

Flygility Training Tips

By Allan Rohde

INTRODUCTION

As most handlers would accept, every dog is different and as such, what works for one dog may not work for another. From that point of view, the more options you have, the more likely you are of finding the training method that works for you and your dog. To obtain those options you need to expose yourself to a wide range instructors, handlers, and training material. Although flygility has not been around that long, and is not that widespread, there are a number of good instructors/handlers around that can give advice on flygility training. I have also found that the internet is an excellent source of training material. Flyball is similar to flygility and most flyball training techniques can be applied to flygility. There is no shortage of flyball training tips on the internet and there are numerous books and videos available.

The following is a collection of training techniques that I have picked up over the years, most of which I have used at some point in time. These should be treated as another range of options that can be used when training your dog.

PUPPIES

You can start to prepare the puppy for flygility from an early age. The one most important thing to teach the puppy is to play with toys. If the pup loves toys, then this will make future training so much easier as you will have something that you can motivate the dog with. Most pups will play with toys so this will be relatively simple. If the pup does not want to play with toys then you need to teach it to. This can be done by using the pup's food as a reward and they get the reward if they play with the toy. This can take time so patience and perseverance is required.

The ball should be introduced to the pup from an early age. The ball will be just another toy for the pup however there are a couple of things you should try to do when using the ball. Whenever you throw a ball to be retrieved, or any toy for that matter, be sure you throw it into a corner so the pup must turn tightly to come back to you (the walls prevent a wide arching turn). Also never throw a toy without running away from the puppy. This will encourage the drive back and develop a strong chase instinct.

Clicker and target training are also useful training tools that should be developed early on.

THE BOX

If the dog is keen on the ball then teaching the box is much easier. The method I have found works for me is as follows:

1. Set up the box with one flyball jump 5 meters from it.
2. Starting from inside the flyball hurdle, walk the dog up to the box and give them the command to step on. You should use a short lead or hold onto the collar as the dog will often try to go around the box. The dog is unlikely to do the pedal straight off so some things that can be used to teach the dog what to do are:
 - If you have target trained then put the target on the pedal of the box so that the dog has something to focus on. A Velcro dot can be used to hold the target in place.
 - As you approach the box gently lift the dog onto the pedal to show it what to do.
 - Starting at the box you can lift one of the dogs legs and place the paw onto the pedal
 - Get someone to pretend to hide a ball (or toy/food) under the pedal. The dog will often go looking for it and often end up triggering the box.
 - Get an assistant to hold a ball directly behind the box and in view of the dog. The dog will often step on the pedal trying to get to the box. This works better for smaller dogs. The handler needs to ensure that the ball in the cup can fly up unimpeded when the dog steps on the pedal.
3. As soon as the dog has hold of the ball, run back past the flyball hurdle so that the dog chases you and does the hurdle. Reward the dog as soon as it has completed the hurdle with the ball. This will help condition the dog to turn immediately it has the ball. It will also help condition the dog to look for the flyball hurdle first up.

(The above should be repeated until the dog knows how to trigger the box by itself. I find it takes 2-4 sessions for a dog keen on balls to be proficient at triggering the box.)

4. Once the dog is triggering the box consistently, you can do away with the lead and send the dog by itself to the box. You can also start to add more jumps after the flyball jump. You can also start to send the dog over the flyball jump - and only the flyball jump - to the box. At this point it is more important to be teaching the fast returns then the sending to the box.

Some other points to note are:

- Do not let the dog go past the box and certainly do not let the dog “steal” the ball from the cup. Use the lead or hold the collar to prevent this
- If the dog does not turn quickly to chase you then use the lead to give them a gently pull towards you.
- Always reward you dog for a fast return from the box. A tug toy is very good for this and the faster the return the bigger the play at the end.
- When you get to the stage where you are sending the dog to the box by itself, you should make sure the dog is focused on the box before you send it. You may need an assistant to try and get the dogs attention towards the box. And when you send the

dog, you should take one or two steps forward as well as giving verbal commands to give the dog a bit of confidence.

The Box – Advanced Techniques

- Despite a dog's best efforts, it will miscatch the ball at times and you should train your dog to recover from this situation. You can simulate the miscatch by having an assistant throw the ball sideways at the point the dog triggers the box. The dog should retrieve the ball but then will not be lined up with the flyball jump. The handler needs to get the dog back on line and to do this they should stand approximately 1 metre towards the box from the flyball jump and on the side the ball is being thrown. As the dog retrieves the ball the handler calls it back to them so that the dog goes around them to get to the flyball hurdle. The dog should be allowed to complete the flyball jump plus one other standard hurdle before being rewarded. This exercise should be repeated several times on each side. It should be noted that the handler needs to be back from the flyball jump as this forces the dog to straighten up onto the jump before attempting the next hurdle. This will reduce the chance of the dog knocking the first hurdle after the flyball jump.
- After the dog is sending to the box reliably, you can encourage more drive by delaying the release of the dog after the send command has been given. The dog should struggle to get to the box and this should be encouraged.
- Whenever sending the dog to the box, make sure the dog is focussed on the box before the send command is given. If the dog is not focussed on the box at the point the command is given, it may not understand what the command is for and fail to go to the box directly or at all. If the dog won't focus on the box, get the box loader to call the dog and/or wave a toy/ball just above the box.
- All dogs will have a natural way to turn – either left or right – and handlers should be aware of which way their dog turns. If the handler knows this, then they can be prepared to compensate for it if needed. An example of this is where the course angles from left to right on the approach to the box. If the dog naturally turns to the right, then the turn will take it more towards the finish line increasing the chances of missing the flyball jump on the way back. If the dog turns left it will be turn slightly away from the finish line and has a much higher chance of getting the flyball jump on the way home. To compensate for the right turning dog, the handler needs to move along the finish line further to the left. This will help the do turn further back to the flyball jump. The left turning dog would not need any compensation as the course design helps the dog.
- To produce quick turns at the box, you can have the "loader" throw a ball from the side of the box as the dog is just getting ready to hit the pedal. As the ball zings past, the dog will push himself off to chase after the ball. The dog will have to shove off the box the instant he hits it (like a swimmer's turn) to leap after the ball. The dog is actually turning and catching the ball at the same time. NOTE: Throw the ball from the side the dog naturally turns toward.

THE RETURNS

A quick return can make the difference between winning and losing a race. I have seen it so many times where a dog is first to the box but returns slowly and ends up losing. First to the box counts for nothing while first to the finish line is everything. Training for fast returns is just as important as training the box. This training will benefit greatly if a strong chase drive has been developed in the dog at an early age.

Returns can be trained using the “backward training” method. This is best done with an assistant but can be done without one if none is available. Each of the following steps should be repeated until the dog is returning at top speed.

1. Starting with just one flyball hurdle, the assistant holds the dog while the handler moves back past the imaginary finish line. The handler then calls the dog and at the same time shows the dog the toy/reward. The assistant should delay releasing the dog until it is struggling to go. When the dog is released, the handler quickly moves away from the dog and continues the calling etc. When the dog reaches the handler there should be the reward and praise. The handler should end up 10-15m beyond the imaginary finish line.
2. Add a normal hurdle 2-3 meters from the flyball hurdle and in a direct line. Again the assistant holds the dog while the handler goes back past the imaginary finish line. The handler calls and the assistant releases the dog once it is struggling to get away. Reward and praise the dog as in one above.
3. Keep adding further hurdles at 2-3m intervals as the dog successfully completes each step.
4. When the dog is successfully completing 5-6 obstacles in a row, replace two hurdles for one tunnel. Add the tunnel at the end nearest to the release of the dog. This allows the dog to be lined up for the tunnel and they are less likely to go around.
5. Once the dog is successfully completing the above steps, start spreading the jumps out so that they are eventually 4-5 metres apart.
6. Once the dog is used to short and long spaces between the obstacles, start to mix up the distances so that the dog needs to think about them.

The Returns – Additional Notes

Some additional points to note regarding the returns training are:

- Do not progress too fast and always finish on a sequence that the dog can do confidently. E.g. if a dog can confidently do three jumps in a row but not four, then train with four jumps but finish on a three jump sequence.
- If the dog goes round the obstacles rather than over them, put the obstacles closer together. This encourages the dog to jump the next hurdle as it does not have enough space to go around.

THE OUT RUN

The outrun should not be attempted until the dog knows what to do with at the box. It is also better if you have also completed the return training. In the box training, the dog should have learnt to run to the box over the flyball hurdle and then complete the return. The next step on from here is to start sending the dog from further away (the outrun). These steps may take several sessions to complete. Do not rush them. The steps are:

1. Set up the box with the flyball jump and 4 standard hurdles and then another flyball hurdle at the end.. Start from the standard hurdle closest to the flyball jump and send the dog over the hurdle, flyball jump to the box. As with the box training, when the dog has hold of the ball, run back over all the jumps/hurdles to finish. Reward your dog.

The handler runs with the dog to the box the first few times and as the dogs confidence grows gradually reduce the distance the handler travels towards the box. Always run with the dog to the finish. Keep repeating until the dog can be sent to the box by itself. Once the dog is doing this exercise confidently move onto the next step

2. Starting one hurdle further back repeat the steps in 1 above. That is, send the dog over two standard hurdles and the flyball jump to the box. The handler should run with the dog for the first few times and gradually reduce the distance as the dog gains confidence. Always finish by doing all the jumps/hurdles on the way back. Once the dog is doing this exercise confidently move onto the next step.
3. Continue the progression by starting 3 hurdles back when the dog can confidently complete 2 hurdles.
4. Then move to 4 hurdles back when the dog can confidently complete 3 hurdles.
5. Then include the flyball hurdle in the exercise so that the dog is being sent over the 6 obstacles (2 flyball jumps and 4 standard hurdles) to the box.
6. Now add a tunnel in place of the 4th hurdle so that the sequence is flyball jump, tunnel, hurdle, hurdle, hurdle, flyball jump and then flyball box. As above, send the dog to the box running with the dog on the first few goes. Then the handler gradually reduces the distance travelled to towards the box.

The Outruns – Additional Notes

Some additional notes on the Outruns are:

- Do not progress too fast and always finish on a sequence that the dog can do confidently. E.g. if a dog can confidently do three jumps in a row but not four, then train with four jumps but finish on a three jump sequence.
- If the dog goes round the obstacles rather than over them, put the obstacles closer together. This encourages the dog to jump the next hurdle as it does not have enough space to go around.
- When using the tunnel some dogs, as they exit, will turn to look for the handler. From this point of view, it is important that the handler runs with the dog until it is past the first hurdle after the tunnel. The handler may have to wait the dog at the start (or get someone to hold it) and move up to the tunnel. When the dog is called/released the handler moves forward timing it so that they are between the tunnel and next hurdle when the dog exits the tunnel. The handler should be commanding the dog run on to

the box as it is going through the tunnel. Repeat this several times. Once the dog is running on without hesitating at the tunnel exit, the handler starts a little further back and aims to reach the tunnel exit at the same time as the dog. The handler gives the send on command as the dog travels through the tunnel. Repeat this several times. The handler then starts further back and aims to reach the entrance of the tunnel as the dog does. The handler should continue moving forward, even if only walking, until the dog is past the first hurdle after the tunnel and running onto the box. The handler will end up about halfway along the tunnel.. Repeat several times. The handler continues moving back until the dog is going by itself from the start. It is important that during these exercises the handler is always moving forward until the dog is committed to going all the way to the box..

- If the dog has a slow outrun you can get the handler to start at the box while an assistant holds the dog back at the start. The handler calls the dog but the assistant does not let go until the dog is struggling to get away. The handler encourages the dog all the way to the box and then runs with the dog back to the start.. .

TRAINING WEAVES

Weaving in flygility is probably the hardest thing to teach a dog. All other training is for speed but the weaves slows the dog down. If the dog has great ball and/or play drive, they will skip weaves, or miss them altogether, to get to the “reward”. It is important to be thorough in the weave training.

Before attempting to add weaves to a course, the dog needs to know how to weave. There are many and varied methods of teaching your dog to weave in agility so I will not cover weave training here. However, once the dog can weave and you are ready to include the weaves in your training then there are a few things that I find helps. It is best to have an assistant for these exercises. At this stage the dog should also be able to run a course correctly by itself.

1. For training purposes, in a straight line set up a jump, weaves (6 poles), jump, flyball hurdle, box. Now angle the weaves slightly (10-15 degree) so that the dog needs to go around the first pole. I have found that dogs tend to go around the first pole into the weaves better than if they have the first gap “open” to them. The latter has a higher occurrence of dogs entering the second gap while the former gives something for the dog to target. This will depend a lot on the method used to train weaves so you can leave the weaves straight if you wish.
2. Starting at the weaves, start weaving the dog while walking beside it (on the side the dog enters). When it comes out the end send the dog onto the box. If the dog fails to weave correctly, call it back and start again. A lot of dogs will carry on to the box despite being called back and the assistant should block the dog from the box, or remove the ball. This prevents the dog being “rewarded” with the ball. Once the dog completes the weaves correctly and while it is running to the box, move to the other side of the weaves. As the dog returns with the ball guide it back into the weaves. Move with the dog as it weaves and then over the last jump. Big reward. Keep repeating this exercise until the dog is successfully weaving all the time. This may take 2-3 sessions to achieve.
3. When the dog weaves consistently with the handler next to it, the handler should start to hang back as the dog is weaving. Encouragement to weave should be given all the time. Initially the dog should be exiting the weaves before the handler is half way along them. Then the dog should be exiting before the handler has started the weaves.
As for the previous exercise, the handler should move to the other side of the weaves to guide the dog in on the way back. Complete the last jump and big reward. Keep repeating until the dog is weaving independently of the handler.
4. The next step is to add the jump first then the weaves etc. The handler should run with the dog over the jump and to the weaves. Again, on the way back get into a position where you can guide the dog back into the weaves. Keep repeating until the dog is weaving consistently.
5. Now try sending the dog by itself into the weaves and to the box. The handler should still move forward with the dog but should only reach the jump when the dog is weaving. As the dog is going to from the weaves to the box and back, the handler again gets into position to guide the dog into the weaves on the way back. Repeat several times.

6. The handler now sends the dog by itself over the jump and into the weaves. If all the previous steps have been completed correctly, the dog should weave by itself up and back. Repeat several times.
7. At this point more obstacles can be added so that the handler is further away from the weaves. The approach angle to the weaves can also be altered.

Weaving – Additional Notes

Some additional notes on weaving are:

- The chances are that when you are sending the dog to the weaves it will get there well before the handler. If the dog is not weaving properly in this situation then make the dog wait at the start while you move to the weaves. Then call the dog to you and through the weaves. You may need an assistant to hold the dog at the start.
- If the dog is not weaving well with obstacles then train with the weave only to start with. Send the dog through the weaves while moving with it. As the dog is exiting the weaves throw a ball for it to retrieve. An assistant is required to grab the ball should the dog fail to complete the weaves. As the dog returns, make it weave back and then reward it. The throwing of the ball is then done a bit earlier. Eventually the handler should be able to throw the ball first and then send the dog through the weaves after it.
- A method of improving speed through the weaves is to put the dogs dinner bowl at the end of the weaves and the dog has to weave before getting the reward. Repeat this 3-4 times at feed time with the first few times only have a small portion of the dogs food in the bowl. The last time has the remaining portion of the dogs dinner. An assistant is required to prevent the dog getting the food should it fail to weave correctly.
- You can proof the weaving even more by making the dog complete 12 weaves during training sessions. This will make the 6 poles in a competition much easier for the dog to complete. Do not use 12 poles until the dog is confidently doing the 6 poles although most dogs will be able to do 12 poles because of agility training.
- When first starting weave training, you can spread the poles out a little further (say 700mm instead of the standard 600mm) and have each one slightly off centred. This makes it easier for the dog to start with. Once the dog is confidently doing this, then the weaves are moved back to normal in a couple of steps.
- If the dog is not weaving well in competition, then ensure that on the practice run you are at the weaves for both out and return runs. If the dog makes a mistake on the way out, then get to the weaves as quickly as possible to ensure the dog weaves correctly on the way back. Also ensure you give a loud and clear weave command well before the dog approaches the weaves. Say the obstacle before the weaves.

COURSES WITH BENDS

In a straight course the handler just needs to stand at the end of the course and wait for the dog to come back. When there is a bend or curve in the course, the handler needs to think of how they can assist the dog in getting the course correct. The way to do this is for the handler to position themselves along the start line in a place that will assist the dog to do the curves. The number and extent of the curves will dictate the approach you take. The following are a few tricks I have learnt over the years.

All courses

- Whenever starting training or competition on a course with bends in it, always run with the dog on the first or practice run. This will ensure that the dog gets it right. In competition, you don't get a second practice so it is important to get the first run right.

Single Bend (Intermediate)

- Whenever running with the dog on a course with a simple bend, run on the outside of the curve. Most dogs tend to angle towards the side the handler is on so running on the outside of the bend will help hold the dog on the right course. Running on the inside will attract the dog to the inside of the bend. This, along with the lure of the box is often enough to make an inexperienced dog pull inside the bend.
- In training the handler should run with the dog (on the outside) to the point the course bends. At this point the dog should follow the course to the box. The handler should be in a position where all the remaining obstacles are in line within them and the flyball jump. They hold this line but move back 2-3 paces. When the dog turns it should head straight back towards the handler and not the start line. Then handler waits until the dog is close and then runs the line back to the start. This will help the dog take the bend successfully.
- When the dog is to the stage that they are to be sent by themselves, they should stay behind the start line but move along it so that they are inline with the flyball hurdle and flyball jump. When the dog turns it will see the handlers and will be more likely to head back over the flyball jump. As the dog travels toward the bend, the handler moves their position back to the start line. Timing is important as if they move across too soon the dog could go inside the curve while if they leave it too late the dog could go on the outside of the curve.

Complex Bends (Open/Advanced)

With complex bends the handler needs to assist the dog as much as possible. It is not always possible to move along the start line to help the dog so other tactics need to be employed. Some of these are:

- Slight movements along the start line can help direct the dog around bends
- The use of body movement and in particular with the shoulders can be of great assistance in directing the dog. If you can not get in position along the start line, exaggerated movements of the shoulder can indicate to the dog to turn on the bend.
- If the dog has learnt directional commands, then these can be used to direct the dog. Just remember the dog is facing you so the commands may seem strange but make sure you get them right.
- A combination of all of the above

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

Mouthing/Chewing the Ball

Some dogs will mouth or chew the ball all the way back from the box. This isn't really a problem except that the dog is usually more concerned about the ball than getting back to the handler which results in a slow recall. One of the exercises you can do to improve this is to let the dog grab the ball while still holding onto it. Once the dog has hold of it then give gentle tugs as if to take it off the dog. The dog should start to grip the ball tighter. As the grip tightens, then pull a bit more on the ball moving it side to side. The dog should hold on tight. This exercise should be repeated several times sometimes letting the dog "win" by having the ball but mostly the handler should end up with the ball. If the handler is not keen on putting their hand near the dogs mouth, then a short rope can be attached to the ball.

This exercise can also be done with a long rope (6m). Throw the ball and when the dog picks up the ball and starts to mouth it, while holding the rope, run away from the dog. Use common sense so that you don't pull the dogs teeth out with the ball. If the dog is not holding the ball well it should be possible for you to get the ball out of the dog's mouth. If the dog does release the ball continue running away from the dog for another 10 metres.

The idea is that if the dog releases its grip on the ball then you end up with it. This should hopefully make the dog think about holding a little better.

Improving Speed

To increase speed you must increase motivation. Each dog is an individual and must be motivated in its own way. One of the best general methods is to hold the dog at the box end and get the handler to call the dog back to them, when the dog has got half way back get the handler to run as fast as they can away from the dog, when the dog reaches the handler get the handler to provide a huge reward, ball, game, tug of war, food or whatever the dog wants.

It's a good idea to time all the dogs before you start a speed training regime, handlers are then motivated by watching the improvement of their dogs.

Better Turns

Sometimes a dog will trigger the box and jump to catch the ball all in the same motion. This often means the dog jumps ends up well past the box so ultimately wastes time. A dog that turns at the box usually is quicker. You can encourage a dog to turn at the box by placing netting or such like directly behind the box. This stops the dog from going past the box.

Rail Knockers

A keen fast dog will sometimes knock rails consistently. There are two possible issues here. One is that during the competition the dog is trying too hard. To help solve this problem it may be as simple as not saying anything. The dog is keen anyway and further encouragement is not needed. Left to their own device, these dogs will often complete the course successfully.

Another cause of rail knocking may be due to the fact that during training the handler never "talks" to the dog but in competition they do. The dog may not be sure about this "new" behaviour so ends up knocking rails. In this case, the handler should train as if they were competing. This gets the dog used to the added "pressure" from the handler and they will be less likely to knock rails.