

## Cavaletti Training and Conditioning

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Hi friends! I have decided that since I feel that education and sharing are a couple of the things lacking in the dog show world, I am going to share something we do here to condition and train the dogs that we show. I already wrote a post about imprinting and socializing new-born puppies. If you have or are expecting a new litter, you might enjoy going back and finding that post.

Today I want to share one of the tools we use here at Pawsatively for training and conditioning of the dogs. It is called Cavalettis or it can simply be referred to as using ground poles. When we present our handling seminars it is one of the things we teach and it is also one of the most fun and rewarding segments of the seminars. It is also one of the most enjoyable exercises we put into practice here at home. We use ground pole work for any breed including the Chihuahuas. We have several different sized poles for the bigger dogs and we use dowels for the Chihuahuas and Papillons and such. The bigger poles are lengths of PVC pipe. We like the white ones so they are easier for the dogs to see. The diameter is determined by the dog being trained. We do this exercise on lead so we get a workout of it too!

Of course you should be sure your dog is fit and healthy before starting any exercise routine, Cavaletti included, so if you aren't sure have your veterinarian check your dog over before starting a new exercise.

Cavaletti work is a valuable exercise. It promotes coordination, flexibility, and muscle development while providing a simple conditioning exercise. It also builds confidence and a good working attitude. Repetition encourages extension and provides muscle memory and foot timing. Cavaletti also encourages a dog to steady its rear, thus promoting a clean down and back. The movement once achieved will even contribute to a stronger back and topline and helps the dog know where their feet are, both front and rear. Frequent practice also helps build stamina, for both the dog and handler. Used correctly by the handler it builds their coordination and ease of the lead changing hands and the dog changing direction gracefully. That in turn will contribute to the handlers ability to present a smooth down and back and if asked, an L or T pattern done correctly. Many agility trainers use cavaletti training too.

A dogs stride length is only partially determined by speed. Length of leg construction and the degree of angulation of both the front and rear are also determining factors along with the length and flexibility of the back. When a dog moves faster, more power is put into the limbs as the front legs stretch out as far as possible and the rear legs are extended to increase horizontal propulsion, thus increasing the distance covered with each stride. Stride length shortens at slower speeds, in hot weather, in unsafe or slippery conditions, when running uphill and when a dog lacks confidence. The goal of Cavaletti work is to promote as much extension as possible without causing trauma/stress and to build coordination and muscle memory.

### **PVC pipes**

To start Cavaletti training you should have 6 to 18 sections of PVC that are cut into 4 to 5 foot lengths and a stretch of level ground. We start with the minimum of 6 poles then as the dog learns the foot timing and gains confidence we increase the number of poles. We like to end up with a section that is about the length of one side of a show ring or the length of a down and back. The diameter of the poles is determined by the size of your dogs hock, or more correctly, the height of his metatarsus. The diameter should be no higher than one half the length of the metatarsus from the hock joint to the ground. Many people make their poles too high off the

ground and for what we are working on the poles being too high or big simply will not get the results we want.

### Measure elbow to ground and double

To determine the measuring distance and placement of poles (i.e. a distance that encourages extension), measure the distance from the ground ( on a flat surface ) to the dog's elbow. You can also do this measurement on a grooming table if it makes it easier for you. Double that measurement for proper placement of your poles. (In other words, if a dog measures 10 inches from the ground to the elbow, bars are spaced at 20 inch intervals) Lay the poles parallel to each other on the ground, like the rungs of a ladder. Be sure to measure the distance apart on each side of the "ladder" to ensure equal distance. Some people say measure the dogs height at the shoulders to the ground and that will work if you do not have a short legged breed. If you breed is short legged then use the elbow to ground measurement for the best results. Both measurements are close but a half of an inch can make a lot of difference to the dog if it is wrong. Use your eye and judgment along with the measurement. If you hear your dogs toenails or feet hitting on the bars, the spacing may be off and need to be corrected.

Start by walking your dog over 6-8 poles that are spaced appropriately for the elbow measurement. I use the same command as I will use in the ring to get the dog to go out in front of me as we go around the ring, for me that's "Let's go". These walking sessions help the dog become aware of the fall of all four feet and help develop coordination of the lift and drop of feet. Some dogs will hesitate to step over the poles and will try to step out of the poles. You may have to do the exercise with them at first, stepping over the poles with them. Sometimes I will place the poles with one end up against a fence or wall then with me on the outside and the wall on the other side their choices of stepping out or over are limited and you can encourage the right behavior. Don't force or pull your dog through the poles, rather encourage them with treats and praise for forward motion. Take the time necessary to develop the dogs confidence. As their confidence grows they will not have to look down and watch their feet to see where the poles are or where they are going. You can also straddle the poles and walk backward, rewarding any forward motion. Remember to praise and reward only when all four feet remain within the poles and the dog has moved forward.

To continue to develop confidence and a happy working attitude, continue reinforcing the stepping over the poles. It is amazing how quickly the dogs learn to avoid stepping on the poles if you provide thoughtful reinforcement from the beginning. As they catch on you can reinforce only when your dog steps cleanly over the poles without knocking them around. Reinforcement can consist of verbal praise, treats, or petting. Walk your dog through the cavalettis then turn around and go back to the starting point and repeat.

Once your dog can traverse 6-8 poles successfully and with confidence while walking through, you can gradually increase the number of poles and also the speed at which you traverse the poles. You should not run through though, the fastest you want to go would be the proper speed which your breed should move in the ring on a down and back. Eventually you can extend slightly and gradually the distance the poles are set apart and encourage your dog to reach just a little farther, again, gradually, until you have achieved maximum extension.

Another great thing about Cavaletti work is that you really only need to gait them through the poles about 10 or 12 times once a day and really no more than twice a day. I do have some dogs who just love doing them and they want more but it is also something that you don't want to over do because you want them to be fun and exciting and not end up dragging your dog through to a

state of boredom. Cavaletti work is also great because it is work you can do alone with your dog, you don't need an assistant.

To keep the work interesting you can vary the height of the poles slightly so your dog has to pay attention to each pole. Sometimes I will raise one end of every other pole to keep the dogs mind and co-ordination challenged.

To keep the poles from rolling you can buy the PVC elbows for one end of each pole. Or much simpler and cheaper you can use an empty soda can and crush the pole into it making sort of a chalk or holder.

It is amazing and wonderful to see when your dog "gets it" and to see the rhythm and grace they acquire as they move smoothly through the poles, head up, topline correct and strong, extension at it's best. After working with them in the cavalettis you will see as the muscle memory kicks in when you move them without the poles, that's when you know the work has paid off.

### Tire drill

The military and sports trainers use similar training for people. For football training it's called the simple or traditional tire drill. You've probably seen the tires that athletes have to go through. They align tires on the ground, staggering them so players can run through the tires. This is done to benefit foot speed, coordination and agility. If you have ever seen parallel wooden bars set a few inches of the ground in a ladder formation on a human course, those are also for the same kind of training exercise for people. The Cavaletti poles themselves came from horse training. The word Cavaletti is Italian and means "little horses".

I hope this is helpful information that will enable you to bring the best out in your dog. If you have any questions, please don't be afraid to ask!

We have had a number of people express interest in having us present another one of our seminars so we are thinking of holding one again (cavaletti training is covered during our seminar as well). Our seminars are a two day event and they include a lot of information, not just how to get you and your dog around a ring again and again while we play judge. If you have any interest in attending one of our seminars let us know. If we get enough interest we will put one together. If you want to help us out with holding one in your area or have your kennel club host one let us know that too and we can give you information about what would need to be done. We love sharing our years of knowledge and helping people do the best job they can with presenting their own dog so they can compete successfully and in addition making showing enjoyable for both dog and handler.

Thanks for reading!

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<http://www.pawsativelyhandling.com/2012/01/10/sharing-dog-training-and-conditioning-information-with-you/http://www.pawsativelyhandling.com>