Basic Turns

By Linda Mecklenburg, photos by JT pawPrints

All changes of direction are some variation of one of these basic turns. The direction of your lateral motion is your primary cue for each turn, with the direction of your shoulder rotation and your hand signal being secondary cues. It is important for you and your dog to understand the differences between the turns so that there is never any doubt as to which direction your dog should go. Practicing each basic turn on the flat (without obstacles) is an important step in helping you and your dog distinguish between the cues for each turn. The ability to perform the basic turns on the flat gives you control of your dog's path between obstacles and lays the foundation for your dog's understanding of cues that indicate turns that occur after obstacles on course as well.

Pull

If you turn your shoulders and step laterally away from your dog, he turns toward you and remains at your side. This is the foundation of a pull. To teach this turn, start at a standstill, with your dog at your side. Focus your dog's attention on a treat in your inside hand. Turn away from your dog and lure him around the turn with your inside hand held close to your leg. Your outside foot steps laterally away from your dog as you turn him. Your dog gets the treat at the completion of the turn. Work the turn at a standstill, then while moving, then from a recall. It is important for you to maintain eye contact through the turn so that your dog knows you do not expect a side change.

STEP 1 *I get my dog's attention with a treat in my inside (left) hand.*

STEP 2 *I step laterally to my right 90° with my outside (right) foot, away from my dog, guiding his nose around the turn with my inside (left) hand held close to my leg.*

STEP 3 *For 180° turns at a standstill, I bring my left foot up to my right and complete a 90° turn.*

STEP 4 *I repeat step 2, stepping laterally to my right 90° with my outside (right) foot.*

STEP 5 *I bring my left foot up to my right and complete a 180° turn. I give my dog the treat at the completion of the turn.*

Front Cross

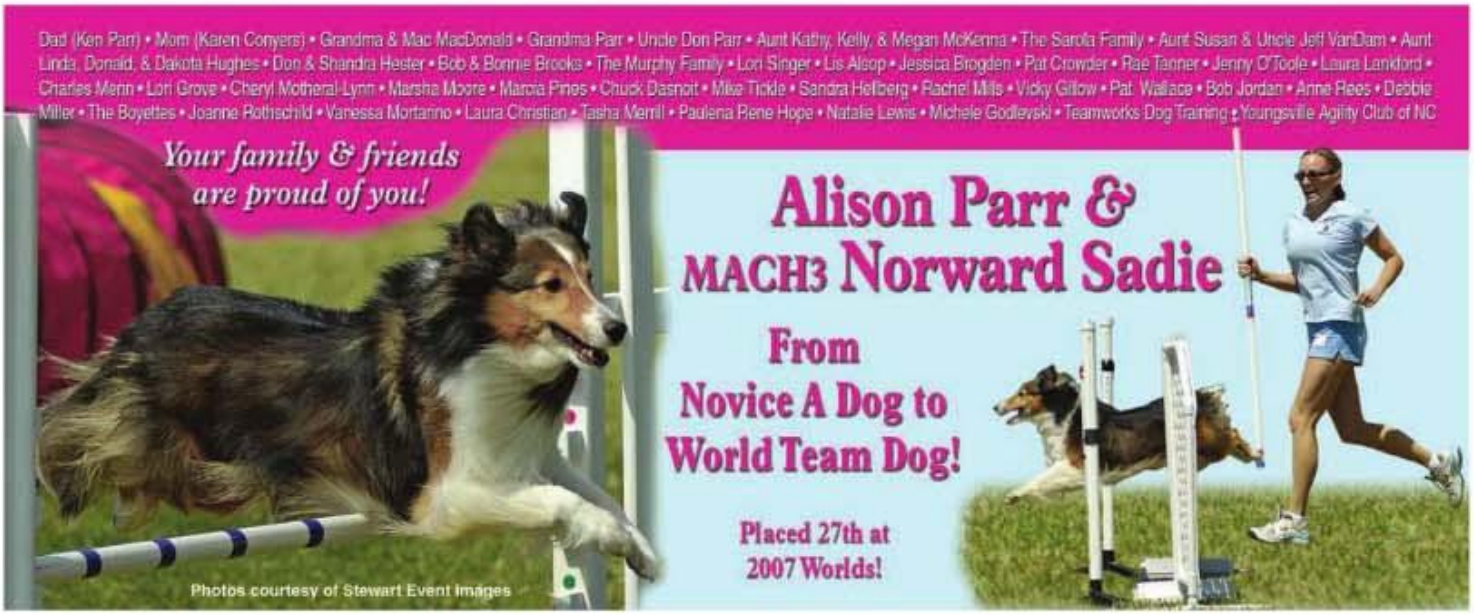
If you turn your shoulders toward your dog and step laterally away from him, he turns toward you. As he turns, you change sides. He must return to your side and remain there. This is the foundation of a front cross. To teach this, start at a standstill, with your dog at your side. First focus your dog's attention on your inside hand, but then bring in your outside hand with a treat in it and get the dog's focus on that hand. Turn toward your dog and lure him around the turn with your hand held close to your leg. Your outside foot steps laterally away from your dog as you turn him. As he turns toward you, step in alongside him for a side change. Your dog gets the treat at the completion of the turn. Work the turn first from a standstill, then while moving, then from a recall.

STEP 1 *I get my dog's attention with a treat in my inside (left) hand and then I bring in a treat in my outside (right) hand.*

STEP 2 *I step laterally to my right 90° with my outside (right) foot, away from my dog, guiding his nose around the turn with my outside (right) hand held close to my leg. Compare this to step 2 of the pull where I also step laterally away from my dog. Note the direction my shoulders turn and which hand I use.*

STEP 3 *I step laterally to my left 90° with my new outside (left) foot. I guide my dog's nose through the turn with my new inside (right) hand.*

STEP 4 *I bring my right foot up to my left and complete a 180° turn. I give my dog the treat at the completion of the turn.*



Push

If you turn your shoulders toward your dog and step laterally toward and in front of him, he turns away from you and remains at your side. This is the foundation of a push. To teach this turn, start at a standstill, with your dog at your side. Focus your dog's attention on a treat in your inside hand, then lure him around the turn with your inside hand held close to your leg. Your outside foot steps laterally toward your dog as you turn him. As he turns, turn with him without a side change. He gets the treat at the completion of the turn. Work the turn first from a standstill, then while moving, then from a recall.

STEP 1 *I get my dog's attention with a treat in my inside (left) hand.*

STEP 2 *I step laterally to my left 90° with my outside (right) foot, toward my dog and in front of him, guiding his nose around the turn with my inside (left) hand held close to my leg.*

STEP 3 *For 180° turns at a standstill, I bring my left foot up to my right and complete a 90° turn.*

STEP 4 *Finally, I step laterally 90° to my left, once again with my outside (right) foot.*

STEP 5 *I bring my left foot up to my right and complete a 180° turn. I give my dog a treat at the completion of the turn.*

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Rear Cross

If you turn your shoulders toward your dog and step laterally toward and behind him, he turns away from you. As he turns, you change sides. He must return to your side and remain there. This is the foundation of a rear cross. To teach this, start at a standstill, with your dog at your side. Focus your dog's attention on a treat in your outside hand, and then lure your dog around the turn away from you with the treat. Your inside foot steps laterally toward your dog as you turn him. As he turns, step in behind him for a side change. He gets the treat at the completion of the turn. Work the turn first from a standstill, then while moving, then from a recall.

STEP 1 *I get my dog's attention with a treat in my outside (right) hand.*

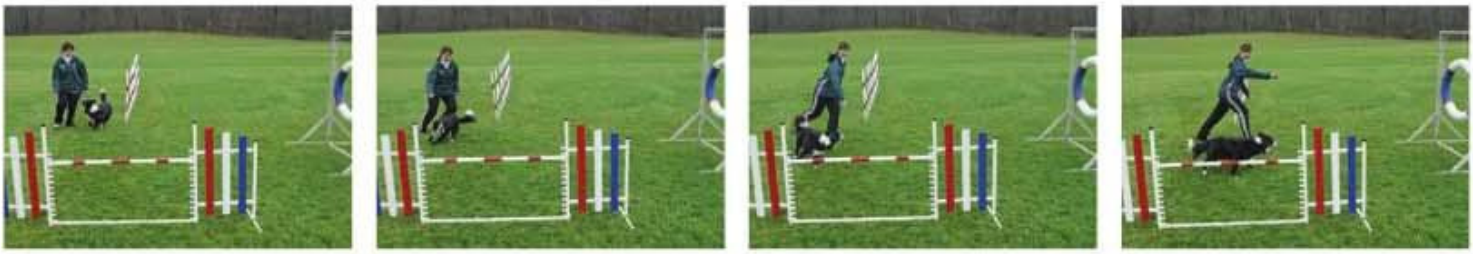
STEP 2 *I lure him forward, then laterally away from me guiding his nose away from my leg with my outside (right) hand. I do not step in front of him. If my dog swings his hindquarters away from me, I help his body remain straight with my inside (left) hand.*

STEP 3 *For 180° turns at a standstill, as the dog turns in front of me, I step to my left 180° with my inside (left) foot. Once my dog gets the idea of turning away, I break the turn into two 90° turns so that I can emphasize the lateral step toward my dog and behind him.*

STEP 4 *I bring my right foot up to my left and complete a 180° turn. I give my dog the treat at the completion of the turn.*

Adding Motion

Once you and your dog have mastered 180° turns at the standstill, practice the turns when in motion. Walk back and forth with him at your side and perform a series of 180° turns on the flat, mixing them up so your dog never knows which direction he will be asked to turn. Once you and your dog are doing 180° turns well, practice 90° turns which are more difficult, especially the rear cross. It is particularly important to practice 90° turns as these emphasize the change of direction of your lateral motion. Ultimately how far you rotate through each turn will determine how far your dog turns. You should be able to do all four turns at a standstill, at a walk, and with your dog running by your side. Eventually work the turns as an extension of a recall to your side. That is, leave your dog 10'-20' away and recall him to your side, then execute one of the four turns. Remember when first training the skill to reward at the completion of each turn. It is important to do so because at the completion of a turn your dog should remain at your side until released. Unless trained this way, many dogs will release themselves as soon as you stop rotating through a turn.



Many dogs will look for an obstacle after a turn without waiting for release. That is not desirable because often the dog will take the first obstacle that comes within his field of view, without waiting for direction. Here I am performing a rear cross on the flat after the weave poles. As I complete the cross, my dog is looking to me for direction, not at the wing jump. This results from lots of practice on his foundation turn where he received a treat at the completion of the turn. If my dog knows to remain at my side at the completion of a turn until released, I have much more precise control of his path.

Adding Obstacles

Once you and your dog have mastered turns in motion, combine the turns with obstacles: one jump with a 180° turn after it, then two jumps with a 90° turn between them. For each of the turns, the final direction of your shoulders and feet when you complete your rotation determines your dog's direction following the turn. When your dog is facing in the desired direction, simply release your dog to the desired obstacle. Not all turns are executed with your dog at your side, some are performed at a distance. But having the ability to bring your dog to your side, turn him and have him remain with you until released allows absolute control of your dog's path between obstacles when you need it.

BASIC TURNS

TYPE OF TURN	LATERAL MOTION (STEP)	SHOULDER ROTATION	HAND SIGNAL	SIDE CHANGE	DOG TURNS
Pull	Away from dog	Away from dog	Inside hand	No	Toward handler
Front Cross	Away from dog	Toward dog	Outside hand	Yes	Toward Handler
Push	Toward dog	Toward dog	Inside hand	No	Away from handler
Rear cross	Toward dog	Toward dog	Outside hand	Yes	Away from handler

Conclusion

Remember that every change of direction is a variation of one of these basic turns. It is important to be able to perform each turn on the flat; that is, without obstacles. For each turn your direction of lateral motion will be your dog's primary cue as to which turn you want. It is important that you both know the secondary cues that tell your dog which direction to turn and whether there is a side change.

Practicing the basic turns will not only improve the control of your dog's path between obstacles, it lays the foundation for your dog's understanding of lateral motion cues for changes of direction over jumps. Ultimately there are many variations of each turn that you will use on the agility course. Developing a good understanding of the four basic turns will give your dog a solid foundation on which to build his more advanced turning skills.

Linda Mecklenburg is one of the most accomplished dog agility trainers and instructors in the United States. She and her students have achieved the highest levels of success in dog agility. Linda has represented the United States in international competition on 12 different occasions with four different dogs. She has earned gold and silver medals at the prestigious FCI Agility World Championships, in addition to earning multiple top ten individual placements at that event. Linda teaches agility full time at her Awesome Paws Agility Center in Mt. Gilead, Ohio. Contact her at awesomepaws@aol.com.