

Spy Kids

Trial Preparations, Start-line Stays, and Good Turns

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marcy Mantell Photography



The Spy Kids will be 18 months this week. By the time you read this, Sweep will have started his USDAA competition career, if everything progresses as planned. Sweep is entered for one day only, as a dry run, in Novice Gamblers and Standard classes. He will be exactly 18 months old on the day that he does his first trial. We will use it to test whether he is ready to enter a full slate of classes at another show in a few weeks. Sweep has been traveling to shows with us since he was a puppy, and seems to be attentive to Jim around the rings. Jim spends lots of time training stays and flatwork, and of course, just playing with him. Sweep has not been to a fun match yet, but all four of his brothers went to one last weekend and behaved admirably.

Sweep will run this weekend if he is willing to play tug at ringside, acts controlled at the gate, stays attentive to Jim when entering the ring, and holds a perfect stay on the start line, while Jim leads out as he regularly does in training. Sweep will get to stay in the ring if he acts like the trained dog that he is, follows Jim's handling cues, and does his contacts properly, keeping

to the same criteria we have while practicing. We don't expect total perfection, just attentiveness, enthusiasm, and an effort shown on his part to follow directions. Sweep is a novice dog and we would understand and forgive him for acting like one. What Jim will not accept is an unwillingness to play tug when invited, or moving from the sit-stay after being left at the start line. If Sweep is too distracted to play with Jim or so excited he cannot hold the sit-stay, he will not get to run.

Rehearsing Possible Scenarios Ahead of Time

Jim and I have already discussed what he will do if Sweep misbehaves. I find it is impossible to make good decisions about naughty behaviors unless I have rehearsed all the scenarios that might happen ahead of time. For example, I plan that I will leave the ring before the run starts if my dog does not give me any eye contact, does not pay attention to my line-up command, or is unwilling to interact and play with me. I plan on my young dog possibly moving on the start line, I am ready for it, and I have thought about how I will leave the ring if it happens. Jim already knows what he will do if Sweep does not nose-touch on the end of the contact (he will ask again, providing Sweep is still in two-on/two-off position), or flies off the teeter (he will possibly ignore it at the first trial if Sweep was traveling too fast to hold his position on a new teeter), or runs by a weave entry (he will call Sweep back to his side, make sure he has Sweep's attention for a moment, then releasing him to weave again).



Stay, drop toy, pick up toy: With your dog at your side, tell him to Stay, drop the toy, pick up the toy, release the dog and reward him for his stay with a game of tug.

Some young dogs are so excited their first times in the ring that they seem to have lost their minds, and all the good behavior and training seems to have disappeared. Both Jim and Sweep may be excited, and dogs can feel the difference in our mood and often will realize that when we act in a certain way we are going to allow them to behave in a way that is inconsistent with how they are generally expected to behave. I am crossing my fingers that both Jim and Sweep are unflappable and will take it all in stride. You will have to wait till next month though, for the show report and results.

Training Update

Jim runs Sweep in one of the classes I teach each week. The dogs are driven, exciting, and noisy, and the handlers seem to follow suit. Sweep was pushing the envelope on his stays at the start line last week. Each time Jim turned his back and moved away from him, Sweep moved one front foot and lowered his body position. Jim returned to reset him each time, by asking him to come back up into a sit, but Sweep would move the foot again as soon as Jim led out **again**. Sweep was not allowed to run after he moved his front foot, even though when Jim got to the lead-out position Sweep would settle into a stay. We would travel down a very slippery slope if we allowed Sweep to move even a little bit on his start line and still let him run the drill. I believe if you allow a little bit of movement, the big break is only a step away. Sweep will not run agility unless he stays perfectly the first time we ask, not the second or third time we ask, after we have had to repair a break.

Last week during class, Jim worked first on rewarding his first step away from Sweep (step out one foot, step back and reward). He did that a few times, then released him and started over. He kept eye contact with Sweep on the next lead-out and was ready to return if he moved. He had to repeat the scenario a few times, but eventually Sweep realized that he did not get to go past the start line if he moved a foot.

Sweep likes to watch certain dogs and handlers in our classes that for some reason are stimulating. They are not always the fastest or most exciting dogs, but they are ones that challenge Jim's patience to keep Sweep's attention and focus. In almost all these scenarios Jim uses tugging on a toy as the means to keep Sweep's attention.



When the pups were just a few months old, I stated that our goal with Sweep were to be able to have him "Eat, play, come, stay... anytime, anywhere." If Jim can accomplish those four things with Sweep, teaching agility will be the easy part.

Stay, throw, send: With your dog at your side, tell him to Stay, throw a toy out ahead, then send your dog to retrieve the toy using handler movement and your retrieve command (Get It!).

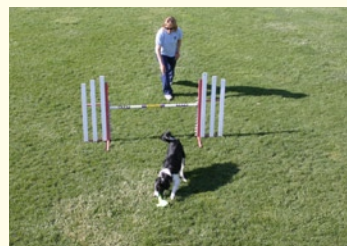


Stay, spin to toy: Put your dog in a sit-stay at your side, drop a toy on your other side, then release your dog and spin with him to the toy.

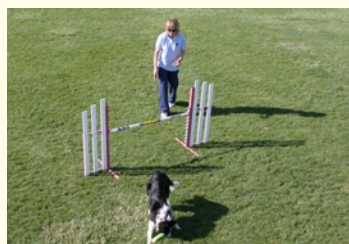


Stay, throw, lead out, spin to toy: Put your dog in a sit-stay at your side, drop the toy behind you, lead out 10', recall your dog to your side, and then spin back to the toy.

The exercises in the photos and diagrams show some of the ways that we use toys with Sweep to help develop good turns and drive, both coming and going away from us. Remember to work each exercise with the dog on your left and your right.



Straight send over jump: Line up straight in front of a jump with the dog in a sit-stay at your side, throw the toy beyond the jump, then release your dog to the jump with your movement. Give your retrieve command (Get It!) after your dog has committed to the jump.



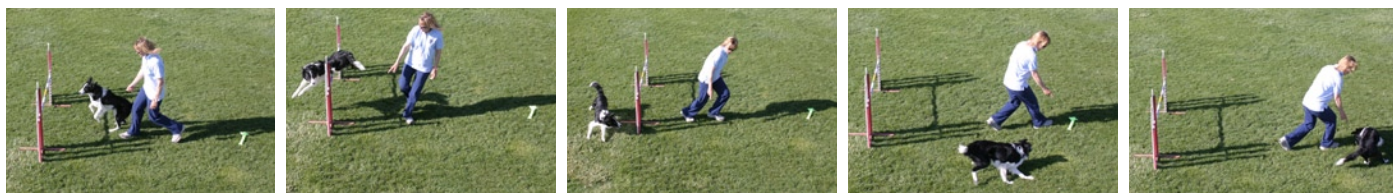
Angled send over jump: Line up at an angle to a jump with the dog in a sit-stay at your side, throw the toy beyond the jump, then release your dog to the jump with your movement. Give your retrieve command (Get It!) after your dog has committed to the jump.

Developing Good Turns

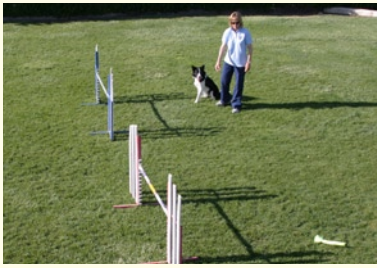
No matter what handling system you use in agility training, it is the turns that can make the biggest difference in your ability to cut your course times, as well as stay on the correct course. Ground speed can be developed to a point, and you should never give up working to get more enthusiasm and drive with your dog, using play and motivation, if you feel that your pup is not reaching his potential. Some dogs start slowly and really need to see the whole picture of agility before they gain confidence and enthusiasm. Sometimes these pups can be the most challenging to handlers as it is so tempting to let them cheat on start lines and contacts in the hope that the less controlling the handler is the more enthusiasm the dog will show. If your pup falls asleep when you do one-jump drills, or wanders off while you backchain your contacts for the thousandth time, you may need to look at the whole picture and decide what will help build enthusiasm and excitement. Do a line of jumps and throw your toy, and make sure you vary how you backchain so you are not boring your dog and putting him to sleep with all the “small stuff.”



Rear cross with jump: Line up straight in front of a jump with the dog in a sit-stay at your side. Throw the toy to the position shown in the photos. Release your dog to the jump and immediately step laterally into your dog and behind his path to indicate a rear cross.



Wrap with jump: Line up at a jump with the dog in a sit-stay at your side; toss a toy behind your dog. Release the dog, move forward to the jump, and wrap back without a side change to the toy.

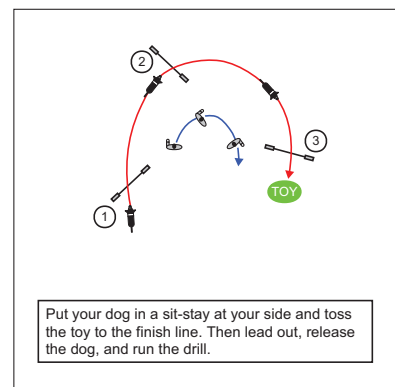
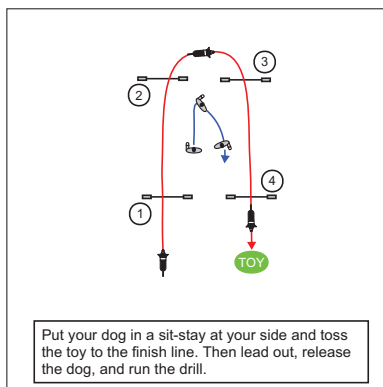
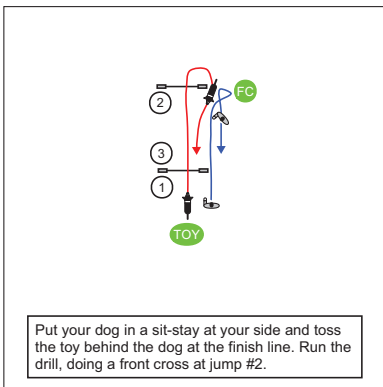


180s over jumps: Line up at a jump with the dog in a sit-stay and toss a toy to the finish spot shown in the photos. Send your dog over both jumps and finish at the toy. Always give your retrieve command, such as **Get It!**, prior to your dog reaching the toy.



We have worked hard to balance Sweep's drive, so that he keeps coming back for more play and wants to work for the rewards. Sweep's play-drive drops off a little bit and his retrieve gets sloppy as he gets tired. He usually returns to Jim with the toy right away, unless the training has gone on a little bit too long. That is usually a sign to end the session, but only after he returns with the toy.

Here are some additional exercises for you to try.



It has been 18 fun months of raising and training Sweep. Jim is looking forward to sharing Sweep's competition career with him, and we are looking forward to sharing the training and results with you in the next few months. I hope you are having as much fun with your pup as we are having with ours. 🐾

Nancy Gyes and her husband, Jim Basic, run Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California. Nancy has been the AKC World Team Coach since 2006, and has been on the AKC World Team seven times, four years with Scud and three with Riot. Nancy and Riot finished 1st in 2002 and 2nd in 2001 in Individual Agility classes at the FCI Agility World Championships. Nancy also won the USDAA Nationals four years in a row, 1998 to 2001, with three different dogs: Scud, Riot, and Wicked. In 2001 and 2002, Nancy and Riot were the 24" jump height AKC National Champions. Contact Nancy at www.powerpawsagility.com where you can also view other articles and videos.

