

Additional Information on Canine Cavaletti Work

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Okay friends, here is the additional information that has been requested after my initial post "Sharing dog training and conditioning information with you" . As I have been writing it, it is getting so long that I have to break it into more parts, this being the second of three. I will post the third part as soon as possible. Here you go, I hope you enjoy it...

Proper Gait is easy and not over reaching

As discussed in the earlier post, Cavaletti training for dogs is a useful and valuable exercise. Promoting coordination, flexibility, and muscle development while providing a simple conditioning exercise that is not stressful and can be done even with a young dog (as long as the exercise is not abused). The practice builds confidence and a good working attitude. Repetition encourages extension and provides muscle memory and foot timing. Cavaletti work encourages a dog to steady its rear promoting a better "down and back". The rhythm and movement once achieved can contribute to a stronger back and topline. Cavaletti work helps the dog know where their feet are, both front and rear. Frequent practice helps build stamina, for both the dog and handler. Used correctly by the handler it teaches them 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.

Cavalettis help your dog know where all four of his feet are going at any given moment. You may notice that when you start the Cavaletti work your dog will rarely step on or hit the poles with his front feet but will often do so with his back feet. Dogs generally aren't aware naturally of their rear foot placement until they are taught to be aware by experience or training.

A few notes about Cavaletti work that I want to mention. You can use clicker training with Cavalettis. Click only after your dog has passed over the next to last pole. The faster you want to go through the poles, the farther back you should start from the first pole. Cavaletti training is not a replacement for strength training or road work. Road work is still needed for aerobic exercise and overall strength. Be sure your dog is mature enough for road work before starting that exercise. For a younger dog or puppy they can usually get adequate aerobic exercise with free range play, especially with you playing along. Cavaletti can also be used for rehabilitation if your dog is recovering from an injury but be sure your veterinarian has okayed him for the work.

One thing I did not mention previously is that while taking your dog through the Cavaletti poles, do not have him watch you, it will throw off his gait. It is one of the things I see in the breed ring, the dog looking at the handler and throwing his front feet all over the place and wobbling or weaving in the rear. It does not help the judge see the dog at his best. Let your dog watch where he is going and in that way he will build his own confidence, learning to look forward as he moves with you and eventually he will be able to move out in front of you with correct timing and gait and he will look great as you go around a ring together. That does not mean you can't talk to him as you go, the opposite is true, you should be encouraging him the whole time. It's part of what makes you a team, the connection, the timing and the understanding.

Cavaletti work is good for correcting some poor habits like pacing, crabbing or "daisy clipping". It stops your dog from weaving on his down and back (you just have to be sure you don't weave either!). Now, it is your responsibility to know if your dog is crabbing, short stepping or pacing

because of a physical problem. If you find that your short stepping, pacing or crabbing dog just can't get the hang of the poles it might very well be due to a hidden physical problem that you just don't see. So, if your dog demonstrates the inability to go through the poles cleanly and with rhythm then please, consult your vet, a veterinary chiropractor, or a canine massage therapist before continuing use of the Cavaletti poles.

Judges should know the movement requirements described in the standards of the breeds they judge but as important as that is to us, we must also know the gait requirements for our own breeds. Regardless of breed, the dogs do need to move with balance and ease so Cavalettis are good for all breeds. However, you should know if you should be working on lengthening stride or increasing speed for your particular breed. Maybe you should just be working on rhythm and balance, confidence and muscle memory. And very, very important, be sure to evaluate your dog honestly. He may simply not be capable of a long extended stride even if it is described in the standard and you aren't going to force him to do something he is just not made to do. Cavaletti training can help reach his potential but you can not expect your dog to reach further than he is physically capable of doing.

So, now...onto the advanced exercises for your dog using Cavaletti techniques. Before doing further exercises you need to be sure your dog has his gait rhythm figured out on the basic exercise (described in the previous post). You watch his gait through the ground poles and it is a thing of beauty to watch... the smooth topline, good timing with steady drive, optimal extension and he is happy to do it, proud of himself even. If you have reached this point and your dog exhibits muscle memory and can move as well out of the poles as he does going through them then you can challenge him with more exercises. The additional exercises can be beneficial but it is always best to continue doing the basic work everyday.

The one exercise that most people who are interested in the show ring gait want to know is how to go about extending or improving the dogs reach or stride. Remember, you are looking for a rhythm that allows the dog's foot to fall in the same place on the other side of each Cavaletti pole. We like to see the foot land in approximately the center between each pole to start. As the dog's foot fall lands closer to the center of each gap between the ground poles, he is becoming familiar with the cadence or rhythm, and it is at this time that you are able to increase the distance between poles to increase his reach. Example: If the dog's landing step, for instance, lands 6" past the second Cavaletti and the poles are spaced 12 inches apart, he will be striding evenly if every landing step falls 6" away from each of the rest of the Cavalettis.

Just learning

When you begin using the poles to lengthen stride start with no more than four poles and increase the number only when your dog masters those four without ticking or clipping the poles. Always walk through any and every new pattern before adding any speed. Remember, you can not expect your dog to reach further than he is physically capable of so start with small increments and know when your dog has reached his potential, then work on his rhythm and cadence and he will be the best he can be. Whenever the distance of the poles is increased, lower the number of poles to four again to prevent injury or frustration at the new distance.

It is important to keep notes on the distances you set. If your 4 poles are set at 15 inches on center start by moving them to 15 ½ inches on center. Work that until you know your dog has it mastered. Then you can increase the number of poles until you are back up to the 8 or 12 you were using regularly.

Again, once your dog has mastered those with rhythm and ease, go back to 4 poles and set them 16 inches apart (I am still using the example of the original set of 15 inches) and repeat the whole process. Write down each change and be sure the dog masters the distance before increasing the distance between poles. Eventually, the distance will become more than the dog can traverse. He will consistently trip over the 3rd Cavaletti. When this happens, consult your notes and return to the last distance used. Once you determine the ideal distance for your dog it is a time saving idea to make a rope or string marker with the distance marked for the placement of each pole. Make two matching strings and you can lay the strings out and set the poles quickly and correctly with out having to measure the distance between each one.

Coming Back to the Judge

If you want to use a Target to encourage your dog you can. When the dog can traverse the Cavalettis (you can do this at the second or third distance increase), place a target at the opposite end, several feet (farther for large breeds, shorter for toys) beyond the last Cavaletti so that the dog does not get in the habit of looking down as soon as leaving the Cavaletti poles. The target should be just that, a target, that you place a piece of food on when the dog arrives at it, do not have it there before he starts because he will race through and/or pull you through which is not the goal. Using a target does help teach the dog to look straight out (not at the handler). If you use a target, you should use a target at each end, so you can just turn around and go back across the Cavalettis, working in both directions, rather than running around to the other end. Placing the target several steps beyond the final pole encourages the dog to continue striding out without the Cavalettis present. Continue taking the dog over the Cavalettis, both directions, increasing speed as you increase the distance between them too, but don't teach your dog to run through them, it should be an appropriate show ring gait, correct for your breed. I personally do not use a target because I want the dog to look at me after we stop, several feet out of the poles as if he were going to bait for the judge or just for me. I also have not had any issues with the dog not looking straight ahead when we are moving because they a

re watching where they are going and they are used to hearing me talk to them all of the time anyway. if I had a dog who continually wanted to look up at me then I would use a target to change the behavior.

This post is now pretty long and there is a lot to absorb, so I am going to stop here for now and I will post the rest later. I hope this has helped you so far and I hope you will return to check for the next Cavaletti post.

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