

3-4-5 Weave Pole Training - Eric Brad

Introduction

When you come up with a method of doing something, you seem to have to have a name for it. So because it describes the beginning stages of this method of weave pole training, I've called it the 3-4-5 method and it is based on a form of behavior "shaping."

Let's start at the beginning. I believe that the behavior that we call "weaves" is really made up of three important concepts that we must convey to the dog in order to make them successful at doing weave poles:

- 1.) Alternate between the poles
- 2.) Take every pole you see
- 3.) Enter with the first pole on the left side

This method relies on shaping using "mark and reward" training (or "Clicker Training") to shape the desired behavior in pieces or increments to build a final "weave" behavior from smaller behaviors learned along the way. In the common "Clicker Training" parlance, this would be called "forward chaining" the behavior.

Because of the "shaped" nature of this training method, it is important to be sure that you have the earlier steps built to a success ratio that has the dog succeeding at the current step in the "chain" at least 80% of the time. Similarly, it is also important that you do not dwell too long at an intermediate step once you have that 80% reliability or the dog will begin to think of it as the finished behavior (which it's not!). Each step is explained below with notes regarding how and when to move to the next step. Don't be concerned about getting the method "just right", there is a lot of room for flexibility so long as you stay within reasonable range of your training targets.

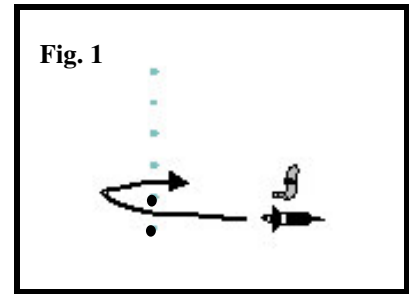
Some notes about training: I work to keep the sessions short and fast (no longer than about 5 minutes per session but as many repetitions of the behavior as you can do successfully) with a high rate of success (60-75%) to keep the dog "in the game" and motivated to keep trying the behavior that's being asked for. Keeping this in mind, progress as quickly as possible once one stage of training has reach that 80% reliability point. Take a step backward to the previous step if the dog's success rate at the current step drops below 60% to make them successful again before going back to the next phase. It's important to keep the dog confident, successful, and motivated.

Step 1 - Poles are Cool!

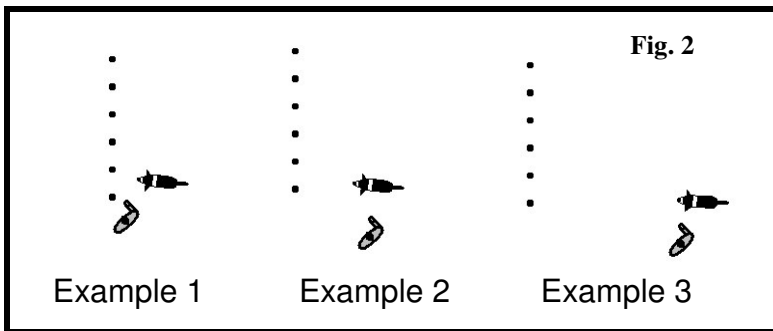
Begin with a regular set of weave poles and remove all but 2 poles. You should have a large area to work in so that you can easily move around at least 6 feet on all sides of the weaves.

The first thing that must happen is for the dog to discover that going through the 2 poles is a "good thing" with click/treat. You may need to do a little prompting by "sending" them with an arm gesture or using your body the first few times. Don't use verbal cues or encouragement here as it will only distract them from what you are trying to teach them.

Start by letting the dog go through almost straight on to the opening to begin, think of this as a “3 o’clock” entry as shown in **Fig. 1**. Eventually you will work your way “around the clock” from 3 to 9 o’clock. If you’re doing this right, the dog should quickly catch on that simply running between the 2 poles is a quick and easy way to get a “click” and reward and they should start eagerly running through.



Start the process with the dog close to the poles, as shown in **Example 1** of **Fig. 2** so it is easy for them to learn that going through the poles will get a Click! and reward. Once the dog is eagerly going through the poles, begin backing up and sending the dog from a greater distance. The distance will be helpful later on and it teaches the dog to choose running through the poles without any prompting from you. The click should bring the dog back for a reward but you should encourage the dog to come back toward you by turning to their right as shown in **Fig. 1**. This will set them up for the next phase of training when we put pole number 3 in place. You can step out to your right with the reward in order to encourage the dog to turn to their right for the shortest route to the reward.



If while increasing the distance the dog is not going through the poles and looks confused or frustrated, simply step closer to help them see the poles and try again. The key is to make the dog successful at least 60% of the time so help them out before they get frustrated enough to quit.

Again, keep sessions short, no more than 3 groups of 6 to 10 tries, especially during early training. Between each group of tries, play with your dog with a ball or tug to give them a break for just some fun and when you are done for that session, have a big fuss and play session to tell them how good they were. It’s best to do 2 or 3 of these sessions each day than a longer session which may cause fatigue in the dog and may become frustrating even if the dog is highly successful. Leave the dog wanting to do the poles when you quit and they will be eager for the chance to do it again.

Once you have the distance shown in **Example 3** of **Fig. 2**, you can start working “around the clock” sending the dog toward the poles from different angles. **Fig. 3** on the next page shows various entries and their designation. Remember to maintain that 80% success rate before making the exercise harder by moving to a new clock angle. It is also important to send the dog from **both** sides of you out to the poles. Be sure to start some trials with the dog on your left and some with your dog on the right as shown in **Fig. 3** in the “6 o’clock” entry labeled **C** and **D**.

As you move “around the clock” the opening will get smaller and smaller for the dog and they will learn to step around the first pole to see the correct entry. It is important that you are careful to only reinforce correct entries with the first pole on the left. You **will** see a drop in success rate as you get to 6 o’clock. If the dog begins taking a right side entry, simply move back toward “5 o’clock” to make it easier. The dog needs to learn that right side (first pole on

dog's right) entries do not produce a reinforcer and that **only** left side entries pay off.

Once you get past "6 o'clock", you will want to step back to the "5 o'clock" position to deliver the reward. This is shown in the "7 o'clock" example and is labeled as **A to B**. This will be important later because you don't want the dog to take a short cut back through the weave poles on their way to pick up their treat.

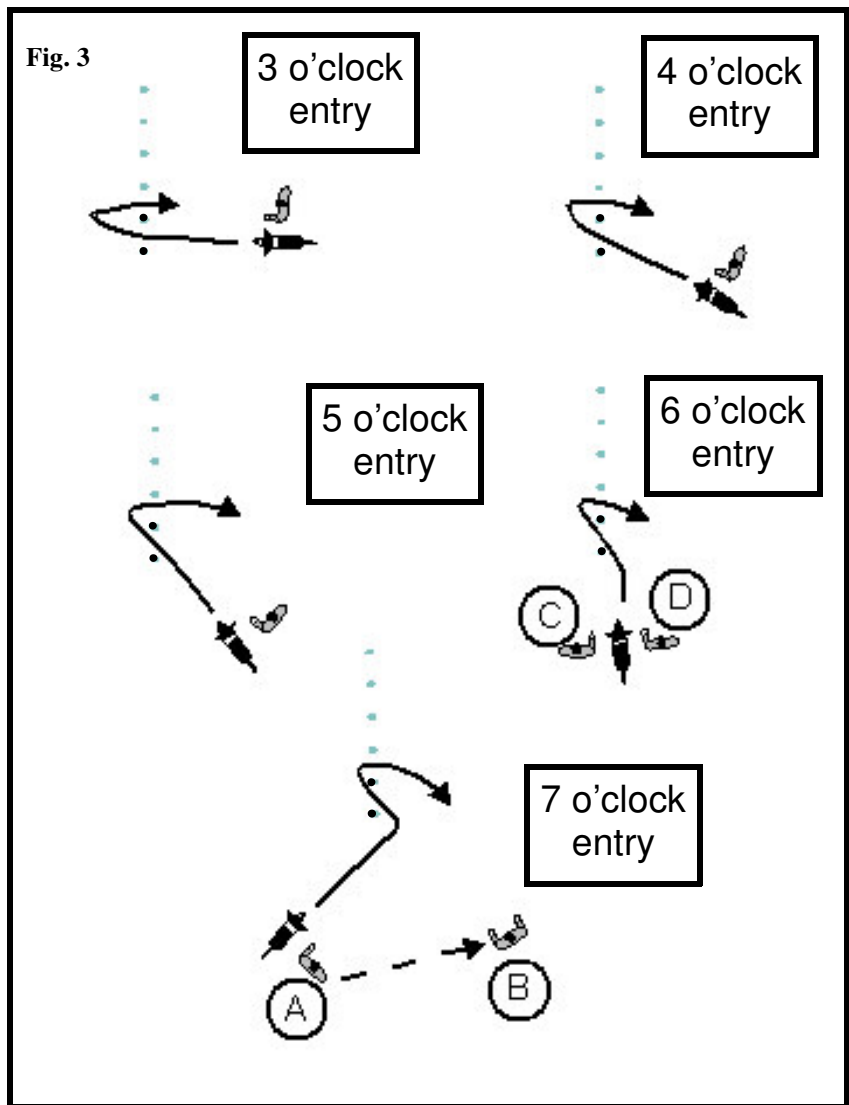
This step begins teaching the dog the "Enter with the pole on the left side" lesson mentioned in the introduction. Be careful to make sure you have eager, happy, and correct entries to about the 7 or 8 o'clock position before proceeding to the next step.

Step 2 - Mini-Weave 3 Poles

Once the dog is eagerly running through 2 poles from several angles and from at least 5 feet distant from the poles, it's time to

move up the success criteria and add the 3rd pole. Be prepared to remove that 3rd pole at the beginning of this step as this will be a difficult jump in criteria for the dog. Be aware that you will need to reduce your distance to that of **Example 1** of **Fig. 2** as you begin this step. In fact, as you move to each new step in this process, it would be helpful to the dog to ask for the new behavior from close to the poles so that you can help them be successful. You can then start increasing the distance again as the dog gets the idea and their success rate goes up. Also, be sure that you begin again at the "3 o'clock" position shown in **Fig. 1**.

It is likely that you will need to lure or prompt the dog to go through the 3 poles correctly the first few times. If you have had them turning to their right during Step 1, they will likely want to go out and around pole 3 to get their reward instead of passing between poles 2 and 3. This is where working close can help because you can lure or offer a hand target between poles 2 and 3 to help them succeed. Be careful during this step! Stay quiet, don't touch the dog, and let them discover what it is you want them to do by simple body cues, luring, or gestures to help them the first few times. It might be VERY tempting to put your hands on the dog or physically guide them between poles 2 and 3. You may have to slow them down if they've been racing through 2 poles to get their click. Remember to keep the success rate and motivation high.



*NOTE: I believe that it is critical that the dog be allowed to **try** going out around pole 3 just to discover that this is not as productive (in terms of earning a reward) as passing through 2 and 3. It is likely that it will happen during early trials at this step or as you begin backing up to put distance into this step. Be careful that the dog does not fail more than 2 times in a row and failure should be only 1 in 4 trials at most so be sure to step in help them find the right behavior after a failure.*

Once the dog is successful at navigating the 3 poles correctly from the “3 o’clock” position at 80%, let them do it on their own by incrementally adding distance as we did in Step 1. Be sure to bring them back to their right so that they come through poles 2 and 3 to get their reward. Allowing the dog to turn left and return to you may cause confusion later so keep the dog moving down the weaves even on a return after a click.

Just a reminder, don’t verbalize or prompt too much in an effort to help the dog have success. If you are struggling, it is better to lower the criteria by moving back closer and prompting/luring or going back to 2 poles to rebuild confidence. Additional verbal and physical movements by you may confuse the dog so that they believe that these elements are part of the expected behavior. It’s important to let them discover what’s getting the click on their own without distractions. It’s no longer 2 poles but 3 poles. Your success rate will drop here at first. If the dog shows ANY sign of frustration, step in and help them again by reducing the distance or with a prompt or lure to help them do the right thing.

If you have a frustrating session and need to remove the 3rd pole, let the dog have 4 or 5 successes with the 2 pole configuration and quit for that session. Begin the next session with a 2 pole setup and 4 or 5 successes. Then add the 3rd pole to begin this step again starting close to the poles at 3 o’clock and using a lure or hand target to get them between 2 and 3 if necessary.

This step is teaching the dog the “Alternate between the poles” lesson.” Don’t forget to work “around the clock” to about 7 or 8 o’clock as we did in Step 1 with the 3 poles configuration to maintain the left side entry criteria. Once you are getting good, fast weaves around 3 poles to about 70-75% success from the different “clock” positions you can move to the next step.

NOTE: This is probably the hardest step for the dog because they may perceive this as a totally different behavior from the 2 pole setup. Dogs do not generalize well so it should not be surprising that they do not see the 3 pole configuration as “2 entries”, one from each side. So be patient and careful to keep the dog successful and motivated during this step. The training that follows this step will be much easier for the dog to generalize and will likely go much faster than Steps 1 and 2. That makes it that much more important to keep the dog motivated and successful in the early steps.

Step 3 – The 4th Pole and Beyond

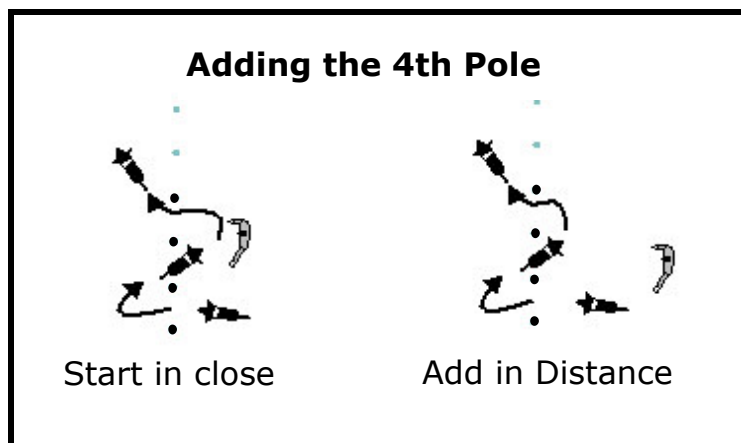
Now that the dog has the basics of “weaving”, you can add a 4th pole to the setup. Again, you will need to step in and prompt the dog to bend back through the 3rd and 4th pole the first few times but it should go MUCH more quickly than the jump from 2 poles to 3 poles. Using the method described in Step 2, allow the dog to discover that going through 4 poles gets the click/treat and not just 3 poles like before. Remember to keep the dog returning to

you by turning to their right and coming around pole 4 and not turning left and coming back either through the weaves or around pole 1.

Gradually add distance for the 4 pole configuration at the 3 o'clock entry and move around to other clock position entries once you have good distance.

This builds up the same behavior as the 2 previous steps for 2 and 3 poles and should go more quickly as the dog

should have confidence at distance and different entries at various positions.



Once again, if the success rate drops too low, remove the 4th pole and let the dog succeed at the 3 pole configuration for 4 or 5 trials. If you have problems with 3 poles, then drop back to 2. Keeping the dog at a high rate of success and reinforcement with a minimum of frustration is critical. You want them having fun and getting lots of reinforcement. End the session with 4 or 5 successes and call it for that session.

NOTE: Your dog will likely “cheat” at this step by doing three poles and waiting for the click. Step in and help them get the 4th pole to get the click so they learn the new behavior. The occasional failure is valuable and necessary to help them see that it now 4 poles and not 3 that gets the click. Be careful to keep the dog motivated to play the game and remove the 4th pole if they get frustrated to lower the criteria.

Once you have them doing 4 poles to 70-75% success, add the 5th pole and repeat Step 3 with the 5 pole configuration. Establish the desired weaving behavior then add the distance and different entry angles as in previous steps. Be careful to avoid frustration if the success rate drops or if you see the dog getting de-motivated. Lower criteria incrementally as described earlier to help the dog be successful and be careful not to allow too many failures before you get back to a behavior that they can do well.

By the time you add the 6th pole, the dog will likely have learned the “Take every pole you see” lesson because you haven’t clicked them for “cheating” when poles get added. Only click/treat when the dog takes every pole!

Step 4 – Polish and Practice

At this point, the dog should have a good understanding of all three lessons; 1. Alternate between the poles 2. Take every pole you see and 3. Enter with the first pole on your left side. This is the stage to play some games by adding and removing poles. Sometimes the dog will see 3 poles, sometimes 5, sometimes 2, you get the idea. This reinforces the “Take every pole you see” lesson. You can also play “around the clock” games to work on entries by varying entry positions randomly.

Keep these sessions fast, highly rewarding for good trials, and short. The dog should look forward to playing the “Weave Game” and, as humans, we have a tendency to want to “admire our work” and ask the dog for too much. Remember, too much practice is just an

opportunity to de-motivate or confuse the dog with poor timing or cueing.

ABOUT CUES –

It is recommended that you have the 3 pole weave to 80% at a distance and the various entry points before adding a verbal cue to this. As you are progressing during the 2 pole setup for the “around the clock” entries you can begin gesturing toward the poles with your arm to send the dog out for each repetition. This should work well with a minimum of distraction until you get the verbal cue in place during 3 or 4 pole work.

Closing Thoughts—

Here are a couple of other thoughts I have on weave poles that I incorporated in my use of this method.

1. You can't do fast what you don't know how to do slow. I had a guitar teacher years ago that gave me that advice while practicing scales. And he was dead right. If you don't know where you are going, you can't run there without tripping or running into something. Make sure the dog understands what action is getting the click at each stage so they can confidently progress to each new step.
2. Speed comes with confidence. My dog is a chow hound and works very eagerly for treats. Once she knew each step well, she ***RACED*** to finish it in order to get the click and treat. If you just let them do what they know how to do with a minimum of distractions, they will find the fastest way to get to that treat!

Summary—Happy Weaving!

So that's it. There is nothing particularly magical about this method. It's just straight forward shaping of weave pole performance using a clicker and reinforcing treats or toys. I really believe that many people make teaching a dog to weave more complicated than it has to be. I'm not a big fan of “guides” or “channels” or “weave-a-matics” because they present the dog with a piece of equipment that may or may not look like actual weaves to the dog. In fact, after I had taught my girl to weave using the above method, I took her to class and sent her into a set of weaves with guides on. She did the entry, hopped out over the first guide wire and looked at me as if to say “What the heck are these things?!?” I'm a firm believer that if you teach any behavior in small enough increments, you don't need to add in prompts, guides, or other distractions to help them learn. Remember, sometimes “helping” is really helping the dog learn.

All of the elements of this training should be clear in Steps 1-3. Feel free to use these elements in different orders or to different degrees. I believe that every dog is different and every trainer is different. This may require you to be a bit more creative with this method to make it work better for your dog. You should always be willing to “listen to your dog” and see what's working and what isn't and make adjustments to keep them happy and successful.

I'd welcome any feedback or suggestions on this method. You can reach me via email at: eric@northlodgemusic.com .

A Final Credit -

This training method is really just a variation/expansion on Susan Garrett's 2x2 method of weave pole training. This method is described in detail in her excellent book **Shaping Success** which can be purchased through most book retailers and pet stores.

I would also encourage you to read the following books on Clicker Training and canine learning to help you understand the important aspects of positive reinforcement and mark/reward training:

Don't Shoot the Dog by Karen Pryor

Excel-erated Learning by Pamela Reid

Click for Joy by Melissa Alexander

This material is copyrighted and may not be distributed or reproduced without the explicit permission of the author.

©2006 Eric Brad