



**So, you have a new puppy. He is cute, smart, athletic, and your next agility star. Where to begin? In addition to the basics of good manners, recalls, and body awareness, this article describes games to play with your puppy that teach him some of the most important aspects of our sport without using any agility equipment. The games tap into your puppy's love of food and his natural prey and chase drive to build focus for you and value for interacting with "obstacles." Then you can put that focus for you and interaction with the "obstacles" together to teach your puppy brilliant response to your handling maneuvers as well as love for and drive to obstacles.**

## Puppy Agility Games, Part 1

By Anne Stocum, photos by Dianne Spring

This two-part series describes games that can be worked with dogs of any age, including young puppies. The only things you need are yourself, a willing and eager puppy, a variety of rewards that your puppy loves and that you control, and your nonagility obstacles—several medium-size traffic cones or other upright, stable objects, and a soft crate or dog bed.

Before getting started, let's discuss some tips for building a great reward system for your puppy.

### Building a Reward System

Building value for a variety of rewards like toys or soft tasty treats, and associating

those rewards with you, is the most important "work" you and your puppy will do in his first year. Use games like restrained recalls, hide 'n seek, chase games, hand targeting, sit-tug-sit, and others to teach your puppy that you are fun and worth spending time with. It's good practice, even at home, to use a clear start to your play/work session so that your puppy knows the fun is beginning. This can be a happy voice, or a "game-on" stance that your puppy recognizes. Then when your play/work session is over, clearly end the session and either put your puppy in his crate or signal that the puppy is on his own time to explore with a *Go see* or *Off you go*.

Your ultimate goal is a puppy that finds a variety of food, a variety of toys, praise, and simply interacting with you greatly rewarding to the exclusion of all other distractions. This ideal state takes time to develop, so don't expect it to happen overnight and don't get discouraged. Most of all have fun with your puppy and remember that any failures are just a moment in your long journey together.

Know what your puppy finds rewarding, taking into account the distractions in your environment. Avoid offering a puppy a reward that he doesn't want in that moment. A puppy who will enthusiastically tug at home may not tug in dis-

tracting environments like puppy class. Most of these games can be started in your living room or kitchen so that you can minimize distractions at first. But be sure to add appropriate distractions as your puppy gets better at the games.

### Tips for Using Food Rewards

Use soft, easily chewable food that won't crumble or stick to your fingers. Deliver one piece of food at a time. If both hands are free, hold a small number of treats in the hand opposite the puppy, then take one treat out and deliver to your puppy. If you switch sides, just move the treats from one hand to another. You can also have a bowl of treats on a counter or

table and take one treat out at a time to give the puppy.

Deliver the food to your puppy in a way that supports the skill you are teaching. If you are rewarding a sit, move the food quickly to the puppy's mouth without pulling the puppy off balance or encouraging the front feet to come off the ground. If you are rewarding a moving behavior, tap into your puppy's prey drive by delivering food after your puppy chases you a bit.

### Tips for Using Toy Rewards

Tugging with your puppy is a great way to build your relationship because it's a team activity. Tugging taps into your puppy's prey drive and most puppies come with an instinct to chase, pounce, and "kill" moving objects. You can turn your puppy into a tugging fiend by remembering a few simple rules of nature. Puppy = predator; Toy = rabbit: 1) The rabbit does not want to be dinner; it will always run away from the predator; 2) The rabbit runs on the ground, it doesn't fly; and 3) The predator will stop chasing rabbits if he never catches and kills one. In other words, when playing tug games with your puppy: 1) Encourage interaction with the toy by moving it away from the puppy—don't shove the toy toward the puppy. Remind yourself that the rabbit (toy) will never jump voluntarily into the predator's mouth; 2) Keep the toy low to the ground to mimic the rabbit running away; 3) Let the puppy catch the toy.

Only put as much pressure on the tug as your puppy will accept without letting

go. A long toy or a toy on a string works nicely with puppies. Let him "win" occasionally by letting go while he is tugging. Don't introduce a release word to tug until you are consistently fighting to get the toy away from your puppy. Don't expect him to grab onto a stationary tug until you have built tons of value for tugging with the toy. Keep it moving! If your puppy has little interest in tugging, be creative and find other ways to play together as a team.



Tap into your puppy's instinct to chase and kill prey by moving the toy away from the puppy. Once your puppy has his mouth on the toy, only put as much pressure on the tug as your puppy will accept without letting go. If he lets go, move the toy away again to encourage the puppy to chase it.

### On to the Games!

Agility is a game of chase for the dogs; they chase the handler around a field at full speed while performing an obstacle course with accuracy. When you run, they run; when you turn, they turn; when you stop, they stop. Sounds simple and in a lot of ways it is. The dogs just need to understand a series of consistent cues from their



Photo courtesy Contact Point Photography

## Best friends. True Sport.

Great things start with humble beginnings.

So it was a quarter-century ago with dog agility in the USA. Before there were competitions, awards and titles, there were everyday people designing obstacles, defining rules, and discovering their dog's amazing abilities. From there, the USDAA was born.

It is as true today as it was then—that every backyard beginner may someday become a world champion. USDAA welcomes everyone with programs tailored to match many levels of ambition and ability.

Be a part of the original. Be a part of our family. People like you are USDAA.

Visit [www.usdaa.com](http://www.usdaa.com) for more information and a complete listing of our events.



**USDAA**

REAL PEOPLE. REAL FUN. TRUE SPORT.™



handlers for the behavior that is desired along with accurate obstacle performance. This article describes five games: the first three teach your puppy to respond to your handler cues and the other two games build value for interacting with nonagility obstacles, namely a traffic cone and a crate or bed. When your puppy understands these five games, you can put them together to practice many handling maneuvers.

These games are designed to be done in very short sets with play in between. This ensures that your puppy finds you and the games fun!

### Focus on the Handler Games

#### Game 1: I Turn, You Turn!

This game teaches puppies that when you turn your

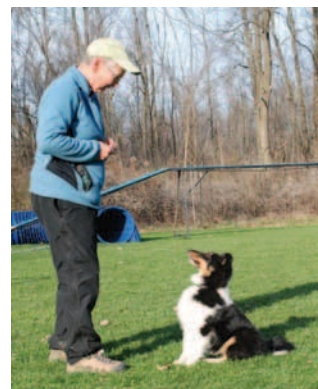
body, the puppy should turn too. The game requires that your puppy has a sit-stay. Remember to use high value treats that are soft and easy to swallow, and to deliver one treat at a time. If you are in an environment where your puppy needs to be on leash, experiment with tying the leash around your waist or drape it over your shoulder so that you can free up both of your hands.

**Stage 1: It pays to be at my side.** Teach the puppy that a good place to be is at your side. Ask the puppy to sit. Move yourself into position next to the puppy so that you are facing in the same direction. Deliver the reward near your leg, with the hand closest to the puppy, and at the puppy's head level so he doesn't move his feet to reach the food (you don't want to

muddy the criterion for your sit-stay). If you have a small dog, bend your knees to deliver the food near the puppy's mouth. Deliver five or so treats while the puppy is in this position. Release the puppy and play for a bit. Repeat on the other side. Play again.

#### Stage 2: Turn with me.

Once you have had a number of successful sessions at Stage 1 and your puppy is eager to play this game, move on to Stage 2. Teach the puppy that when you turn, he should turn with you. Start the exercise as above, then give your release cue and turn in place, one quarter turn. Be ready to deliver a treat to your puppy as soon as he gets up and moves with you. Avoid luring the puppy into position. Deliver several treats to your puppy



Ask your puppy to sit. Move yourself next to the puppy and reward at your leg, near the puppy's head.

"The research on these herbs is extensive. They improve endurance, work capacity under stress, and recovery after strenuous activity, all of which are helpful for the working dog."

Adaptogens and the Working Dog  
Christine King, BVSc, MACVSc,  
MVetClinStud

# GO PRO

**AUBURN**  
LABORATORIES INC  
877-661-3505 auburnlabs.com

in quick succession for his brilliance in maintaining his perfect position at your leg. It doesn't matter if your puppy sits or stays standing as long as his head is near your leg. Remember to work both sides, count out your rewards, and play in between sets.

### **Stage 3: Keep circling.**

Once you have successful quarter turns, you can add a half-circle turn and then finally a full-circle turn. Keep the reinforcement value very high and take plenty of play breaks or your puppy will get bored and you will get dizzy.

### **Stage 4: Side changes.**

Once you can turn full circles with your puppy, your puppy has received so much reinforcement for being at your side, he knows it's a good place to be. In this stage, you'll teach your puppy to respond to a side change. Start with your puppy at your side. Reward at your leg. Then turn into the puppy, and reward at your other side. Reinforce your puppy's brilliant response. Repeat on both sides and play after each short session. Once your puppy has a tight, snappy response to the side change from a stationary position, add your "in place" circles before changing sides.

### **Game 2: I Run, You Run!**

Chase games are huge fun for puppies and can teach great agility skills.

**Stage 1: Chase me!** Place your puppy in a sit-stay or, better yet, get a partner to restrain your puppy. Have your partner hold the puppy gently by his chest or collar. Lead out a short distance at

first, holding your reward in your opposite hand (you want the puppy chasing you, not the reward). Take a game-on position.

If your puppy is in a sit-stay, give your release cue; if he's being restrained, call your his name as you burst into a sprint. The holder will let go of the puppy when you call his name. As the puppy catches up with you, slow up, and deliver the reward using the hand closest to the puppy. If using a toy, keep the toy moving until the puppy has latched on for tug. If using food, deliver the food while still in motion.

Ideally, your puppy will not go past you in this game because of all the reinforcement you built in Game 1 for being at your side! If he does, turn into the dog and run the other way, letting him catch up with you again for his reward. Be unpredictable in this game. Vary the distance you are from the puppy. Sometimes lead out a little farther and wait until the puppy comes forward a bit and then run. Sometimes run first before calling the



Use retrained recalls for chase games. As the puppy reaches you, slow up and reward at your side.

puppy's name or giving your release cue. Keep it fun!

### **Stage 2: Chase with turns.**

Once you are successful with Stage 1 of the I Run, You Run! game and the "I Turn, You Turn!" game, you can put the two together. Do a restrained recall and as the puppy reaches you, turn into the puppy and reward his response to your side change. When your puppy is advanced in the I Turn, You Turn! game, doing full circles at your side, let the puppy chase you and do a post turn when he reaches you. Reward your puppy for staying at your side.

### **Stage 3: Driving ahead.**

In this variation of the chase game, you will cue your puppy to drive ahead of you. This requires a reward that your puppy will chase—a toy or food pouch.

Start with your puppy in a sit-stay or restraint. Release as in Stage 1 of Chase Me!, but this time, don't slow up. As the puppy reaches you, throw the reward ahead of you and keep running. Now both you and the puppy are running forward toward the reward, teaching the puppy to keep driving forward as long as you keep driving forward, too.

If your puppy doesn't have a good retrieve yet, put the toy on a leash or have a second toy in your pocket. Call the puppy and let him chase you down for the second toy. If using a food pouch, run to the pouch, open it, and let the puppy take out the treat, while you excitedly tell him how great he is. Advance in this game by gradually letting the puppy get farther ahead before throwing the toy. But remember to keep up your

speed driving to the toy. If the puppy looks back at you, you have gone too far, too fast.

### **Game 3: I Stop, You Stop!**

This game teaches your puppy a brilliant response to your deceleration. Don't start this game until your puppy loves the I Turn, You Turn! game (at least through Stage 4) and is brilliant at Stage 1 of the I Run, You Run! game.

**Stage 1: Full stop.** Put your puppy in a sit-stay, lead out a short distance, and stop. Release your puppy. Based on all the reinforcement he's received in the previous games, he should come quickly to your side. Reward at your leg. Be sure to work this on both sides and vary the distance you are from the puppy. You can also play this game by stepping to the side of your puppy.

Advanced stages of the I Stop, You Stop! game add motion and will be described in Part 2 of this series. For now, keep adding reinforcement value for the puppy being at your side.

### **Focus on the Obstacles Games**

#### **Game 4: Send to Crate/Bed**

Your puppy's crate or his bed is often the first "obstacle" he interacts with. Take the time to make it fun and rewarding and you will have a great tool for use in teaching lots of agility and life skills. I recommend Susan Garrett's *Crate Games* DVD.

**Stage 1: Build value for the crate.** Your puppy will probably spend a lot of time in his crate. Throw a cookie into the crate each



time your puppy goes in. As you walk by, give him a cookie. Give him chew toys in his crate. Surprise him by putting him in his crate, and then releasing him just a few moments later for a fun game with you. Teach your puppy (as in Susan Garrett's *Crate Games* DVD) to wait at the door of the crate before being released. This is also a great way to teach your puppy his release word and a great sit-stay.

### Stage 2: Send to the crate.

Before you go to this stage, your puppy must believe that his crate is a great place to be. When you open the crate door, does the puppy enthusiastically run into the crate? If so, you are ready for this stage.

Build a little anticipation by restraining the puppy just a bit in front of his crate. When you can feel him leaning toward the crate, let go. As his head goes in, toss a handful of really great cookies into the crate. As he finishes those cookies, call him out, and play the game again. Start close to the crate and don't add distance until your puppy is fighting you to get into his crate. Remember, the farther you are away from the crate, the more delayed the reward will be for the puppy. First build value close with quick rewards, and distance will come easily.

For puppies that are highly toy driven, instead of throwing cookies, throw a tug toy inside the crate and



Once the crate has a lot of value for your pup, build anticipation with a little restraint. Release and watch your puppy drive into his crate, throwing cookies or a tug toy in after him. If using a toy, lean in and tug inside the crate.

### Game 5: Circle the Cone

For this exercise, you will need a medium-size traffic cone (or some other similar stable, round object) and when we move onto the next set of exercises described in Part 2 of this series, you will need an additional one or two cones.

### Stage 1: Build value for interacting with the cone.

This can start as a shaping exercise. Get close to the cone. If the puppy looks at or approaches the cone, say Yes and deliver a treat to the puppy near the cone. Position the treat in such a way that you encourage the puppy to continue around the cone. You are not luring, simply using placement of reinforcement to encourage the behavior you want. Stay close to the cone so that you can keep a high rate of reinforcement.



As you shape the puppy to circle the cone, place your treat close to the cone in such a way that you are encouraging the puppy to circle around it.



Once the puppy is reliably circling the cone, it's a good time to switch to a toy as a reward. Add distance a little bit at a time, always looking for the puppy's enthusiastic response.

### Stage 2: Sending to the cone.

Once the puppy is obviously finding value in interacting with the cone and is reliably offering the circling behavior, you can begin to add distance from the cone, sending the puppy to circle the cone and come back to you for his reward. This is a good time to transition to a toy reward, if you haven't already done so. Get the puppy playing tug near the cone. Grab the tug out of his mouth and when the puppy offers the circling behavior, reward again with the tug. Don't add too much distance too soon. You want the puppy to have a high rate of reinforcement at this stage.

### Next Month

Have fun with these games. In Part 2 of this series, I'll talk about advanced stages of the games and we'll put the games together to teach your puppy a brilliant response to your handling maneuvers as well as love for and drive to obstacles. 🐾

Anne Stocum lives in upstate New York and has been involved in dog agility for nearly 15 years. She enjoys teaching all levels of agility and helping teams achieve their best through consistent handling and good dog training that builds a solid foundation, and that is fun for both handler and dog. Anne has competed 10 times in national finals (AKC and USDAA) with her Shelties Breeze and Lacey. She and Breeze were also members of the 2010 AKC/USA World team. Anne blogs about raising her Border Collie, Tai, at [annestocumagility.wordpress.com](http://annestocumagility.wordpress.com).