

Foundation Behaviors for Watersports (and Other Sports)

True cooperation, real teamwork, cannot be demanded or taken. Cooperation, when given freely, increases trust, playfulness, creativity, focus and energy. These are the keys to joyfully learning and inspiring team performances. Deborah Lee Miller-Riley

Basic Watersports Behaviors:

Core Behaviors are the simple blocks of behavior that make up more complex behaviors. These are the core skills for watersports:

BRING: Dog shall immediately leave the handler, move to a *designated article*, grasp it, and deliver the article into the handler's hand when cued to do so.

COURSE DIRECTIONS

AROUND: The dog shall move in a circular pattern or loop around a designated target (Person, Boat, Marker) The dog can be cued to circle in a particular direction, as in a herding dog commands, Come-bye and Away which tell the dog to circle (left or right) of the sheep from the shepherd.

COME HERE: Hand Targeting - Dog shall move immediately to the handler, from any location, from any distance, away from any pleasure source and make (nose, paw, chin) contact with the handler's hand, when cued to do so.

OFF: The dog shall immediately move four paws off a platform (boat, dock, MPG station) when cued to do so. Clarity will be preserved if handlers have separate cues for leaping off something, like a boat, and leaping over something, like an agility jump. The cue to jump is not needed when the dog is sent from the platform to retrieve or deliver, as getting to the target would include the dog leaving the platform.

PASS or BETWEEN: The dog shall move between two designated targets. Also know as *weaving* when there are three or more poles/markers in a row.

PORT: Given a choice between two or more possible destinations the dog will move to his or her LEFT when cued to move to the Port.

STAR: Given a choice between two or more possible destinations the dog shall move to his or her RIGHT when cued to move to the Star.

STRAIGHT AWAY: Remote Targeting - Dog shall immediately move straight away from the handler, to a designated location or target when cued to do so. Interacts with the destination target can be defined with *sit, down, release-it, up, wait, bring, around, or weave between*.

UP: *Up means the target destination is above the dog's present position. The dog shall move up to reach the target. Boat-Up means the target destination is on top of the boat.*

DIVE: The dog shall submerge its muzzle to a water depth that allows the dog contact with the designated target or the dog shall submerge to search for a designated target.

DOWN: Dog shall immediately adopt a prone posture, elbows and belly on the floor, at any location, on or at any target or from any distance from the handler, until released by the handler, when cued to do so.

PULL: overcome resistance and complete the Bring behavior, aka towing.

PUSH: The dog shall direct the movement of an object by applying force with her forehead, muzzle, paw or shoulder.

RELEASE: Dog shall drop, release or surrender control of any article in his or her possession, from any distance from the handler, in motion or stationary, when cued to do so. (drop, leave-it, spit). For clarity, a *Leave-it* cue means the dog is not to approach/touch something of interest to the dog and a drop/release-it cue means the dog is to release control of what the dog is carrying.

SIT: Dog shall immediately adopt a sit posture, hocks and rump on the floor, at any location, on or at any target, or from any distance from the handler, until released by the handler, when cued to do so.

SNIFF: The dog shall locate a specific scent source desired by the handler.

SWIM: Dog shall join the handler in the water and shall remain close to the handler without interfering with the handler's movement whether swimming or wading. When swimming the dog shall keep pace at the handler's shoulder (left or right) or shall circle or loop the handler when the handler is not swimming.

TAKE: Dog shall immediately grasp a *designated article* and transport the article to a remote target, location, person when cued to do so. Delivery destinations can be identified by combining Take with *away, port, star* or a labeled destination.

WAIT/STAY: Dog shall remain stationary, at any location or target, from any distance from the handler, until released by the handler.

CRITERIA is an aspect or variable that defines a behavior. Focus on one criterion at a time when training to help isolate the objective. Watersports criteria includes:

- 🐾 **Distance** How far (travel between two points, including distance from shore or travel parallel to shore and travel beneath the surface)
- 🐾 **Duration** How long (action or stay)
- 🐾 **Directional** Which Direction (submersion or surface, environmental clues, and visual & auditory signals from handler including: away, come, left, right, submerge or climb up.)
- 🐾 **Destination** What is the target location (shore, start box, water zones, people, swimmers, markers, boaters, and how the dog interacts with the destination target - default or cued)
- 🐾 **Intensity** Quality of performance - energy, strength, speed, force, eagerness, passion, joy
- 🐾 **Load,** Qualities of the (Article size, texture, shape, weight, buoyancy, drag, number of, etc.)
- 🐾 **Method of Transport** How to (carry by mouth or harness; or tow by mouth or harness)
- 🐾 **Start Position** (Shore, dock, water, boat, next to or away from the handler.)

CUES are the signals we use to initiate a LEARNED behavior from the dog. Cues are usually attached to a canine behavior AFTER the behavior has been established and the dog is offering the desired behavior. Some planning is needed if you compete in different sports as you may need to select new cues for different sports, i.e. the word jump in agility is not the same jump as done off a boat. Cues can be:

- 🐾 **Visual** -- the way we use our body (hand, arms, legs, head) or Things, like flags, colors, lights.
- 🐾 **Audible** -- noises we can make with devices, like bells, horns, whistles or our body, (clapping, grunting or whistling).
- 🐾 **Verbal** -- words (sit, down, come)

Note: Using the word "touch" for a contact cue usually asks the dog to touch with her nose, thus "touch" becomes the label for the dog's nose. Teaching the dog a separate name for each of her body parts makes the dog more versatile and allows the handler to specify HOW the dog is to touch the target.

Getting Started

There are many behaviors in watersports; including retrieves, deliveries, team swimming, submersions, tows, target discrimination, course discrimination, and platform to boat work. How do we get these canine behaviors started? An easy, fast, and motivational way to communicate a desired behavior to the dog is through targeting concepts.

Touch Targeting:

Touch Targeting is a training method that asks the dog move to a specific target and make body contact with the target. It serves to strengthen behaviors performed away from the handler, isolate body parts for specific movements and asks the dog to voluntarily move her body to a target destination. Targeting permits the handler to work her dog hands free and it empowers and trains the dog through choices.

Kinds of Targets: There are three basic touch targets used as transitional tools: The Trainer's Hand, a Pawn (any small object that can be moved around) and a Wand or Target-stick used as an extension of the hand. Because these target tools are used to get a behavior started and are default (go touch whenever presented) targets, the handler does not need to name these targets. They are just Go-To items that can be placed or used anywhere in the environment to ask for canine movement.

Watersports Targets: for contact and non-contact

Hand:

1. Fingers: (default nose contact)
 - A closed fist with thumb up as target or
 - A closed fist with index and middle finger out as target.
2. Palm (default chin to palm contact)
 - Dominant hand held flat with all fingers together, palm facing up, hand parallel with floor.

Pawn - Default - any portable, unlabeled, conditioned go-to target including:

- 🐾 Floor tiles (4 X 4 ceramic tile for dogs who are compulsive retrievers, or a small plastic tile)
- 🐾 Cones/Shore Markers/ Water Markers
- 🐾 Stickers placed on walls, floors, objects
- 🐾 Clips (like clothes clips or kitchen clips)

Labeled Targets A label is a word associated with an article, person or destination, that identifies that article, person, or destination to the dog. Labeled watersports targets may include:

- 🐾 Tables, water platforms and **boat** platforms
- 🐾 Starter's Box
- 🐾 Shore
- 🐾 Swimmer or person (generic name for people and names of individuals)
- 🐾 All Water Retrieve and Delivery articles: Ropes to lines, balls, dummies, and other toys.

Training targets can be almost anything in the environment including;

- 🐾 Baskets/buckets
- 🐾 Ring gates

- 🐾 Rugs or Mats
- 🐾 Crate/Car
- 🐾 Colors or symbols
- 🐾 Large Drive Balls

Body Parts as Touch Points: Handlers can teach their dog the name of specific canine body parts. Attaching a label to a canine body part (i.e. Nose, Chin, Paw, Shoulder, Rump) gives the handler an advantage when precision and fast comprehension is needed. Important body part labels for watersports are Paw, Nose, Chin. With these labels, the handler can identify to the dog how to touch a target.

Common Touch Points:

- 🐾 Nose to target
- 🐾 Paw on target
- 🐾 Rump - "Sit" at target
- 🐾 Belly - "Down" at target
- 🐾 Chin on target
- 🐾 Mouth grasp target

Criteria: duration/ repetition, intensity, context changes

Course Movements to Master

There are eight primary directional actions which include target contact. All movement is forward. However, for fun & fluency you can teach the dog to "Away, Port, Star and Return to Handler" running backwards.

1. **Straight Away:** from handler
2. **Port:** move to the left, the dog's left
3. **Star:** (Starboard) move to right, the dog's right
4. **Stop/Stay**
5. **Return to Handler**
6. **Up** - climb on, to get on top of, i.e. climb "up" onto a boat platform.
7. **Off** - to get off the target by jumping down or over
8. **Over** - to leap over the target without climbing on it.

There are two additional directional actions where the target is used to define a course without canine contact with the target.

9. **Looping around** (No stop or contact at target)
Looping is the dog's circular or looping path around a fixed target, i.e. circling a swimmer or a boater.
 - Circle to the right
 - Circle to the left
 - Circle handler
 - Circle marker, chair, cone, table, etc
 - Circle stranger

10. **Passing** (No stop or contact at target)

Passing is when the dog's course takes her close to a target on the way past it. The target in Passing is a directional clue, not a contact target, i.e. moving between weave poles or swimming past a water marker to get to a drop zone. Going THROUGH a tunnel in agility is a *passing* course direction.

- Pass left side of target (Herding term "Come-bye")
- Pass right side of target (Herding term "Away")

At some point watersports may include behaviors that ask the dog to go UNDER a target.

Criteria: Distance, Start position, Action at Target, Duration, Intensity

Start Positions to Master: [DOG: sit, down, stand. HANDLER: Stand, Sit] *extra

- 🐾 Dog at Handler's left side, toes facing same direction as handler
- 🐾 Dog at Handler's right side, toes facing same direction as handler
- 🐾 Dog toe to toe in front of the handler, facing handler (boatwork)
- 🐾 Dog rump to toe in front of the handler, facing away (boatwork)
- 🐾 *Dog toe by toe between the handler's legs facing same direction as handler
- 🐾 Dog at distant target, on a perpendicular line with handler, facing handler
- 🐾 Dog at a distant target, to the left of the handler, facing handler (triangle positions)
- 🐾 Dog at a distant target, to the right of the handler, facing handler.
- 🐾 Dog at a distant target, on a perpendicular line with handler, facing away from handler
- 🐾 Dog and handler on a platform, dog at handler's left side
- 🐾 Dog and handler on a platform, dog at handler's right side
- 🐾 Dog on distant platform, handler on platform facing dog

Training Reminders:

Create ATTITUDE (joy in the game) before all else.

Great leaders never hold the dog responsible for creating the learning attitude. Joy, focus, persistence, intensity of effort, and learning/memory are the handler's responsibility.

Keep shaping steps small and reinforcement rates significantly higher than the number of unrewarded behaviors.

Train for improvement toward the destination of Personal Excellence. Perfection is not a training destination, it is a dark, joyless hole.

HUMOR increases creativity and learning! Training with a sense of humor can benefit both you and your dog. When you marry laughter with "mistakes" you make a joy-based relationship your highest priority. It feels great when you let your dog and yourself off the instant-perfection hook. Laughter is not only good for the soul, it's a super social reinforcer. Dogs who enjoy making their owners laugh tend to offer a wider variety of behavior. Having a dog who is creative gives the trainer more opportunities to capture and strengthen desired behaviors. This empowers the dog and delights the trainer -- the right nutrients for new learning.

Perception is different for non-human animals. Fear is a very powerful emotion that can keep a dog safe, but it is not necessarily compatible with a handler's training goals. Temple Grandin said, *You can train an animal to close its fear file, but there is no delete button for fear. When you punish fear you make it worse. When an animal voluntarily cooperates, you reduce stress and fear. When your dog offers you cooperation - APPRECIATE IT!*

🐾 Understand that primal fears include:

- Entrapment -- inability to escape, especially restraint, no choice.
- Suffocation -- inability to breathe - drowning, confinement, restraint.
- Falling -- unstable surfaces, drop offs like in pool or lakes.
- Pain -- emotional and physical, is the behavior you are asking for uncomfortable for the dog?
- Noise - intensity, unpredictability, proximity.

🐾 Recognize fear in your dog. (Know Canine Body Language) Submissive body language is not the only indicator of stress. Arousal, hyper activity and aggression are also indicators of stress and fear. Predictability offers the trainer the opportunity to prevent or reduce fear and distress. Address the fear issues or train to reduce arousal before you continue watersports training.

🐾 Learn how to keep your dog in a curious or *seeking* state of mind to help quiet emotions like fear and distress.

REST, like good timing, is critical to learning. The more demanding the training session the more time the dog will need to process the information. Rest occurs when the dog can relax. Handlers can foster an environment for relaxation by knowing what their dog needs for relaxation and rest. Covering a crate may dampen visual stimulation; body massage and touch work may offer muscle relaxation; or sequestering a dog in a quiet room, car, or building may offer the best opportunity for relaxation for other dogs. A good leader and trainer is an advocate for the dog. **A canine advocate will always put the dog's need for rest above personal goals or social pressure.** That includes saying *No* to just one more class exercise. Problem solving, focused learning, fear and worry are energy burners. Dogs who are considered soft, cautious, reactive or shy can have less stamina in public training sessions than dogs with more confident temperaments. When publicly training these dogs, handlers will need to consider proximity to stressors and watch for the dog's inability to focus on the handler or task.

Factors effecting canine learning & performance and handler patience and adaptation:

- Age/Growth (puppy, adolescent, geriatric issues)
- Temperament (including biddability, persistence, confidence, sociability, curiosity, playfulness, resilience and all in the right balance to each other)
- Other traits & instincts (chase, hunt, retrieve, water attraction, sexual)
- Prior learning and experimentation (negative and positive experiences effect learning)
- Health, Structure, Conditioning & Energy (including K9 visual awareness)
- Intelligence
- Fear (learned and temperament)
- Canine Buoyancy (lung capacity, propulsion, muscle to fat ratio)
- Handler awareness and sensitivity to the dog's needs
- Handler's knowledge and planning for training goals.
- Handler's awareness of how to start and build a behavior, use of and timing of a behavioral marker, use of and value of reinforcement (to dog) and delivery placement of reinforcement.
- Environmental factors / water site variables (temperatures, wind speed, water dynamics, organic and mineral content, wildlife attractions/distraction).

Reinforcement is anything the dog wants, is willing to work to obtain and tends to "strengthen" or increase the likelihood the target behavior will be repeated. Examples of reinforcement include food,

water, access to toys, and opportunity to do something pleasurable like **play or explore**. Some dogs love EMOTIONAL Reinforcers, vocal to tactile, but be sure to watch for a joyful response from your dog to ensure its pleasurable for her. Relief from fear or stress provoking stimuli is also a reinforcer. Food is a valuable reinforcer, but only if the dog is hungry and the dog desires the food over other opportunities and distractions in the environment. Make sure food and non-food reinforcers are **selected for canine irresistibility** -- above human likes and convenience.

Timing and Marking a behavior is critical to learning. To “mark” a point in a dog’s behavior is to draw attention to that behavior and make it significant to the dog. The marker, which identifies the desired behavior becomes a valuable tool when paired with a source of reinforcement. Listening for the “marker” then becomes important to the dog because she learns to anticipate something pleasurable. A device that makes a unique sound or the word “YES” are two well established markers. Example: The dog accidentally or intentionally steps on a target, the handler captures the dog’s action by “marking” the paw contact with a Click or Yes. This calls the dog’s attention to his behavior. The handler then gives the dog a valued resource like a treat or toy. If the dog enjoys this, the game is on to figure out how to get the handler to dole out more of this resource. The dog may then experiment and intentionally step on the target, (Asking the question, does this behavior get my handler to Click or Yes me?) The handler replies with a Click or Yes for the target contact and rewards the dog with a treat.

Know what you want to mark when you begin the trial. In your mind isolate the muscles the dog uses to start the target behavior. Then watch the dog carefully for the target behavior and CLICK or YES the moment the behavior is forming the behavior you desire. Follow-up with reinforcement. Think of it like taking a photograph. As you press the shutter button, you capture the image you want. In this case you capture the image you want the dog to see. What does your click capture?

Increase criteria (duration, distance, intensity, context, distractions) when the dog is JOYFULLY offering the behavior objective. Comprehension is expressed in the dog’s desire to work with you and push you to play the game again.

Terms: A **Trial** is one performance of a behavior. A **Session** is a series of trials defined by time (i.e. 5 minutes of training = 1 session), or the number of trials, (i.e.10 trials = 1 session). Depending on the dog and the training challenge, you can train several sessions per day when rest is given between.