
The Clapping Controversy

What purpose does this serve?
Should everyone clap while their dogs are in the poles?

By Brenna Fender

If you attend any national or international agility competition, you'll see handlers clapping while their dogs weave. What purpose does this serve? Should everyone clap while their dogs are in the poles?

While there are surely detractors of clapping, many well-known competitors and instructors support the practice under some circumstances. The benefit of clapping while a dog weaves "depends on how the weaves were trained and the dog's temperament and personality," says Anne Andrlle, a 2008 IFCS/USDA World Team Member who lives in Portland, Maine.

Applaud Me

Having handlers clap while they weave gives some dogs an advantage. "Some dogs perform weave poles best when they are given a cadence to follow," says Chris Parker, who holds the Guinness world record for dog weaving. That cadence could be any repetitive sound. "The cadence can help keep this type of dog focused on the task at hand. For many dogs, an enthusiastic cadence will actually speed the dog's performance."

Supporting your dog in the weave poles can be very helpful no matter how you do it. 2006 IFCS U.S. World Championship team member Olga Chaiko says, "Staying with the dog and making a team effort in the weave poles always helps, regardless of how you express yourself, as long as the dog understands and welcomes your support."

Webb Anderson, whose schnauzer is the number one terrier in AKC agility, believes that clapping provides a positive form of support: "I have always clapped while my pups are in the weaves. I have always considered this a 'cheering' to really have the pup drive in the weaves." The key is making sure that your dog views



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clapping as positively as you do. Parker suggests "making sure that whatever handling method you choose to do in the competition ring has been conditioned in training to produce the optimum performance."

Many competitors have seen improvements tied to the handler clapping while the dog weaves. Two-time ESPN Great Outdoor Games Gold Medalist and 2003 AKC World Team member Sherry Kluever claps while her oldest terrier, Frisco, is weaving. She says, "His weaves have definitely gotten more consistent and faster since I started clapping." Kluever adds, "I have had several students try it as a way to motivate the dog and it can definitely make a difference." But Kluever has found that it doesn't always work — clapping doesn't affect her other dogs' weave pole performances at all.

Cons of clapping

Despite the apparent advantages of clapping, the same trainers that recommend it under some circumstances say that it can be detrimental in others. "I find clapping or using the voice to encourage dogs to weave sometimes distracts the dog, and they try harder by scrambling to go faster, which puts them out of rhythm in the poles," says Andrlle, who adds "[This] actually makes them go slower!" Parker, who has competed on the AKC World Team, agrees: "For some dogs, a cadence will rush the dog's performance and result in a less-than-efficient execution of the poles." Rushed footwork can also cause a dog to get caught in the poles.

Parker has seen dogs become distracted by clapping. "There are dogs that just simply cannot deal with the distraction of a cadence and they prefer to run their poles with their handlers silent," she says.

Photography by Craig Lizotte



Cluever agrees: “It can distract some dogs.” Bonnie McDonald, who judges in multiple agility venues, has seen dogs have all sorts of reactions to clapping. She says, “Dogs that are sound-sensitive can actually be distracted and even slowed down by clapping. I’ve see the ‘worried’ look creep across their faces when the handler starts to clap.”

Andrle is also concerned about how consistent clapping might fit into a handler’s training plan. She says, “Very often, many dogs come to rely on the clapping, and may not continue to weave if the handler’s clapping stops or the frequency changes.” This may restrict the handler on the course, interfering with the design of the optimum handling path for the rest of the course. Andrle adds, “In general, I am in favor of handler encouragement being random, whether clapping or voice encouragement, so that the dog’s weaving does not become dependent on the handler action.”

Clapping can become a method of cheerleading on the course, which can often actually encourage dogs to run slower because it may appear to the dog that he is being reinforced for his slow perform-

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ance. Chaiko says, “If your clapping is a form of cheerleading, it only makes the dog’s job harder.”

So should I or shouldn’t I?

The decision to clap while a dog weaves is one that has to be made by the handler — there is no one perfect answer. McDonald says, “It’s certainly not a cure-all or for every dog.” She offers a few guidelines for those who should avoid clapping: “Chances are, if you have a sound-sensitive (or just sensitive) dog, clapping is probably not your best bet. If your dog startles relatively easily then clapping probably isn’t for him or her. Additionally, if the handler has no sense of rhythm then I advise against clapping.”

But McDonald, like many other trainers, has found that some dogs can actually be encouraged to weave faster by clapping,

and she believes that “clapping can be an effective tool when used correctly with a dog that is receptive to the rhythm of the noise.”

So knowing your dog well is going to be the most important factor in determining whether or not to clap while your dog does the poles. “Knowing your dog’s likes and dislikes plays a big part in how you choose to support them through their obstacle performances,” says Parker. Andrle recommends an analytical approach to determining a particular dog’s response to clapping. “The best way to determine the effect of clapping on the dog’s weaving performance is to time it both ways,” she says.

In the end, a dog’s emotional well-being may well be the best deciding factor on this issue. Angelica Steinker, author of *Click and Play Agility*, says, “It seems to me, if it makes your dog happy, clap away!” **DS**

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