Balancing Your Handling

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Running any course as well as possible depends on precise communication. Whether it's a novice dog's first time in the ring or a finals run for the gold, the handler's ability to efficiently show the course is key to building the team's mutual trust and enjoyment playing the game together, ultimately progressing to higher and higher levels of proficiency.

To gain and maintain precision and comprehension with our handling, we train using what we call **_balancing repetitions_**. Steering the dog through the course is much like steering a car. Overreactions cause the steering to get out of balance. When the steering is out of balance we lose the precision necessary to communicate at speed. Neither car nor dog is as responsive. We do more but get less.

Frequently, efforts to win a class or avoid off courses to go clear for a qualification will tempt us to oversteer just a teeny bit. Maybe we crank the wheel a little, using more turn cue than we need to keep our dogs from heading forward into the wrong end of a tunnel. **[diagram 1]** But then at the next trial, a course asks us to turn the dog away from both entrances. If a little extra turn cue only got the dog off one entrance, how much more will we need to keep the dog out of either entrance? **[diagram 2]** Left unaddressed, we end up with more and more play in the wheel, less and less precision in our steering.
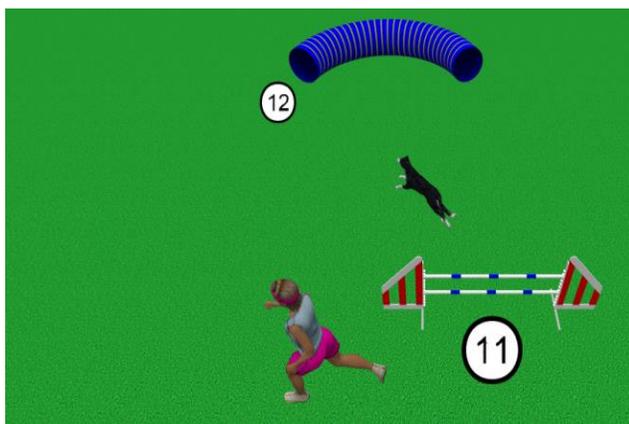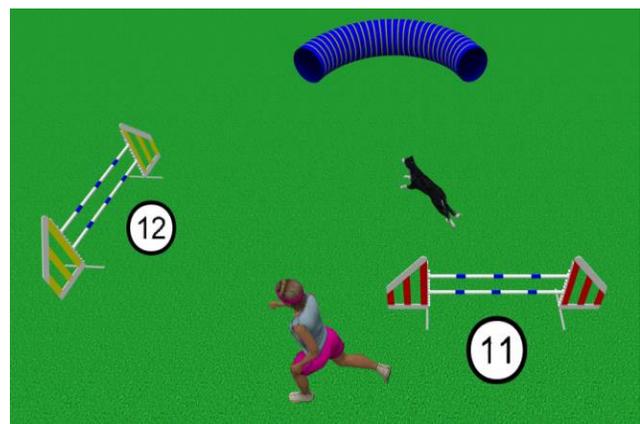

diagram 1

diagram 2

Balancing repetitions are the way we keep our steering true and aligned. We constantly return to our balancing repetitions in training, always checking to see if our cues are staying precise. For me, this attention to clarity is how the handling becomes a real joy, truly being in flow and working as a team to get the best performance possible.

It helps to see specific examples, so let's take Becky Dean's 2013 UKI US Open Biathlon Jumping course. **[diagram 3]** The opening resembles something we see on many levels of courses, but it gets more dynamic as the dog reaches the triangle of jumps #6-#7-#8. Also the offset line of jumps at #11-#12-#13 presents the possibility of a highly angled approach challenge compounded with a side change. The course then ends with a combination of challenges in the form of angled approaches with turns through a box, again compounded with a side change.

To demonstrate how balancing repetitions work for both national and local level courses, we can use a version of this course that might be more typical of what we encounter at local shows. **[diagram 4]** Opportunities to use balancing repetitions are readily available involving the pinwheel of jumps #6-#7-#8 and the nearby wingless jumps. There are many ways to test our steering to see if it is precise enough to guide the dog through several different, closely related sequences.

2013 UKI US Open
Fletcher, North Carolina
Sunday, November 3, 2013
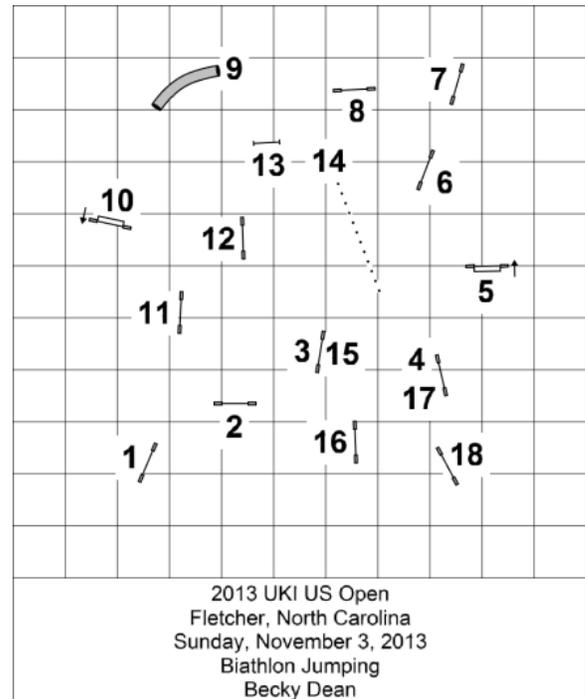Biathlon Jumping
Becky Dean

diagram 3

This first set of balancing repetitions can help sharpen our tools that cue the dog to focus on the handler until redirected to an obstacle. We might use these cues to keep the dog running with us when the next obstacle is hidden from their view or alternatively when we want to shape the dog's path before turning them away from us in a rear cross performed on the flat. **[diagram 5]**

First, consider the repetition where the dog's path is shaped and then turned away into a rear cross on the flat (the green path in the diagram) [**VIDEO**]. This is followed by an attempt at a balancing repetition where the dog is asked to remain focused on the handler and not anticipate being turned away (the red path in the diagram) [**VIDEO**].
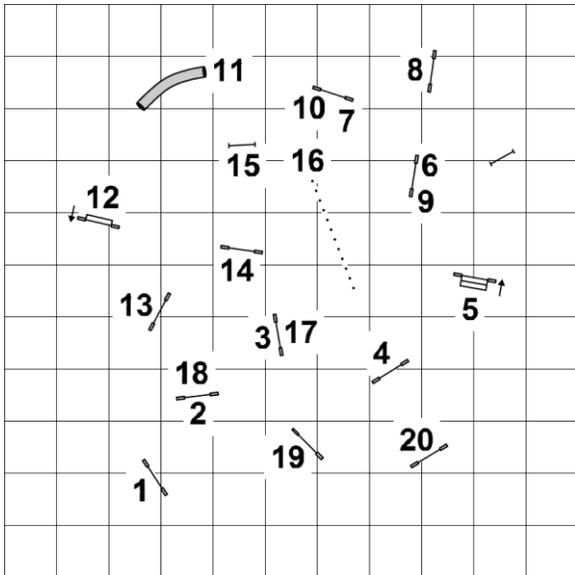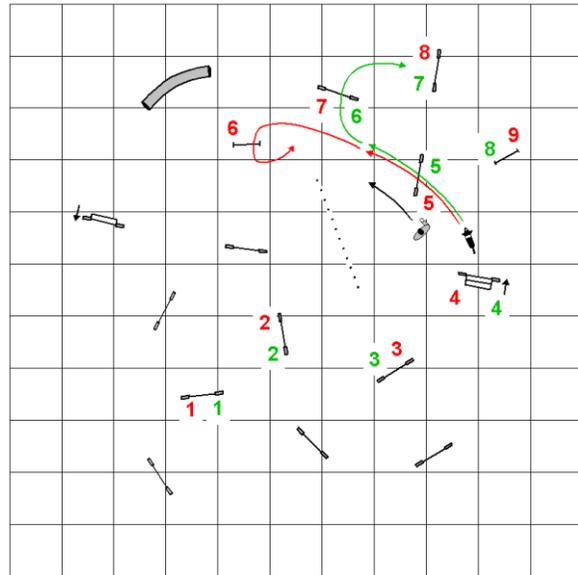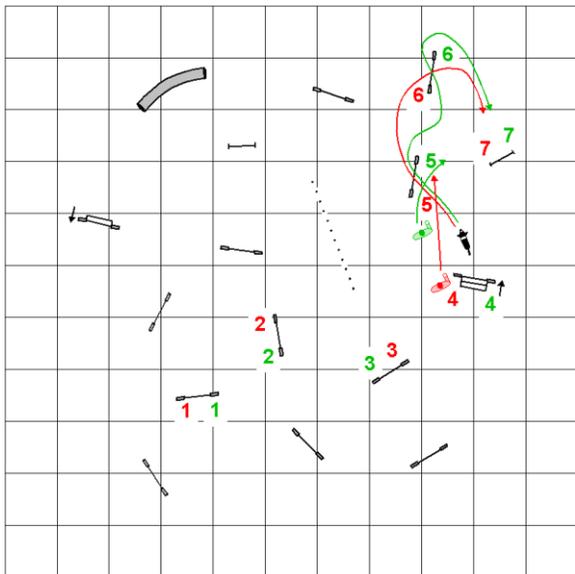
diagram 4

diagram 5

diagram 6

In the second video, notice how Bird changes lead over the winged jump #5 and makes a brief, slight movement toward the turn away jump. This is highly valuable information! It tells us we need to attend to our cues and further develop our mutual understanding of precisely how and when the dog is cued to turn away. This kind of fine tuning lets us maintain a useful steering tool, rather than allow the tool to confound our steering, or alternatively abandon the tool altogether.

In the last example, we balanced keeping the dog focused on us versus turning the dog away on the flat. We might alternatively balance different types of motion accompanying rear crosses of a particular jump. **[diagram 6]**

Again, the main point of the balancing repetitions is *not* to evaluate the choice of one maneuver over another. The focus is on developing your feel and precision with one particular maneuver.

In this example, we choose to tune our ability to cue a rear cross of jump #5, using different motion cues approaching #5, to cue the 180 degree turn to jump #6 (the red path in the diagram) versus cueing the tighter turn for the threadle to the other side of jump #6 (the green path in the diagram). [**VIDEO**]

The following set of balancing reps checks our ability to signal blind crosses appropriately. Does the dog *really* know when we are cueing a change of side or not? We want to make sure that *we* are cueing the dog to blind cross, rather than having the dog choose to cross unexpectedly behind us. [**diagram 7**] Often the line along which the handler travels may be fairly similar when cueing the dog to blind cross (the green dog path) versus when cueing the dog to push or serpentine (the red dog path). We use balancing repetitions to make sure we maintain confident understanding. [**VIDEO**]
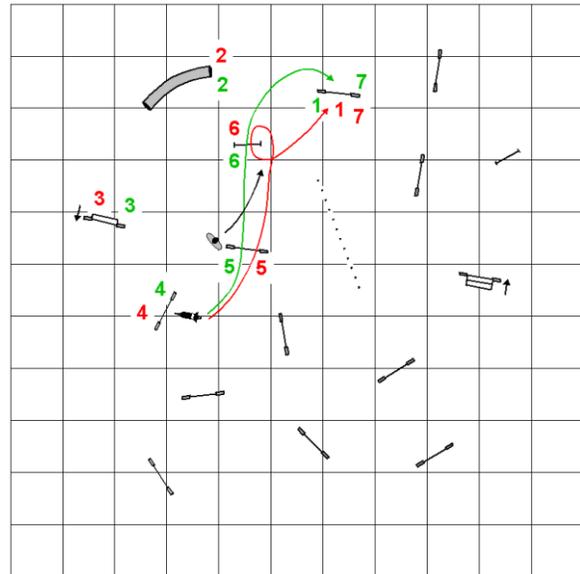
diagram 7

Coming out of that blind cross, we can use a different set of balancing repetitions to enhance and refine our 'throw behind' maneuver to cue different degrees of turn over jump #6. [**diagram 8**] Even while rotated toward the dog, the handler's movement from jump #5 toward jump #6 cues forward motion to the dog. So, as the dog lifts and clears jump #5, the handler can apply more quantity of movement toward jump #6 while rotating toward the dog and tossing the dog behind them in order to cue a softer turn inside the runout plane of jump #7(the red path in the diagram).

Alternatively, the handler can apply less quantity of movement toward jump #6 while rotating toward the dog and tossing the dog behind them in order to cue a tighter wrap turn to the weaves #7 (the green path in the diagram). [**VIDEO**] Knowing we can use our tools with this kind of precision gives us the confidence in our steering to ask for exact lines in competition.

There is more *ground* on a course than anything else, so often the team that executes the best lines has the best run! Balancing repetitions like these prepared Bird [**VIDEO**] and Sweet [**VIDEO**] to excel at local shows and finish first and second on Becky Dean's 2013 UKI US Open Biathlon Jumping course.
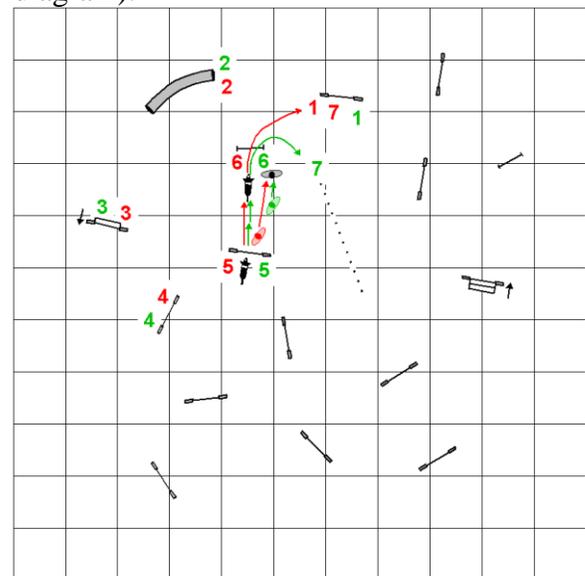
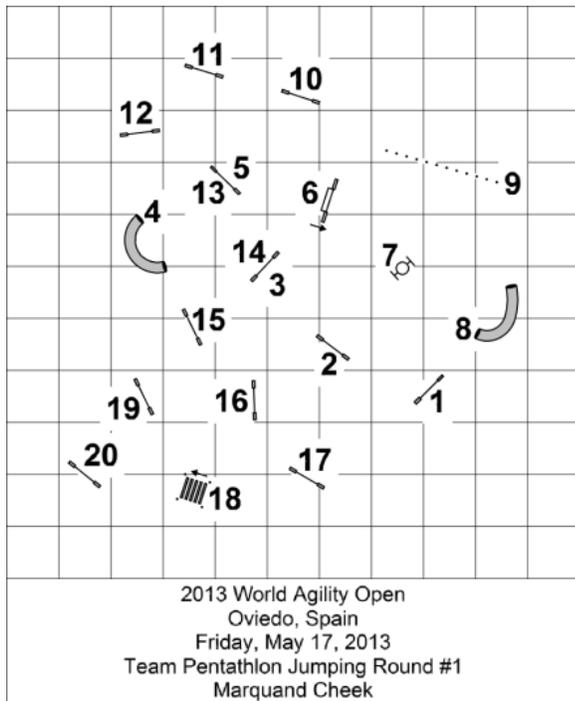We train like this *all the time!*

diagram 8

diagram 9

More chances to train with balancing repetitions are easy to find in Marquand Cheek's 2012 WAO Team Pentathlon Jumping course. **[diagram 9]**

This course starts with a delicate zig zag that includes a managed approach to the second jump leading into a box of three jumps surrounding a tunnel discrimination. Then, as often happens, the course returns through this box of jumps surrounding the tunnel #4, asking the dogs to turn away from the tunnel entirely as the course makes its way back and forth toward the close.

How we develop the skills needed for these sorts of courses is essentially the same as how we develop skills to progress our dogs from novice and beyond. Let's take a version of this course that is more recognizable as something we might see any weekend. **[diagram 10]**

Since we regularly encounter boxes of jumps surrounding two or more tunnel entrances, this portion of the course lends itself particularly well to balancing repetitions. **[diagram 11]**

From the threadle following the weavepoles, we can readily practice balancing repetitions through the box with at least six slightly different sequences. Again, the objective is focus on developing the feel of negotiating these differing lines enhancing the precision with which you use any particular choice of handling maneuver or tool. Can you get from #3 to each of the different #4's executing a front cross between #3 and #4? Can you get from #3 to each of the different #4's without crossing? [**VIDEO**]
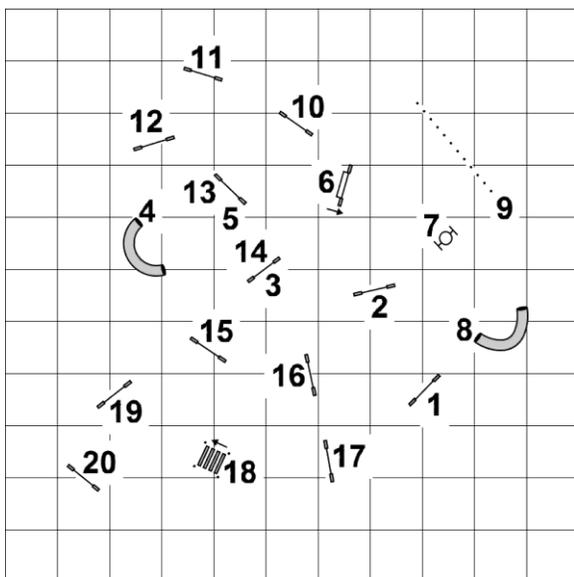

diagram 10

It's fun to learn maneuvers that might be new to you. Every few years it seems a new incarnation, or reincarnation, of a particular set of maneuvers become the popular topic for discussion lists, articles, and seminars. This is a wonderfully enjoyable way in which the sport stays fresh and exciting.

What we find even more important is to be able to continue to develop our feel for these new tools as fully as possible. So, within our balancing repetitions, we might occasionally include a maneuver we're just starting to use more regularly.

For example, in our repetitions through the purple sequence from diagram 11, as our dog clears jump #2 on our right side, we might
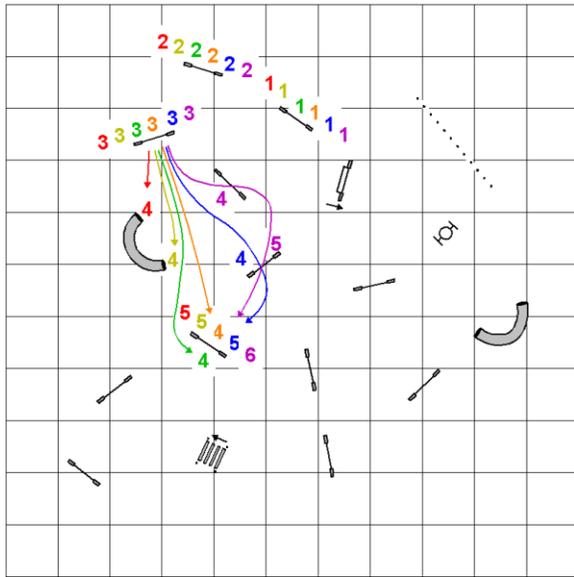
diagram 11

approach jump #3 focusing toward the dog and its takeoff for jump #3, and then rotate traditionally in a counterclockwise direction before rear crossing jump #4. [**VIDEO**] Alternatively, starting again with our dog on our right side clearing jump #2, we might begin to build greater comfort with focusing back more toward the dog during the approach to jump #3, and then throwing the dog behind us to rotate clockwise or opposite the direction of the dog's turn, to then pick the dog up on the right hand and rear cross jump #4. [**VIDEO**]

Learning new maneuvers can be fun! But the new maneuvers are not always more useful than the more traditional ones. In this case, handled either way, the sequence timed out exactly the same.

This tends to happen more regularly as a handler gets a better and better feel of their potential tools. After all, style points aside, achieving the best line for a particular dog is the key to achieving the fastest time. The better feel a handler develops with each of their tools, the more widely they can use any number of those tools to help the dog find its best line.

One key to developing finer and finer precision with any particular tool is to use these balancing repetitions to correct for examples of oversteering. Ultimately, it's much more important for us to notice that in this case, handled either way, we may potentially weaken the responsiveness of our steering as the dog turns from jump #4 to find jump #5. After completing either the traditional turn or the throw behind turn of jump #3 and then rear crossing jump #4, we might call the dog's name, perhaps to make absolutely sure that the dog stayed inside the runout plane of jump #5. However, we have to make sure we were visibly indicating jump #5 with our motion and handling cues when the dog heard us call its name. If we weren't visible to the dog, the dog should have responded to the call of its name by turning its focus away from jump #5 to find us.

Within this arrangement of obstacles, we can readily create a balancing repetition to test whether our use of the dog's name inadvertently weakened our steering. **[diagram 12]** We can then go back and repeat the sequence using the traditional turn of jump #3 or the throw behind turn of jump #3, followed by the rear cross at jump #4, and then call the dog's name while moving toward either jump #5 (the green path in the diagram) or the tunnel #5 (the red path in the diagram). [**VIDEO**]

Just as it's important to tend to your steering and balance approaching tunnels within boxes, there's much to be gained by tending to your steering and balance exiting tunnels within boxes. In this example, we can readily practice balancing repetitions exiting the tunnel to any number of different sequences. **[diagram 13]** As the dog exits the tunnel, being precise with our line of motion helps the dog find the next obstacle more quickly. This set of balancing repetitions also gives us the opportunity to make sure we can distinguish when we are pushing our dogs to the back side of a jump versus when we are shaping the approach to the front side of that same jump. [**VIDEO**]

Different handling choices and styles are personal and unique to each dog and handler team. What is universally important is how each team keeps the cues and communication clear, precise and fluent.

Balancing repetitions are easy to use with all systems of handling. allowing any team to work together with increasing confidence and precision. Confidence and precision build the speed and efficiency needed to succeed at any level, all the way up through the World Agility Open [**VIDEO**]
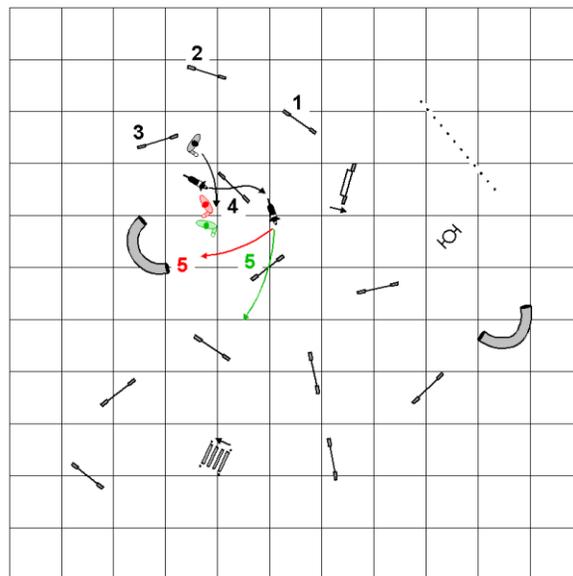
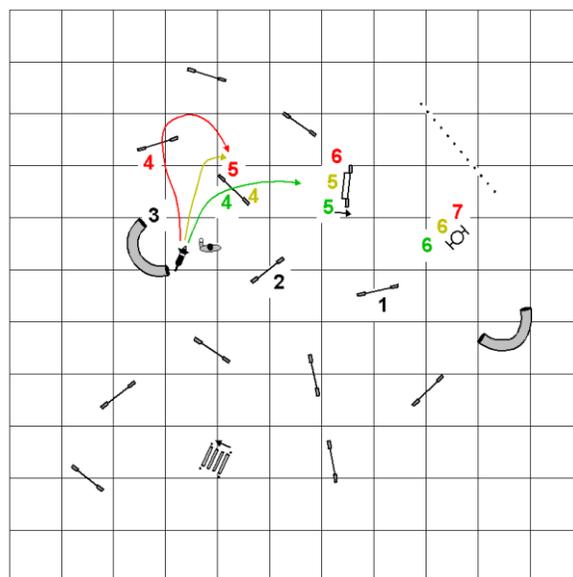They also help us have a whole lot of fun together!

diagram 12

diagram 13