

SIDE CHANGES – fashion trends, advantages and disadvantages

By Marie Hansson

This article discusses fashion trends in side changes during the development of agility as a sport, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of different alternatives.

It all begins with obstacles

When one begins doing agility, the focus is on getting to know the obstacles. Anything concerned with steering the dog between obstacles comes later. When Agility started in Sweden, in the mid 80's, we did the same things everyone else did. Once we got the dog to understand how to negotiate the contact obstacles (the dog walk and see-saw were only 20 cm wide at that time), how to correctly pass every second pole in the weaves, how to go through tunnels and tires, to patiently wait on the table and simultaneously have enough drive to jump long and high over jumps; then it was time for the next goal. To get the dog moving forward and going on as fast as possible.

Chance or strategy in handling choices

Reasons for handling choices were ruled by a consciousness of time limitations in competition; it was most likely that fact that determined whether you took the inner or outer path of a long tunnel. You were in a hurry and you wanted to run the fastest way with your dog. Today considerations and strategies are so much more advanced; it is all about lines, about thinking ahead, about being totally decisive, about consequences and much more.

Of course, if you couldn't get your dog motivated enough to confidently attack the obstacles, it could get rather messy when you wanted to change from the dog's right to left side, or visa versa. The same is still true today. If the dog is "locked" into one side of the handler, side changes are difficult. Then many handlers came over from the obedience ring and tried their hand at agility. Those who trained obedience before starting agility wanted their dogs on their left side only; they had no choice and therefore no problems with side changes.

Rear crosses came first

It was the handlers who wanted to take the shortest route that were forced to do a side change and got refusals as a result when their dogs could not understand what their handlers were doing. In the early 90's the rear cross was most common, and more or less successful depending on how successfully you had weaned the dog of sticking to the handler so that it could go on to the obstacles it was sent to.

In the mid 90's a successful Danish handler taught the Swedes that these

rear crosses could be used as an aid in getting the dog to turn. Suddenly crossing behind the dog was synonymous with assisting the dog in turns. If you stood with the dog on your left in front of a jump, and you moved from right to left as the dog jumped, ending up with the dog on your right side, you had used the side change as a way to make the dog understand it should turn to the left and at the same time you had changed from left to right handling. Rather important when you have some temptation straight ahead. Even today it is a key argument of many in favour of using rear crosses as a handling tool in certain situations.

Front crosses become popular

Time passed and in the late 90's front crosses started to appear as a preferred planned side change. Of course there were those who already, albeit unconsciously, moved in front of the dog, turned in to face it and then turned away in the direction of the course again. They may have done a front cross without being aware of the fact. This time a successful Finnish handler taught the Swedes this side change and helped them to give it a name. The biggest joke is that the claims of the origin of this side change depend on who you ask. Many Swedes think it is a Finnish technique, yet there are, to this day, Danish handlers who call this side change "the Swedish cross", because some of us Swedes were their roll model in turn!

At first the followers of the rear or front cross were determined according to the type of dog they owned. Those with fast dogs that freely ran ahead, kept to the rear cross and those with the slower dogs, that could be outrun, used the front cross. But after some time the front cross became very popular and was utilised by all types of handlers with all types of dogs. Those with fast dogs were evidently forced to run faster and hopefully save time by having the dog do a few obstacles independently before the point where the cross was to take place.

Blind cross

The third side change didn't make a serious appearance until the 2000's. The name derives from the act of crossing the dog's path in front of it, without turning to face the dog, which means that for a short time you are "blind" to what the dog is doing. If you execute this move skilfully, you as the handler can continue on your path without losing any time in slowing down and making contact with the dog. But by the same token it is a very difficult and delicate operation that poses the huge risk of the dog taking the wrong direction and being eliminated. As a result, this side change has gained the least popularity. Many trainers even warn against using it. But the development of the agility sport is shrinking the margins between serious competitors and many are being forced to take risks in order to have a shot at winning. This has me convinced that in the future there will be more handlers who dare to take a stand and train towards a level of understanding with the dog that will enable them to execute a blind cross with some degree of security. I know successful handlers in other parts of the world who do it naturally.

The WC is our mirror

The FCI Agility World Championships is a wonderful opportunity to study trends. You could conclude that different countries obviously share many ideas, but also differ in many, and at the same time notice trends that seem to influence the whole agility world.

During the early 2000's, French and Finnish handlers were the forerunners who impressed by displaying enormous energy, eagerness and enthusiasm in violently and fearlessly throwing themselves in front of their dogs to front cross at almost every turn. Many of us were amazed at the one-sidedness in their handling. Sometimes the results were brilliant, but frequently the handler seemed to be in the way of the dog. At times this handling led to knocked crossbars and even refusals, but more often a less than successful front cross resulted in only a little time loss. This is bad enough in a sport where fractions of a second separate us and competition levels have become quite brutal. Then again, sometimes they were the winners and that is, naturally, what fuels a trend.

Some years followed during which WC-competitors from increasingly more countries resorted to front crossing in the majority of their side changes. As recently as the latest WC, 2006, it finally seems that there is less extremism in using only front crosses for all dogs, handlers and situations. It is quite a relief to see extremely fast border collies and medium sized shelties being controlled from behind, by handlers who use rear crosses as well as front crosses. And we even got to see some blind crosses at this year's WC. The agility experience is naturally enhanced by variety.

One-sided front crosses

Now it is time for some criticism of the enormously popular front cross! I have never understood how you can manage front crosses in certain situations without wasting time. For me agility is about giving the dog information about the path it is to take and the sooner the better. The dog *will* run faster than you, just give it the information and it will choose the most economical path by itself at the greatest possible speed. Of course, choosing a handling alternative should be about weighing up all the several conditions. Each situation is unique, as is each dog and handler. Taking all this into consideration, it becomes obvious we should have more than one alternative to choose from, to enable us to make the right choice for the right occasion.

If you use up all your energy in trying to make it ahead of your dog, the risk factor rises exponentially. If you are in the way you will literally stop the dog in its tracks. Additionally, you may not be able to give the dog information about where to go next. The difficulty of the front cross lies in that if you are not done turning, the moment the dog checks you out to confirm the next directional, your body language will be incorrect and, in the worst case scenario of the dog getting the wrong directional information, it may lead to an elimination. At best, you will have a confused dog that will reduce its speed waiting for a clearer cue. Nevertheless, you will have lost time.

Rear cross disadvantages

The rear cross also has its disadvantages. Simply because the dog doesn't have eyes in the back of its head! Dogs do have a wider range of lateral vision than humans, because their eyes aren't placed in the front of their faces as our's are. But they don't have 360 ° lateral vision. That means you have to be aware of what we call the dog's "blind spot". If you come into that position for more than a moment, the dog may reduce its speed to give you a chance to signal better, or even turn its head to see what you are doing, both of which can result in the dog running by an obstacle or knocking down a jump. It is therefore necessary, in some cases, to be very particular about the placing you choose in a rear cross, so the dog can see your signals in time.

It is possible, through training, to have a dog that will go on and take the obstacle ahead of it, in spite of the handler changing direction behind the dog, before it has reached the given obstacle. Most untrained or inexperienced dogs will turn at the same time the handler does, in other words ignore the obstacle ahead because the handler's motion shows he or she is about to turn. When you work behind the dog, see to it that, as far as possible, you stay at an angle to the side, so that the dog can still see you and work ahead without interruption.

Sounds that help with turns during a rear cross

Many handlers use audible cues to clarify their side change behind the dog. Hand clapping and shouting to the dog are the most common. Many use the dog's name to get its attention. You can also use the dog's name as a signal to let it know it is time to change direction.

In the interest of thoroughness, I should point out it is also possible to use a rear cross to signal the handler's intention for the dog to go on straight ahead. It is naturally something that can be learned, but most choose the easiest way; using a rear cross to mark a turn.

Slowing the dog intentionally using a front cross

Front crosses are sometimes used as a tool in intentionally slowing the dog down. For instance, when the dog's trajectory carries it in a certain direction and an off-course obstacle is within range. If the handler doesn't trust the dog to turn with him or her and fears the obstacle ahead may have too great a power of attraction, the handler can intentionally use the front cross as a way to take control, make contact and reduce the dog's speed all at the same time. The turn will not suffer when the dog is forced to stop and change direction, but the dog will be controlled by the handler when he or she more or less blocks the dog, and thus steers it into the correct direction again. Handlers who choose to do this evidently think this is a better alternative to the dog eliminating itself by taking the wrong obstacle.

Physical restraints on the handler

It is an indisputable fact that physical abilities determine which side change

you should choose. It is true the dogs compete against each other and it is only their times that matter. It is equally true that both young and old, boy or girl can compete in agility under the same conditions, because it is the dogs' results that count. All the same, conditions are not all that equal between the handlers. It is certainly not easy to get into the right position when you have short legs, little speed or low strength. Bad knees can also exclude quick front crosses, where you have to turn up to 360° lightning fast. The younger, more agile handlers, with more strength and speed and those with longer legs have fewer handicaps keeping them from their goal. Watching some of the fast men on the course may make you envious. You may feel like they ought to be competing in their own division, it is not really the same when the man with a small or a medium dog can be a step ahead all times to show the way; every potential difficulty disappears as if by magic! On the other hand it is an unbelievably exhilarating challenge to develop the level of understanding between dog and handler that enables the dog to complete a course correctly and at speed without the handler always being right there to point out the way ahead.

Good front crosses are hard work

The challenge of front crosses is to make them really perfect, only then will they be useful in assisting the dog to know exactly where to go without having to look over its shoulder. On top of that they can create a powerful attraction for the dog to run even faster to catch up to the handler.

Executing a perfect front cross requires a thorough knowledge of your dog's natural speed so that you know how much time you will have to make the turn. To put it simply, when you need to be where! And that is not that simple! Especially with a dog that is still in the developmental stages of training and is continually changing its speed. Incidences of handlers who think they can make it to a certain position to turn and don't make it, are common. We have all been there!

The crux of a good front cross is to make sure that you are facing the right way at the moment when the dog needs a cue to indicate the correct path, when the dog is up close to you. This is the very latest moment that you should be facing the right direction. Otherwise you will waste time in bringing the dog back into the right path after it has veered off course due to the faulty information you gave by not being in position in time. Even worse: it could take the wrong obstacle. In contrast there is the great advantage of showing the dog the correct direction as it approaches, then the dog can place itself optimally on the course to choose the tightest path to the next obstacle.

Walking the course = decision time

It is while walking the course, when you read and memorise the course before your run, that is the time to decide what crosses to use. This is the time to consider where you believe the dog will be at any one instant, and if you will be able to make it to the required position with your body language accurately indicating the correct path. Naturally it takes a lot of repetition and experience, both of courses and of the timing estimation itself, before

you can expect to be able to make the right decision. But the most important thing before this happens is for you not to be influenced too much by what everyone else does while walking the course. Even if almost everyone does a front cross in a certain place, it is not to say it is the safest solution for yourself and your dog. The idea is to be sure of yourself, if you take a chance on something you may not be able to do, that may lead to your dog going off course, knocking a jump or running by an obstacle. Only you know how quickly you can move and how fast your dog is; you are both unique. Of course, it may be advantageous to consult with fellow trainers who also have a good knowledge of how fast you and your dog are and your personal ability of executing a front cross. Sometimes it may be only a matter of believing in yourself. On the other hand, if you don't believe you will make it, you probably won't. It is all about being absolutely convinced that it will work, then it probably will.

The future is flexible

At the latest Nordic Championships in December 2006, we were treated to an extremely high quality show of runs by many, many very fast and clear dogs in three height categories. As usual there were very many front crosses on the course. But this time there were a few Border Collie handlers who displayed a different strategy to that of the majority. In order not to lose a fraction of a second on unnecessary delays brought about by the handler being unable to execute a perfectly timed front cross ahead of an explosive dog, we saw some rear crosses in places where almost everyone else did a front cross. It was very exciting and inspiring to see more alternatives in handling choices instead of everyone doing the same thing!