February 2013

Judges' Spotlight

By Kenneth Tatsch

As one of our judges you are one of the pillars on which USDAA agility is built. You interface directly with our competitors. You provide fun, challenging courses that continually push our competitors and their dogs to be the best teams that they can be. You judge their performances with an unbiased eye in their pursuit of excellence. You treat our competitors with dignity and respect and make them feel a welcomed member of the USDAA family. For all of this we say thank you!

Our goal with the "Judges' Briefing" is to communicate more regularly with you to help ensure consistency in course design and judging. With all the concepts we employ in a growing list of classes and programs, it is important that we collaborate on those concepts and help educate through design.

In the newsletter we will provide definitions and diagrams to outline the philosophy behind USDAA course design and judging, in general and in specific classes and levels. If you have questions about the material within this newsletter, please email those questions to: judgesbriefing@usdaa.com. Chances are, if you have a questions, so do other judges.

The first issue of the Judges' Briefing™ focuses on the difference between the new Masters Challenge classes and the Masters Titling classes. In the article that follows, we explore how a challenge can be used in both Masters Challenge and Masters Titling; it comes down to a matter of degree and what surrounds certain elements. One of the takeaways is to be careful not to generalize challenges in our day-to-day conversation, but look at the total picture and think in terms of how they are being used in a course.

Future issues are planned to include similar articles. If you have specific courses that you think present issues of interest, please forward them to us at the email address above, identifying key issues you want addressed, and we'll try to get them into a future issue.

We hope you find this newsletter enjoyable and informative and that you will help contribute to it with your questions and comments.

Technical Review Committee

The Judge's Briefing is a compilation by the following people:

    Publisher - Kenneth Tatsch
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                Paul Stolzenburg, and Mark Wirant

Course Challenges: Masters Challenge to Masters Titling
By The Editorial Review Committee

On any given agility course, there are a collection of challenges or elements that are testing the dog and the handler and these challenges increase in complexity as the dog and handler progress through the different program levels. As an example, in the Starters level we are testing the dog's ability to perform the dogwalk. Moving along into Advanced, we might ask the dog to perform the dogwalk with a tunnel discrimination in close proximity to the entrance. Progressing into Masters, it would be common to see the tunnel entrance closer to the dogwalk, but may also be compounded with the handler changing sides. In other words, two elements at once, not only does the dog have to find the dogwalk entry, but it also must do so while the handler is performing some method of crossing the dogs path, potentially distracting the dog from the required dogwalk entrance.

So what do the Masters Challenge classes offer then? Before we answer that question, let's review just some of the key points of the Masters Challenge Program:

- Generally based upon European design standards.
- Designed for high-level competition.
- More technical handling style versus a fluid course design.
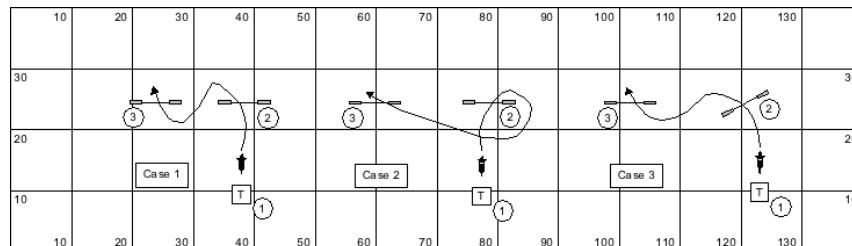- Almost an "anything goes" approach in course design.

You may be familiar with; runouts, refusals, serpentines, threadles, and collections and some newer elements you may begin to become familiar with are; discrimination cluster, backside approach, push-pull through, n-patterns, extended spacing, and double performance. These are all elements that you may see in a Masters Challenge class.

I'm sure you're thinking, "Wait, the threadle is a Masters Challenge element?" The threadle can be both a Masters Challenge and a Masters Titling element; it all depends on how it is presented to the dog and handler. Our Course Design Guidelines state, "Any course may include a challenge type that might normally be indicative of challenges from the next higher level in order to educate and prepare competitors for the next level". Therefore, it is important to understand how we can differentiate a challenge between the two levels so a Masters Titling class doesn't drift to the level of a Masters Challenge class. When we are evaluating challenges for the different levels, the things we are looking at are:
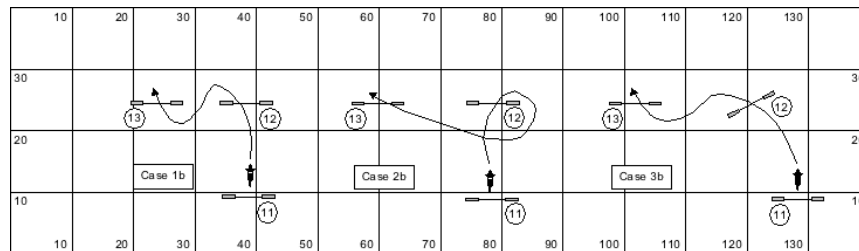
- What is the speed we are entering, performing, and exiting this challenge?
- What type of responsiveness are we asking for from the dog and handler team, is it tight and controlling or is it open and flowing?
- What is the distance between obstacles as well as the distance the handler is from the dog?
- Is there a flow being maintained throughout the challenge?

Let us focus on the threadle, reviewing some examples demonstrating appropriateness of this design element in the Masters class versus the Masters Challenge class. Each example shows first a tightly spaced threadle used in a sequence, and then the same sequence with a widely spaced threadle, or perhaps the jumps being adjusted to still encourage the performance of the threadle sequence while rewarding the team for completing the maneuver versus perhaps wrapping the jumps in the opposite direction which might be a more fluid handling approach. These examples use jumps only, but the conclusions continue to apply when obstacles other than jumps are used to form part of a threadle.
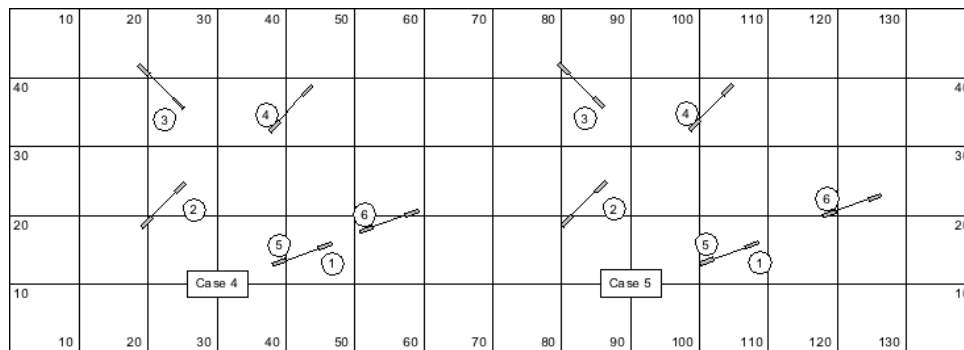
Case 1, 2, & 3:

In many cases, distance between threadle elements decreases the difficulty level. However, in this example, there is not much difference between Case 1 and 2. The lack of speed entering the threadle and the fact nearly all handlers will be able to address it from a good handling point removes any timing element from this sequence so the distance between the jumps is not very significant. However, in some cases the handler may not be comfortable performing the threadle element so as in Case 2, even with the jumps spaced wider apart, the handler decides to wrap jump 2 in the opposite direction and not actually performing the challenge as the judge presented it. Recommendation: Either of these would be fine on a Masters Titling course soon after the start jump or a full stop obstacle like the table. However, does this challenge change if the table is replaced with a jump and is in the middle of the course where the dog has speed heading into the sequence? Yes, speed is a large influence in how we evaluate elements.
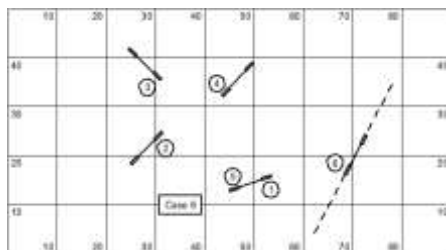

With either the table or a jump leading into the threadle, with a further adjustment as in Case 3, by rotating jump 2 slightly, the judge is now encouraging the handler to perform the threadle element by opening the challenge slightly and rewarding the dog and handler team for working the element as presented by the judge. The immediate reward is a shorter course yardage which equates to faster course times and the secondary reward is becoming more proficient with the actual threadle challenge. There is also a dis-incentive with wrapping to the right in that the face of the hurdle is exposed on the passby to #3 for a greater possibility of a wrong course. To further identify the difference between Case 1 and 3, let's look at the dog's path. In Case 1 we are asking for very tight responsiveness and control but in Case 3, the flow is much more open and flowing and slightly more forgiving to the team even though each is a threadle element.
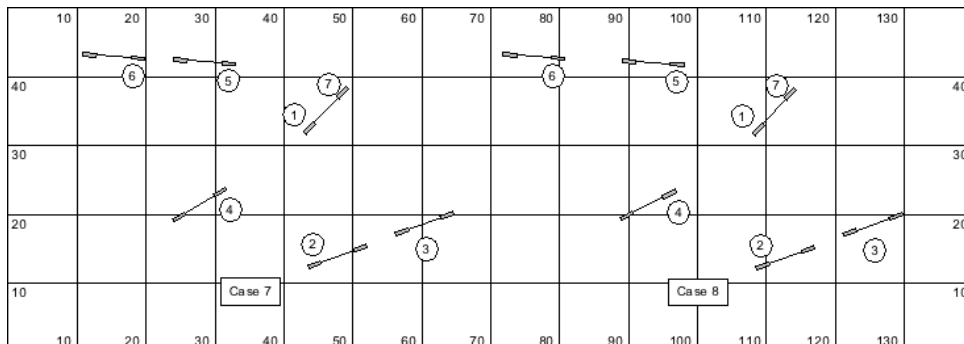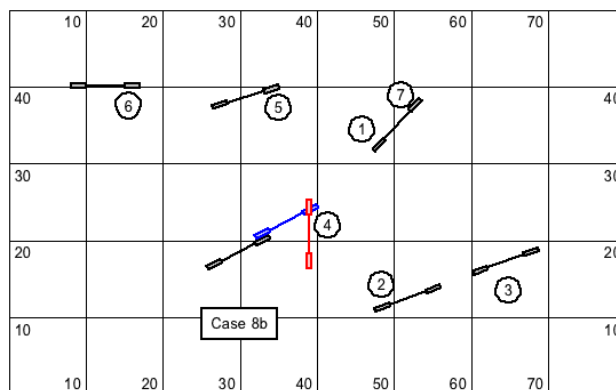
Case 4, 5 & 6:

Here the spacing of the threadle elements causes a larger difference in the difficulty level between Case 4 and 5. As with the previous example, the handler has been given a good opportunity to be in a good position to handle the threadle. However, in this example an element of speed of approach has been added. The speed adds a timing element to this challenge; adding extra distance between jumps 5 and 6 as in Case 5 definitely eases the difficulty of this challenge. Recommendation: Case 5 definitely is fine on a Masters Titling level course. Case 4 is OK, but probably only if the remainder of the course is not overly full of control elements. A secondary option as in Case 6 below, besides just increasing the distance of the jumps as in Case 5, following along in the thought process of Case 3 above, by slightly rotating a jump, we can open the threadle slightly and again encourage the handler to perform the actual threadle technique. This time instead of rotating the entry jump, as that might affect the desired line between jump 1 and 2, we actually rotate the second jump of the threadle, jump 6. When doing this, we must be careful to make sure there is enough landing room for all dogs, big and small, as to make it fair that all teams have the opportunity to perform jump 6 without crossing the runout line of jump 6. Due to the runout line in this case, perhaps just increasing the distance between the jumps, as in Case 5 makes more sense for this particular sequence in a Masters Titling level.
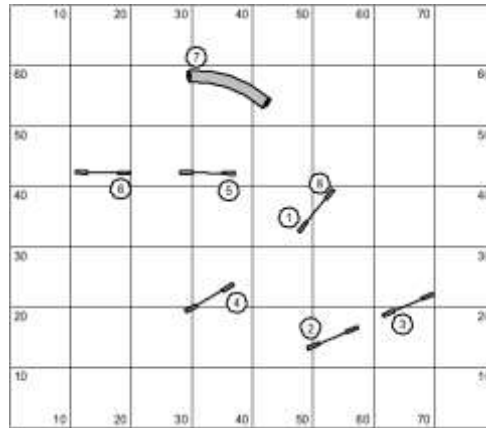
Case 7 & 8:

Once again the threadle spacing changes the level of difficulty between these cases but the elements of the course before and after the threadle are even more important than the spacing of the threadle. Not only is an element of speed present, but now the elements of the preceding 2-3-4 sequence challenges the ability of the handler to make a critical handling point for the 5-6 threadle. Moving the threadle apart as in Case 8 provides some room for error on the approach and exit of jump #5 (but increases the difficulty of the bypass from 6 to 7). Recommendation: Case 7 doesn't belong on a Masters Titling course; there are just too many challenges in quick succession raising the compound challenge count above the level that is appropriate for a Masters Titling level course. Case 8 *might* be acceptable on a Masters course, but only if some challenges before or after the threadle are reduced or eliminated, or by adjusting angles in the sequences as show in Case 8b.

Often the difference between any two levels, whether it be Advanced and Masters, or Masters and Masters Challenge, is a matter of degree. Keep in mind that course design should not only challenge, but educate. By that we mean, new concepts are introduced in a manageable fashion, and then they are refined at the next level to demonstrate proficiency. The phrase coined long ago in the equestrian world, and perhaps in other sports activities, is "Design to educate".
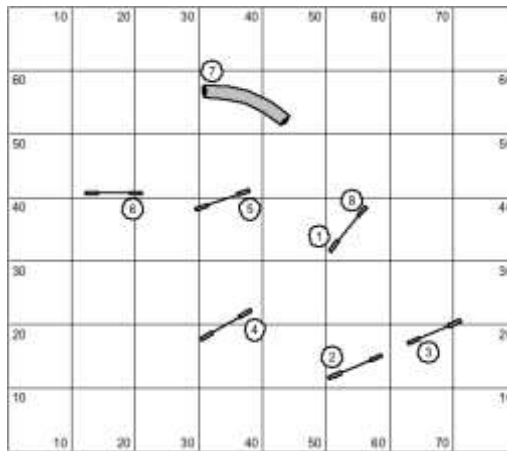
How do we make Case 7 work for a Masters level course then if we are to reduce some challenge?
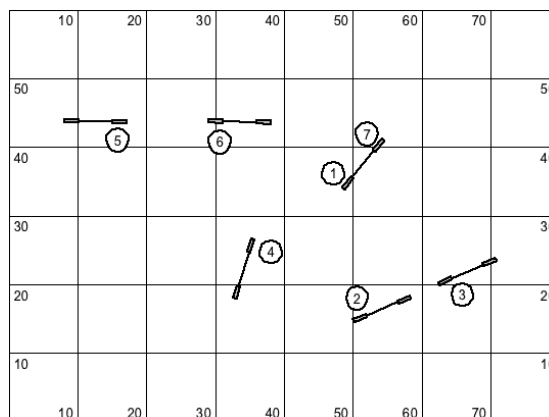
Option #1a:

Along with the increased distance between threadle elements 5 and 6, this option inserts a tunnel into the sequence to remove the bypass after jump #6. This greatly reduces the overall difficulty by providing a smooth exit from the threadle sequence.
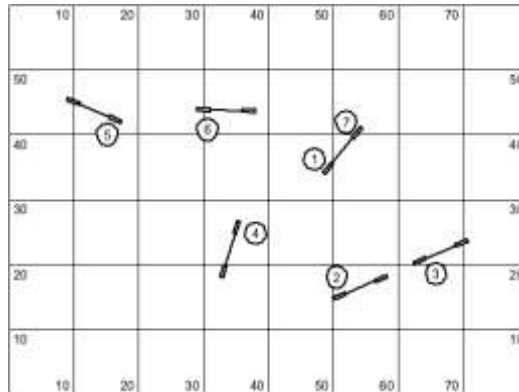
Option #1b:

Another possibility is to modify our option slightly further by rotating one of the jumps in the threadle element. By rotating jump 5 in this sequence, we are asking the handler to perform the threadle technique by opening up the challenge, and encouraging the dog's flow to the direction that would be best suited to perform the threadle. Again we are encouraging the flow but reducing the tight responsiveness and control. By rotating the first jump in the threadle challenge, we do not risk inducing the runout line as discussed in Case 6 above.

Option #2a:

What if we do not have an extra tunnel or the space to modify our challenge to use Option 1a or 1b? Are there other possibilities? Sure, this option reduces the handling needed to accomplish jump #4 prior to the threadle and eliminates the bypass challenge following the threadle by swapping the threadle elements of jump 5 and 6.

Option #2b:

Following our train of thought of earlier cases, besides increasing the distance between jumps, we also have the option of opening the flow and reducing the responsiveness and control by rotating the first jump in the element of the threadle, in this case jump 5. This should encourage the dog and handler to turn right after jump 5, while in the option 2a turning left around jump 5 would be a good possibility.

Summary: Threadles are a design element that provide the type of compound challenge that is expected at the Masters Challenge level. Like any other individual Masters Challenge design element however, threadles can be used on a Masters titling level course as long as the judge takes care to see that they are placed in a sequence where other elements do not add additional difficulty to the execution of the threadle. In addition to the care and proximity of other elements, we still want to encourage the dog and handler to perform the threadle as it is presented so they are rewarded with benefits of shorter course distances and knowing they can accomplish and succeed on the courses which include elements with higher degree of difficulty.

The above cases are just a few examples of how a Masters Challenge element can be modified to be used successfully in a Masters Titling class and how we look at Speed, Distance, Responsiveness, and Flow as a whole and not just individually when designing the challenges for the appropriate level.