eye Contact (natural)
If the handler looks ahead to the next obstacle or direction of travel the dog will have more tendency to focus ahead. If the handler focuses on the dog and makes eye contact, the dog will tend to collect and draw into the handler more. Eye contact may not be applicable in many situations, such as when the handler is behind the dog, but may come into play in other situations, such as when you're front crossing or doing a wrap.

How the 6 Handling Cues Affect the Dog

The variations on each of the cues can be broken out into 'turning' cues vs 'forward' cues. Turning cues will usually also cue collection (the dog must collect to make a good turn). The more turning cues, the more the dog will collect. Forward cues will usually also cue extension. The more forward cues the more the dog will extend.

Motion:

- Forward cues: Handler is moving (not stopped)
  Handler is moving forward in direction dog is going
  Handler is accelerating or maintaining constant pace
  Handler maintains distance from centerline of jump

- Turning cues: Handler is stopped
  Handler is moving laterally or in a direction different from dog's current line
  Handler is decelerating (if not already stopped)
  Handler is moving towards or away from centerline of jump

Shoulders:

- Forward cues: Shoulders facing forward in same direction as handler/dog are moving

- Turning cues: Shoulders turned into dog or facing the dog
  Shoulders are turned away from dog's path (dog will turn but may also extend)

Location:

- Forward cues: Handler is ahead of dog and near dog's line of intended travel
  Handler is on landing side of jump or exit side of obstacle

- Turning cues: Handler is behind dog or is located away from dog's intended line of travel
  Handler is on take-off side of jump or entrance side of obstacle

Arms/Hands:

- Forward cues: Inside arm extended or held forward on line of travel and/or towards obstacle

- Turning cues: Outside arm used
  Arm (inside or outside) held or drawn in close to handler's body

Verbal:

- Forward cues: Obstacle command
  Trained 'go on' command

- Turning cues: Dog's name
  'Come' command
  No verbal (dog will need to be more aware of where handler is)

Eye Contact:

- Forward cues: Peripheral eye contact, handler looks where they're going
- Turning cues: Eye-to-eye contact between dog and handler, handler focus on dog

Balancing the Cues

The balance of the 6 cues will determine the final action taken by the dog.

For example, if you give 4 turning cues and 2 forward cues, the dog will move forward but in a more collected manner. If you give 6 turning cues and no forward cues, the dog may not even do the next obstacle because he'll stop or turn before reaching it. If you give 5 forward cues and one turning cue, you will likely get a very wide turn with the dog moving in extension.

The balance of cues will vary based on the individual dog. You'll know the balance is probably wrong if the dog makes a mistake. You can analyze the mistake and determine if the dog needed more forward cues (dog pulled off before doing the obstacle) or more turning cues (dog turned wide or continued on and took additional objects that the handler did not intend to cue). Once you determine if you need more turning cues or more forward cues, examine each of the 6 types of cues (motion, shoulders, arms, location, verbal, eye contact) and see if you can figure out which one to change.

In addition to what cues are used, the timing of when they are used is also important. The cues must be given at the point where the dog is determining what to do next. For a jump, the dog needs the information somewhere between his commitment point and actual take off (a dog can't easily alter his trajectory once he's in the air) so the cues should be given during the last stride or two BEFORE he actually jumps. For nonturning obstacles such as a contact or the weaves, the cue should come by the time the dog is preparing to exit. It may come earlier if the dog has independent obstacles skills (won't jump off the contact or pull out of weaves if you move before he's completed them).

A turning obstacle is a obstacle where the handler's action will affect how the dog performs the obstacle – in other words, the dog is responding to the handling cue as part of the obstacle performance. For example, if the handler is behind the dog and motionless (both collection/turning cues) when the dog is sent to a jump, the dog should shorten stride and jump collected, and his jumping trajectory should be an arc around the jump standard that will bring him in a tight turn back to his handler. Conversely, if the handler is ahead and moving forward (both forward / extension cues) when the dog jumps, his jumping path should be a straight line over the jump using an extended stride.

A nonturning obstacle is an obstacle where the dog can't respond to the handler cue until after he completes the obstacle. For example, if the handler pulls laterally while the dog is on the dogwalk, he can't turn until he completes the dogwalk. Or if the handler pull away or drops behind while the dog is weaving, the dog can't respond to the handler's movement until he finishes the weaves (assuming he's been trained he must finish them all before doing the next thing cued by the handler). If he responds to the handler's motion while weaving, he will likely pull out of the weaves and have a faulted performance.