

Trials and Tribulations

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF TRAINING ALASKAN MALAMUTES



Ellen competes in agility with her Mals Mr Greyfoot (left) and Tag, aka "the Tunnel Rat!"

Photographs courtesy of Randy Gaines

Headed in the Right Direction

Top Ten Agility competitor Ellen McKee explains how she keeps her dogs with her, even through high-speed twists and turns.

I have been competing in agility with Tag (CH IR's Snow Hollow Taggart Lake, WTD, WWPD, OA, OAJ, NAP, OJP) since 2009. He was eight years old when we started competing, but very lively and busy. So, we started in regular agility classes – jumping 24 inches. By the time we got into Excellent A, he was knocking one bar in almost every run. Whether he knocked a bar or not, he would take an eternity to either sit or down on the table in Standard. Thank goodness, that rule changed last year. Of course, now that he just has to get on the table and stay in any position, he often sits.

Anyway, at the last trial last fall, I moved him down to Preferred, starting all over jumping 20 inches. We have been to only two trials in 2011, and he is already back into Excellent A Preferred Jumpers and Open Preferred Standard. Needless to say, he is running very well. And, he also runs well into tunnels - even when he isn't supposed to.

At the last trial, while earning two new titles, he greatly entertained the crowd by thoroughly enjoying an off-course tunnel. It was his first run in Open Standard. He had a terrific start – cleared all the jumps, hit his weave pole entry, was right with me and focused on every cue. It was beautiful. The last five obstacles were the teeter, to a tunnel curving under the A-frame, then a single bar jump, wrap back to the A-frame and a single bar jump for the finish. Tag completed the teeter, nailed the tunnel and the jump, wrapped

beautifully back toward the A-frame and took the tunnel (Wrong Course fault), and then took the tunnel, and

Let's Twist Again
Your dog is going where he is looking. To change direction, you must control the dog's head.

then took the tunnel and then took the tunnel. With a very forceful "A-Frame" command from me, he decided to do the A-Frame and the final jump. He was just so happy that he got to do all of those tunnels. "What a fun course! Let's get some treats!" The judge commented that his run was good enough for America's Funniest Home Videos. Of course, the goal IS to have fun with your dog!

Step-by-Step

Turning Toward You



Note that this dog is turning with the handler while in the air - so timing your cue to turn is very important. As the dog commits to jump, give him the command to turn and turn your body to point him to the next obstacle you want him to take.



When you turn right, pass the next jump so it stays on your left side. Do not block your dog's path to the jump.

Turning Away From You



Walk forward slowly and put the treat in front of your dog's nose. Move the hand with the treat forward, out and in a circle backwards, while saying "Turn."



When the dog turns away from you and has reversed direction, let him have the treat. If you did it right, your dog will switch sides, and you will both head in the opposite direction.



Right - this is how it looks in competition! Photograph courtesy of Randy Gaines.

How I Train Direction Changes



Use this jump set-up to train your dog to turn. I make a box at the end by putting two jumps between jumps three and four, perpendicular to the jump line.

Once you have introduced your dog to all of the agility equipment, it is time to train him to follow your cues (hands, voice and body language) in a specific pattern around the agility course. You want both of you to flow smoothly through the course in a competent and safe manner. This often compels the handler and dog to make multiple direction changes.

You must remember at all times that your dog is not going anywhere except where he is looking. Therefore, to make direction changes, the handler controls the dog's head.

The easiest to train is to have the dog turn toward you. I like to set up four jumps in a row. I also make a box at the end by putting two jumps between jumps three and four and perpendicular to the other four, as shown in the photo above.

First, run with

your dog on either side of you, taking all four jumps in a straight line. Then, with your dog on your left, take the first three jumps. Once your dog has committed to the third jump, call him by either using his name or a "come" or "here" voice command. As soon as your dog looks your way, turn your body to the right toward the side jump, and give him the command to jump. (Note: be careful to run past with the jump on your left and don't block your dog's path to the jump.) He should take the jump that is perpendicular on the right side. It is important that you reward your dog immediately with either a treat or a soft toss with a ball or toy and lots of verbal praise. Repeat with the dog on your right, calling him toward you, turning left and taking the left outside perpendicular jump.

Getting your dog to turn away from you is a little harder to train. I start with ground



work by having a treat in the hand closest to the dog. While walking slowly forward, put the treat right in front of his nose. Move the hand, still with the treat, forward and out and circle backwards. At the same time, use a voice command of "turn" or "switch" (or anything that will come to mind quickly). When the dog turns away from you and has reversed direction, let him have the treat. You should have also reversed your direction. You will note that the dog has switched sides. If he was on your left, he should now be on your right and you are both heading in the opposite direction.

You will probably find that your dog will learn to turn away from you more easily in one direction than the other. My dog Tag learned very quickly to turn away from me when he was on my right side. But, the left side turn-away took a lot longer.

Once your dog is comfortable turning away and getting treats, try it with the same jump set up that we used for turning our dog toward us. After your dog has committed to the third jump, give the turn command. If your dog is on your left, drop your left shoulder. You can also swing your opposite arm forward as you make your turn alongside your dog. Both of these body movements reinforce your verbal command. Again, don't block your dog's path to the next obstacle.

Usually, the "turn" command also involves a Back Cross, but I think that is for another lesson.

It is very important to be consistent with your dog. When he is learning something new, give a reward immediately when he has been successful. If he isn't successful, look at your body position. You have probably given opposing signals with your voice and body. Try again. Keep your voice and facial expressions positive. Always remember to keep it FUN!

Bloopers

Readers share their Malamute Moments

Can I Get That To Go?

The comedian of my kennel is Elise, Aluk's Fur Elise, RA, NJP, CGC. Elise has a way of bringing masses of people into hysterical laughter at shows. At an outdoor agility competition in Idaho, she was halfway through the course when suddenly she lost attention completely and took off over the ring gate! I must add here that she is very fast...Concerned bystanders and I caught up with her as she calmly stood in the concession line - waiting, I assume, for perogies, as they were sold at that particular vendor. She is quite a character!

~ **Kim Sullivan**

Man, a perogie would really hit the spot right now...



Photograph of Elise courtesy of Kim Sullivan.



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About the Author

Ellen McKee acquired her first malamute in 1984 - a puppy that had been dropped off at a local boarding kennel because his owner couldn't keep him. She was smitten by the breed and has never looked back! She currently enjoys a wide range of activities with her malamutes, including conformation, sledding, weight pull and agility. She has earned an obedience title with one of her mals, but her true love is agility. Ellen has put an astonishing 28 agility titles on three malamutes and a border terrier!

An AMCA member since 1987, Ellen lives in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Ellen also belongs to the Grand Teton Kennel Club, a local non-sanctioned



training club, where she has taught agility for the last ten years. Always mindful of the needs of dogs, she and the other trainers at the club donate their earnings from teaching agility and obedience to the local dog community once a year!