

## Achieving balance in course design.

In **Clean Run** March 2007 **Stuart Mah** wrote an article titled “Achieving balance in course design” which provides Judges with some good ideas to consider when designing courses. He is also the author of *Fundamentals of Course Design for Dog Agility* and *Course Analysis for Agility Handlers*.

The article began by setting a scene of agility competitors walking a course and asking if you have ever heard them saying to one another... “They must run a mini” or “This is a fast dog/slow dog course”. People say this because they feel that the course favours one type of dog or handling style over others. The course is “unbalanced”. The aim of a judge should be to provide courses that provide a mixture of challenges so that any type of dog/handler can have a fair go.

The areas to look at when deciding if a course is balanced or not include:-

1. Areas of control vs area of freedom
2. Types of challenges
3. spacing that might favour different sizes of dog.
4. restrictive handling options
5. overuse of training exercises

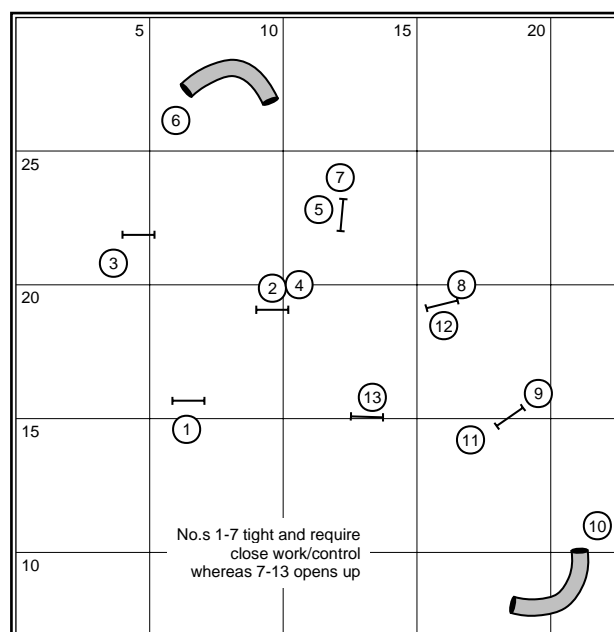
### Areas of control vs areas of freedom.

When a judge puts multiple tricky sequences into a course they are favouring the fast handler who can run close to his dog. In some cases this is how the (previously) fast Novice dog becomes a slow senior dog – when faced with so many tricky options and off courses the dog, in order to avoid receiving a barrage from its handler the dog simply slows down to the handler’s pace.

A dog that works close to the handler will typically find it harder to perform obstacles that are far away from the handler, preferring instead to take those close to the handler.

In an ideal course, there should be a blend or mix of sequences where one sequence may require control and another sequence may require the dog to “open up” and extend to cover ground. It does not have to be half of each but the idea is to use both types of sequences and create a course that does not necessarily favour one type of dog over the other.

You should consider the “take one, give one” philosophy. What this means is that if you put a difficult problem into a course (take one) you should also add a softer area free of such tight control (give one).



## Type of Challenges

A more balanced course includes more than one type of challenge. For example, a course that has a directional problem, an obstacle discrimination problem, and a spacing problem is going to have better balance than one that has all call-off challenges.

Some of the challenges need not even be handling challenges but might put some of the responsibility onto the dog, such as when a straight line of jumps includes angled jumps and odd spacing. This will cause problems for the dog without the de-motivation a call-off challenge brings.

Despite what some judges might believe, allowing the dog to move at speed is not going to necessarily make the course “soft” or “easy.” Thus, course designers should make an effort to design balanced courses, not merely add extra obstacles to create difficulty just to meet a required number of challenges.

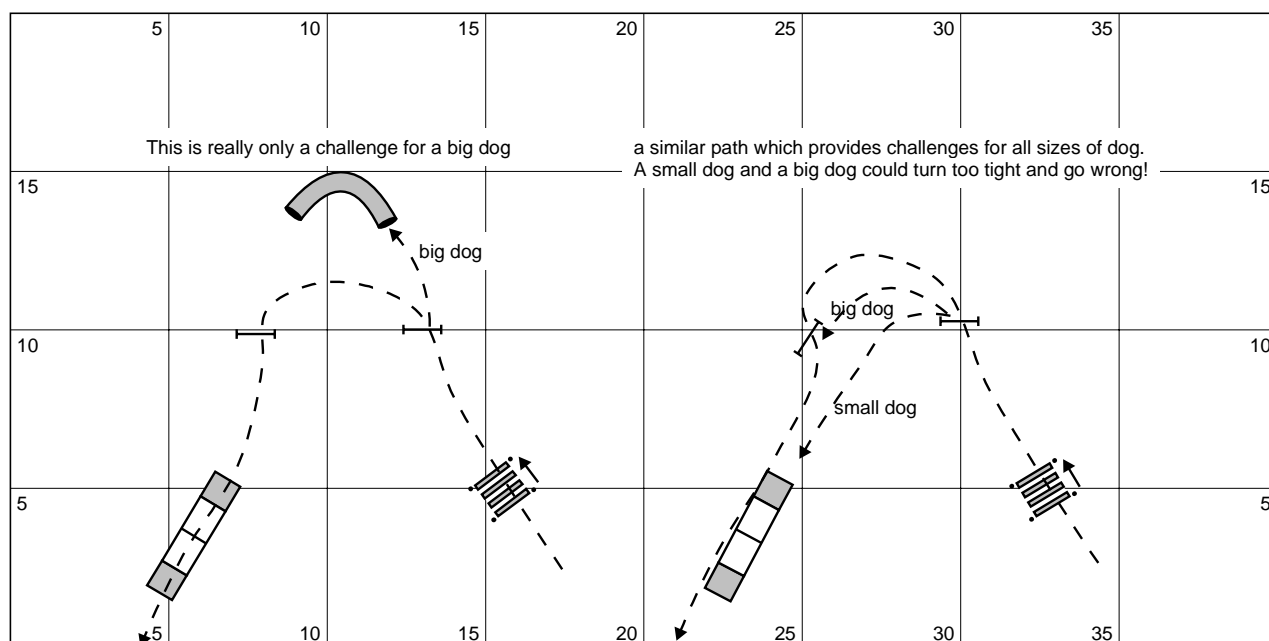
Often you will see a Judge put down a very difficulty course and you will find that the success rate is higher than a course where the dogs run much faster and which appears to be easier. This is because the challenges on the harder course are more obvious, and the dogs are moving slower and are closer to their handlers and the handlers can take steps to avoid the challenges more successfully compared with a faster course where the dogs get further away from the handler and subtle challenges are their downfall!!

Whilst a faster more subtle course might have a lower success rate, the handlers tend to have a more enjoyable time since they don't feel like they are constantly yelling at the dog about this or that problem on course.

## Balanced spacing around the course.

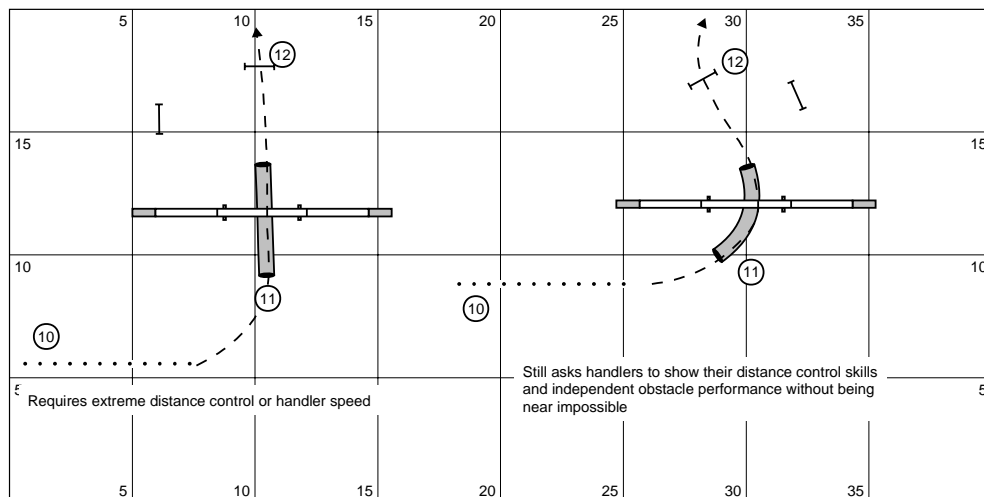
Course spacing should be such that it tries to cater to both small and large dogs. This goal can be the most difficult for designers to achieve. In designing courses to make the challenge difficulty the same for small and large dogs, many judges prefer to move the obstacles closer so that the small dog has the opportunity to take an off-course. However, what may be challenging for a small dog might be almost undoable for a large dog.

A simple rotation change may make the spacing more balanced whilst still providing a challenge for all heights of dog.



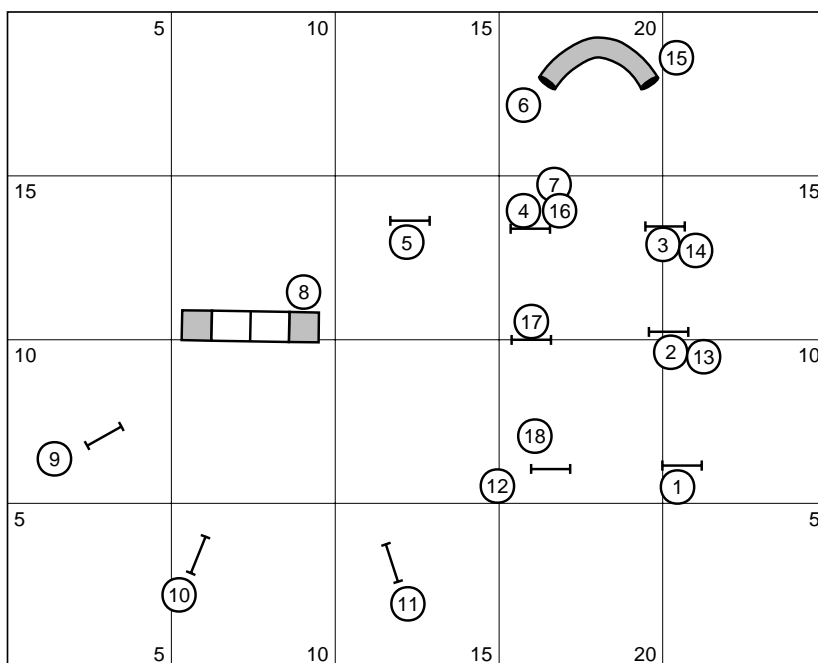
## Handling Options

There are many types of handling options and handlers will have their own strengths and weaknesses. The best courses will be designed so that handlers may have a range of handling options to choose from, and where the average handler and their dog will achieve the course, there is the opportunity for others to do it even better by employing different handling options.



## Overuse of training exercises.

Sometimes a designer will be so enamoured with a recent training exercise that it will dominate their course eg. an over-use of serpentines or pull-throughs.



## In Conclusion

A thoughtful course designer can use all the above components (including a few others such as safety, judgeability, number of obstacles, and type of class) and put them together to create a course that does not give an advantage to one type of dog or handler far out of proportion to the rest of the class.

By reviewing courses designed by yourself and others you can learn to recognise the design elements you are using, what other possibilities there are and when to use them so that your courses are more balanced and much more enjoyable for competitors and their dogs to run.