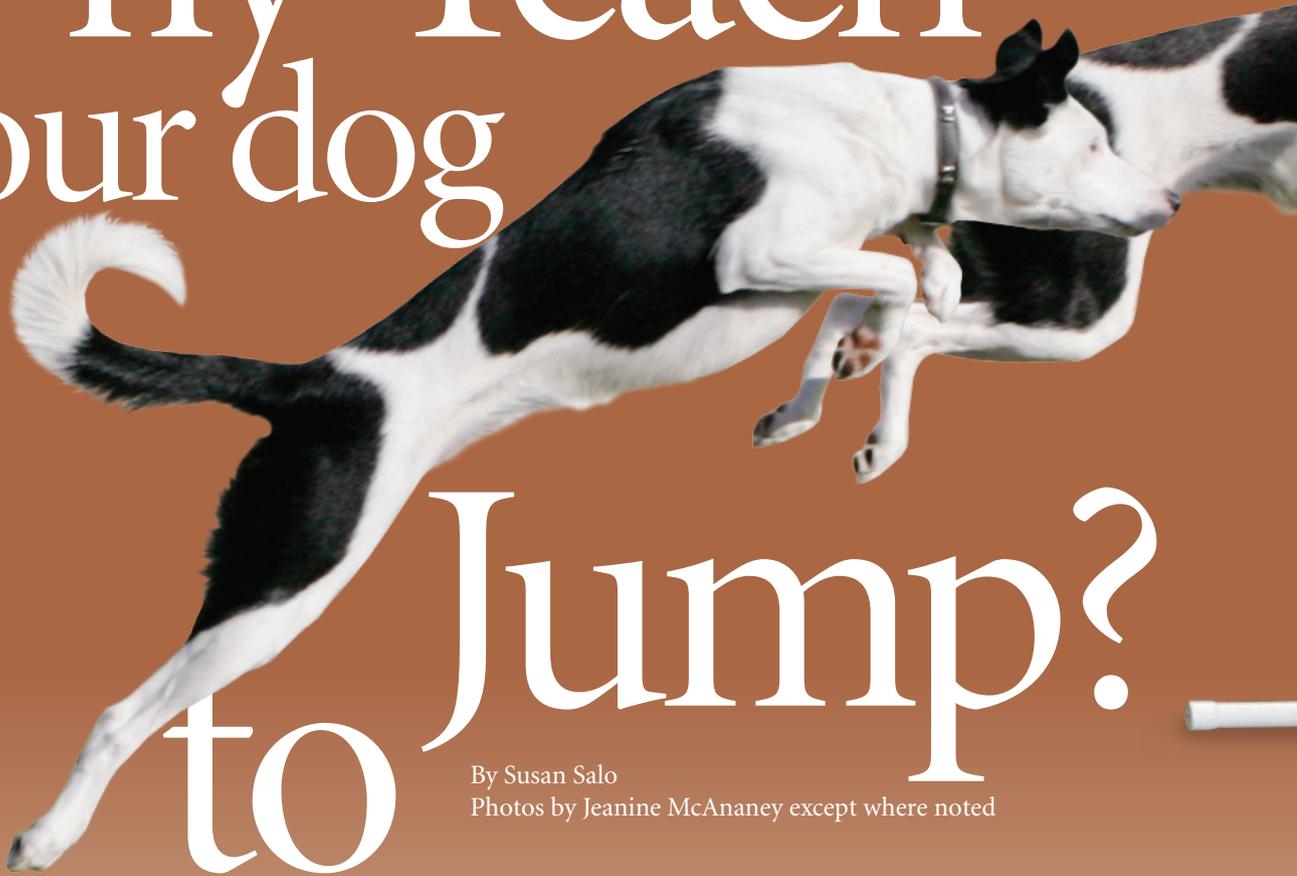


# Why Teach your dog



# to Jump?

By Susan Salo  
Photos by Jeanine McAnaney except where noted

When Dana Crevling gave me this topic to speak on at the Clean Run Instructor Conference I immediately thought it would be a great topic for an article. As I have often stated, we all know most dogs *can* jump, so why would we need to train the skill? Because when the dog *chooses* to jump, he has a focused mind (he sees where he is going) so his body can respond appropriately. When we insert ourselves into the picture, the dog now must divide his focus and multitask. Since he must follow the handler *and* perform the job of jumping, his jumping task becomes far more complex, to say the least.

I cannot think of any handlers who do not spend practice time working on their dogs' contact performances. Even though their dogs perform contact behaviors with great precision, they still require regular practice to maintain that level of excellence. The same is true of weave pole entries. Much training time is devoted to that skill set throughout the dog's career. Should the dog's jumping skills get any less attention? I think not, considering that every course the dog will ever set a paw on will be mostly made up of jumps!

Yet jumping skills still remain the least taught and least understood aspect of the agility dog's training. Is it really such a hard concept that we need to allow the dog practice time

for jump skills? Not simply as jumping relates to the handler, meaning while running sequences, but actually setting aside training time for ongoing work on the mechanical skill sets of jumping, which will help the dog's physical skills as well as help him maintain his confidence as it relates to jumping.

Training jumping skills aids the dog in both developing and maintaining the proper muscles required to jump, which can also minimize the risk of injury. Far too many dogs are getting seriously injured in this sport due to poor preparation for the demands of the tasks we expect of them. An ill-prepared dog will constantly have to work harder than one that is prepared. A well-trained athlete, human or canine, will produce only the



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amount of exertion required of him, no more, no less. When we see any athletic endeavor well performed, the motion always appears smooth and easy; with proper training we can achieve the same “ease of motion” for our canine athletes.

It’s a complicated process to acquire the speed, balance, and footwork necessary to produce a reliable performance in the ring when it really counts and then to maintain those skills. Drills of some sort are a constant part of any athletic endeavor to maintain the reliability and precision of the skill sets required by the sport. Jumping skills are no different than contact skills and weave pole entry skills—you must set aside

time for the dogs to practice their jumping skills separately. Putting ourselves in the picture and training jumps only as part of handling sequences is not enough if our dogs are to achieve the goals we set for them.

So why teach a dog to jump? The direction of the sport dictates that dogs must be confident, skilled jumpers because every course they will ever step onto is primarily made up of jumps. Whether our individual goals are to compete on a world team or to earn a MACH or ADCH, we owe it to our dogs to make sure they can successfully negotiate a course of jumps safely and confidently, and that they actually enjoy the process.



In this lovely photo you can see the flexion and angulation of the dog's rear end as he prepares to jump. This flexion represents the "load," or weight shift, from front to back. Along with the degree of flexion, which is like compressing a big spring, the weight shift is preparing the dog for the powerful liftoff toward the jump. His back is raised to approximately a 45° angle, which is appropriate for the jump height. When dogs are moving with an extended stride toward a jump, they will often fail to make an appropriate angle of elevation in relation to the jump, because the longer the stride, the lower the dog's body is to the ground. This is a great example of a well-executed set point.



In this photo the dog has left the ground and is making a clean ascent with his legs coming up behind him and quite even with each other. The dog's shoulders have comfortably moved forward, his head is down, and his front legs are brought up tightly under his chin. You often see photos of dogs leaving the ground with a lack of organization: the legs are not tight together, the head is upright, and the front legs are uneven. This photo shows a good liftoff.



Here we see a nice flight photo. The dog has cleared the jump bar by only a comfortable margin, which is totally appropriate. A well-trained athlete will provide only as much exertion as the task requires, no more, no less. The dog is checking in with the handler because this is the last jump in the series.



Here is another great example of a well-executed set point. The dog has just lifted off the ground, her rear legs are tight together behind, her front legs are up under her chin, her head is down, and her shoulders have moved slightly forward.



This is truly a classic photo! I am so fortunate that this dog's owner is kind enough to allow me to use this less-than-flattering photo of an otherwise very accomplished jumping dog. As you can see the dog is actually *running* through the air and has failed to set herself up at all; she is pushing off the ground from one hind leg, which causes a bar to come down. Poor motion from the handler during the lead-out caused this situation and had a huge impact on the dog. I see this all too often in trial situations, when motion from handlers is either inappropriate or poorly timed, or perhaps when handlers have asked their dogs to organize faster than they actually *can*.

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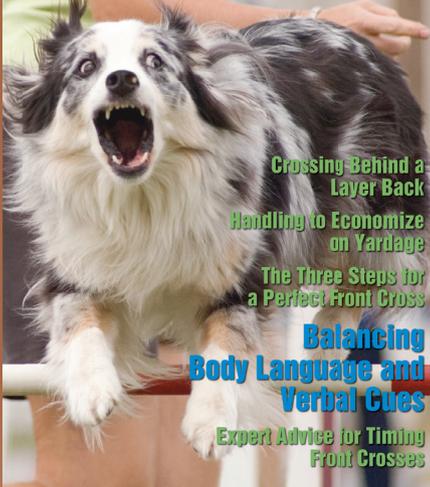
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In this photo we see the correct motion and a lovely jump from the dog. Her rear legs are tight together behind, her shoulders are relaxed and slightly forward, her forearms are tucked nicely up under her chin, and her head is down.



This photo shows our dog with a good load from her haunches, and yet she seems a bit slow to bring her shoulders up for the angle of elevation. This is often a place where dogs can tend to get a bit sloppy as they become fatigued.



Here we see the dog in a relatively extended stride to show just how far behind the hips the dog's hind legs are. The arc is low to the ground. When you look at this as a still-frame moment, it demonstrates just how much of the dog's hind end needs to come forward to be well under her for the load that we saw in earlier photos. It is truly not that simple a task for dogs to gather themselves *and* come to an angle of elevation *and* multitask by following our instructions, *and* read upcoming tasks, all simultaneously! 🐾

*A lifelong horsewoman, Susan Salo has offered her insights into jumping for dogs in agility in seminars around the country, including Power Paws and Clean Run Camps, and is proud to be a part of the Say Yes Team for Susan Garrett's Graduate Skills Camp in Toronto, Ontario. She currently resides in Woodland, California, and can be reached at Jumpdogs@aol.com.*