Weave poles are often a large point of struggle for many teams. It is a complex behavior that requires a lot of physical and mental skills for the dogs. I have trained weave poles pretty much any way you can imagine: luring on straight poles, Weave-o-matics, channels, 2x2s, 2x2s with a twist, and any combination of those. I’ve used shaping, luring, prompting, wires, gates, etc., and I’m still learning new ways to teach weave poles!

My biggest takeaway over the last twenty years of weaves is that every dog is different, and every trainer is different. But what isn’t different for each team is how you increase the level of difficulty. If you make weaving too hard, too fast, you will probably end up with “poisoned” weaves. By poisoned, I mean that the dog will experience some sort of anxiety around weave poles, and his weaving performance will suffer at some point in his career.

There are a lot of things the dog has to do to weave correctly, and how challenging all of those different things are depends on the dog—his size and structure can play a big role in how he has to move his body to move between the poles efficiently. I believe it is really important to take a look at all of the skills needed to weave, break those skills down, and train them all individually before asking a dog to perform those skills in sequence and at speed:

- Seek out/commit to poles
- Collect for entry
- Rebalance their body (harder on really angled entries)
- Proper footwork
- Duration (more poles)
- Distractions
- Speed
- Independence
- Sequencing

If your dog struggles with weaves, can you pinpoint the skill that is difficult for him? Saying “he struggles with weaves” isn’t specific enough to devise a good training plan, since there is so much involved with weaving. If you know the piece the dog struggles with, you can remove that piece from the chain of behaviors and make that piece stronger before asking your dog for the chain of behaviors again.

In this article, I am going to address some of the most common weave pole problems and how I might go about training those pieces individually.

**Problem #1: Your Dog’s Weaves are Poisoned**

If your dog has a negative reaction to the weaves (e.g., ears back, tail tucked, slower pace), you need to start with changing his conditioned emotional response to the weave poles. Consider how it feels to be trained to weave by you. Are the criteria clear and fair? Is the rate of reinforcement high? Are you training multiple weave skills at once?

If you’re afraid that you have poisoned weaves, start with this: reward the effort. If you say “weave,” and your dog gives any response to the cue that looks a little bit like weaving, reward him! Weaving is hard, and oftentimes, we withhold reinforcement in training when one tiny piece of weaving was wrong, but many other pieces of weaving were correct. Keep that in mind. Look for something your dog did correctly instead of looking for the mistake. If there is anything that looks like weaving, pay the dog! Your dog...
must believe that he can win the game of weaving before you can begin to work on the potential skill problems.

I like to use a reward process called, “Never Wrong, Sometimes More Right,” that I learned from my friend and colleague, Sarah Stremming of The Cognitive Canine. You will need a low-value reward and a high-value reward. If the dog weaves 100% correctly, he earns the high-value reward. Anything else earns the low-value reward. You will find that if your dog knows how to weave, he will work harder to earn that high-value reward, but will always earn something for their effort. You will also be able to see which weaving skills need to be pulled out and trained separately.

Problem #2: Entry Mistakes

I see dogs missing entries for two main reasons: lack of understanding of which gap is the correct gap, and an inability to collect before the first gap. I train these two skills separately and slightly differently.

To address the lack of understanding of the correct entry gap, I think of how I train any other discrimination exercise. I attempt to create an errorless learning procedure by removing the incorrect options from my dog’s immediate view (Figure 1). I ask my dog for all sorts of entry angles when he is given only one logical choice. Placement of reward is close to the dog’s line so that as you add more poles, he could easily continue weaving.

Over time, I move poles 3 and 4 closer to poles 1 and 2, increasing the difficulty of the discrimination choice (Figures 2 and 3). At each level of discrimination difficulty, I add in handler distractions so that my dog is learning to seek the first gap out on his own, without additional physical support from me.

Figure 1: The entry choice is made easy for the dog, and the placement of reward is on the same line as the weave poles.

Figure 2: The second gap is moved closer and closer to the first, but the dog is reinforced for choosing the first gap until the weaves are completely closed.
To address the second entry problem, collection, I focus on placing the reward behind the dog (Figure 4). The specific reward placement will depend on the gap your dog is struggling to collect for. For example, if the dog struggles turning left into poles and finding the first gap, I will reward for wrapping pole 1. If the dog struggles turning right into the second gap, I will reward for wrapping pole 2 (Figure 5).

For collection exercises, begin with as few poles as possible (three or four). Oftentimes, dogs are not collecting for poles because they are so excited by the opportunity to finish the poles and earn their reward or the next obstacle. Additional poles will be a distraction, and also add the challenge of finding the correct entry. The goal is to train only one skill at a time, both when the dog is first learning to weave and when you are problem-solving.

Only add poles when your dog is fluent with collecting on four poles or fewer. The reinforcement strategy of rewarding behind your dog will create what I refer to as “backward thoughts,” which is the behavior that is created by rewarding behind the dog’s line (Figure 6).

**Problem #3: Lack of Speed or Independence**

Weaving requires so much physical and mental concentration from dogs that sometimes we lose speed to gain accuracy. Before training for speed, make a list of your dog’s rewards in order of excitement level. Does your dog get more excited about cheese or steak? Tug toys with fur or without? Be creative and ask your dog what gives them moving more!

To focus on building speed or independence in the weave poles, I make it easy for the dog to be accurate and use higher-level reinforcers to bring more energy to the behavior. I open the channels, add wires, use fewer poles, or any combination necessary I need to help the dog be successful at driving through the poles quickly and independently.
Figure 6: In this series, you can see how the placement of reward behind the dog has encouraged collection into the weave poles.
Whichever setup I decide on, I begin with a mid-level reinforcer to ensure success. Over several training sessions, I increase the difficulty of the weaving, while using the same reinforcer. Once the dog is weaving straight poles for a mid-level reinforcer, it’s time to make the weaving easier again, but increase the excitement level of the reinforcer (Figure 7). When focusing on speed and independency, I also add handler distractions (Figure 8). While the weaving is easier, the dog can focus more on his footwork and speed and learn that the handler’s movements are not relevant when he’s moving between the poles. I am careful to observe how my dog’s behavior is changing with regards to the weaves to know how quickly I can progress or how much difficulty I can add to this skill.

Figure 7: This is a slightly open channel with a high-level reinforcer pre-placed on the ground to encourage speed and independence when the handler is not moving.

Figure 8: Guide wires are added to the poles to decrease difficulty, and a mid-level reinforcer is pre-placed on the ground to encourage speed and independence while the handler is adding distracting movements.
Problem #4: Popping Out Early

Dogs are most vulnerable to handler distractions during the last three to four gaps of the weaves. This means we need to teach our dog to ignore distractions during those last few gaps. To build value for those last poles, I love to backchain!

I begin with only two poles, but I imagine these as poles 11 and 12. Since dogs need to exit to the left of the poles, I stand to the right of the poles and hold their reward, so it’s visible to them (Figure 9). I leave them in a sit-stay, about where poles 9 and 10 would be. I cue the weaves, holding the reward very close to the line he has to take to weave correctly. Once the dog’s head enters the poles, I cue the dog to take the reward from my hand. The dog learns in this way that going away from the reward will earn the reward.

I continue to add poles two at a time (Figures 10 and 11). If your dog cannot ignore a visible reward distraction, move the distraction farther away, to begin with, out of the direct line of the dog. When the dog is successful, you can move the distraction closer to their path.

Figure 9: Here you see the first steps of backchaining to build value for the last gap of poles.

Figure 10: I have added two more poles and am rewarding the last gap in the same way as I did in Figure 9.

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Figure 11: I have added two additional poles and am rewarding the last gap in the same way.
Training Tips

**Using guide wires or gates:** If your dog is struggling with any of these training strategies, do not be afraid to use guides or props to show your dog that they can do it (Figure 12). I use wires, guides, or gates at each stage of training, and fade or remove them as the dog becomes more confident.

**Ping-Pong:** During any of this training, be careful to avoid constantly increasing difficulty. Make it more difficult for a few repetitions, and then do a few easier reps to build confidence in your dog before going back to more difficult efforts (Figure 13).

**Limit the number of repetitions.** If you use food, have a limited supply of treats on you! When the treats are gone, the session is over! Fight the desire to grab more cookies. If you use toys, set a timer, and fight the urge to press repeat!

**Think. Plan. Do.** Have a clear plan for your training time. Know your objective, know where your dog will start, how your dog will be rewarded, and how you will reset them for the next repetition (Figure 14).
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