

Get Closer to Me

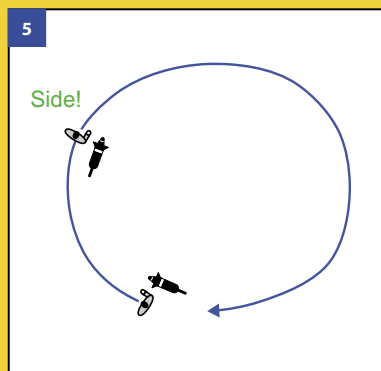
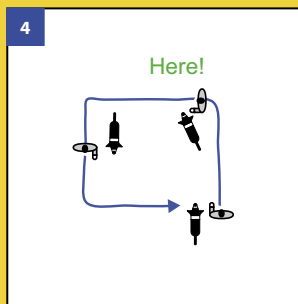
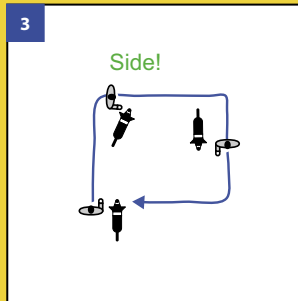
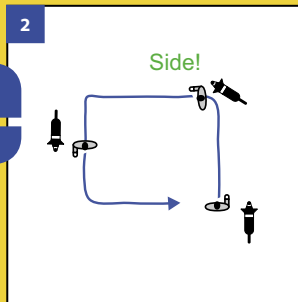
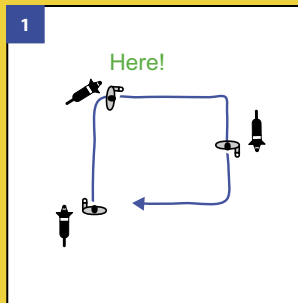
Part 2

Last month we worked on teaching your dog to come to your left or right side on command from a stationary position. We also worked on moving with your dog in a straight line, and turning right and left approximately 180°, and continuing in a straight line again the opposite way. If you were successful, your dog was staying at your side, not forging ahead, and staying parallel to your body.

Now that your dog is working close, you should be able to do more exercises on the flat to reinforce this behavior. We already worked on walking in a straight line and turning left and right with your dog on both sides. Now you should be able to add more changes of direction.

For all of these exercises, remember:

- Start all your heel work in a quiet environment without distractions. Distractions can and should be added later.
- During each exercise, click and treat at random for your dog staying close to your side.
- Finish each exercise by releasing your dog from your side with a verbal O.K.



Step 1

With your dog on your left side, walk forward in a straight line for about 10'. Make a right turn (while giving your dog a command to come to your left side; I use *Here*), go another 10' and do another right turn, and then go another 10' and do another right turn. Your path should form a box when you are done as in **Figure 1**. During the exercise, click and treat at random for your dog staying close to your left side.

Step 2

When you are successful doing the “box” exercise while walking, start to move at a slow jog. If your dog stays with you in the proper position click and treat at random for your dog staying close to your left side. If not, go back to walking and let your dog be successful. Remember to stop and play often if your dog is losing interest. If he is doing the exercise correctly, he shouldn't lose interest at all because he is getting lots of treats!

Step 3

Once you can successfully walk and jog around the box, start to vary your movement. Start by walking with your dog, gradually move into a slow jog, and then move back to a walk. Does your dog stay with you when you say *Here* and have your hand at your left side? If not, go back to working slowly and reinforcing often. If you move forward in your training too fast, you will have a dog coming to your side, but without much enthusiasm and drive, which is exactly what you don't want.

Step 4

Repeat steps 1 through 3 starting with the dog on your right and turning to the left (while giving your dog a command to come to your right side; I use *Side*), as shown in **Figure 2**.

Step 5

Now try starting with your dog on your right side and turning to the right (while giving your dog a command to come to your right side) as shown in **Figure 3**. This will be much harder than the previous exercise. Do this first while walking, then try it while moving faster, and then vary your movement between walking and jogging.

Step 6

Repeat step 5, this time starting with the dog on your left and turning left (while giving your dog a command to come to your left side) as in **Figure 4**.

Step 7

You can do all sorts of fun variations. Try working in a circle, first by going to the right as shown in **Figure 5** and then by circling to the left. Again, work the dog in both directions and on your left and your right side. Also, you should be able to start from a walk, then start to jog, and then go back to a walk.

Step 8

Start by going in a straight line for about 10'. Make a 90° turn into your dog and continue in another straight line for about 10', then make another 90° turn away from your dog again, and so on. At some point, make two turns into your dog and go back the way you came as shown in **Figure 6**.

I often do this type of work before I go into the agility ring after working on the warm-up jump. Besides being a fun game for the dog, it gets him to concentrate on me near the ring instead of on other dogs. You can move in very small circles or boxes if there is not a lot of room.

The Next Steps

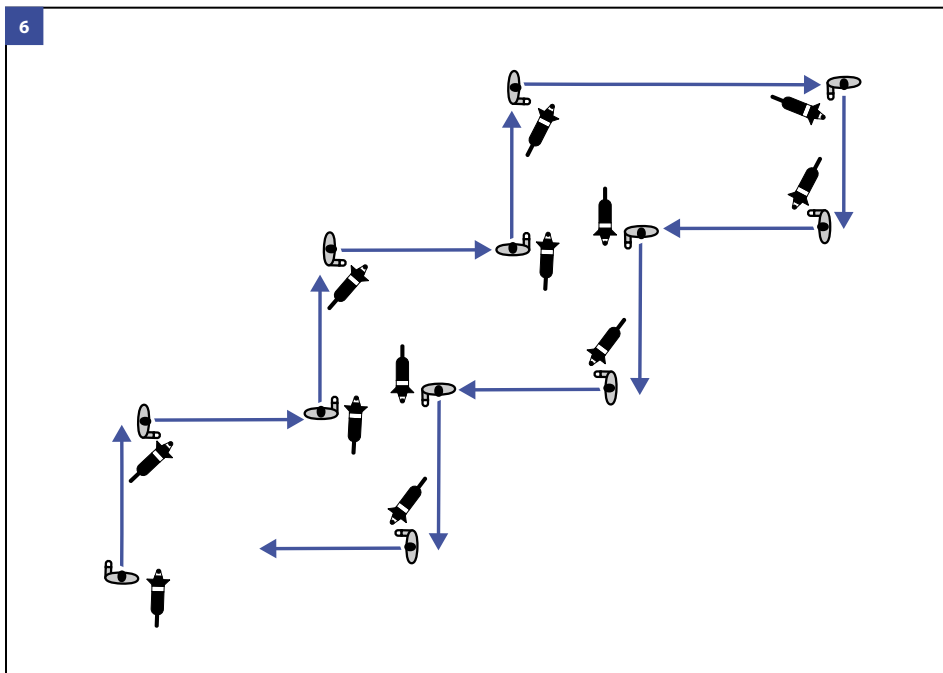
Now that your dog understands staying by your side until release, it's time to introduce distractions. I do heel work with my puppies near the agility ring while holding onto the leash to ensure they don't run away and also to abide by the rules. I do this when I know my dog understands his job and won't be a nuisance to the dog in the ring, and I never get so close that I'm in the way of the trial. I also work my younger dogs during the break at agility class when I'm attending with my older dogs. I work my young dog on the side of the agility class and reinforce often for enthusiasm and attention.

Once I start going to agility class with my young dog, I do my heel work before class around the obstacles and especially in front of my dog's favorite obstacles. His rewards for doing this correctly are that he can do his favorite obstacle and also that class begins soon. Try to work around as many distractions as possible. There are many times in foundation agility class when you are standing around waiting for your turn. Why not use this time to work on your close work?

Once your dog has mastered coming in close with distractions, start to add these commands into your sequencing and course work. Remember, it is important to use your command to come to your side efficiently, when you really mean it and are ready to reinforce with toys or treats. You should also be ready to stop in the middle of your sequence at practice to tell your dog where he should be if he doesn't follow your direction. Just like you will lose your contact performance if you don't maintain criteria, you will lose the effectiveness of your *Side* or *Here* command if you let your dog get away with anything less than coming to your side when asked. It is very important not to give a command if you are not ready to maintain and reinforce your criteria.

Use your *Side* or *Here* command to walk to the start line and set your dog up on your left or right side without pulling on the leash or collar to get your dog set up in the correct position. Use your *Side* or *Here* command when you play Snooker so that you can pull the dog through obstacles and also run across the ring at speed while your dog stays at your side. I am sure you can think of many more reasons to have your dog come in close to your side.

Remember that once you teach your dog a *Side* or *Here* command, you should be ready to reinforce the behavior often, and remember to only use it when it is necessary. 🐾



Karen Holik has been involved in agility for over 10 years as a competitor and also a USDAA and AKC judge. She has competed in the finals of the USDAA Grand Prix World Championships seven times with all her dogs: two Shelties, a Border Collie, and an All-American. Her youngest dog, MACH Triune's Feelin Hot Hot Hot (a.k.a. Sizzle) won the USDAA Steeplechase Finals in 2003. Karen and Sizzle were members of the AKC/USA World Team in 2003, 2005, and 2006. Karen offers private lessons and seminars and can be reached at oncourseagility@comcast.net.