



I THINK I CAN!

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The mental & emotional aspects & how they affect jumping.

By Suzanne Clothier

NOTE: Third in a 4 part series on jumping that first appeared in Off Lead magazine.

In the first article in this series, we looked at the complexity of jumping process, and how much we take for granted each time we ask our dogs to "go hup!" Jumping difficulties can limit or end a dog's competitive career, and can spring from physical, mental, and mechanical causes. In the second article, we looked at physical causes - structural (created by the dog's skeletal design) and functional (a result of how the dog's body is used, regardless of design). In this article, we're going to consider the mental aspects of jumping.

Mental aspects of jumping (or any training) can be broken down into intellectual ("knowing") and emotional ("feeling"). Though intellectual is a word rarely applied to dogs, the definition "relating to or performed by the mind" certainly fits when discussing what our dogs learn and know. I'm well aware that science has yet to "prove" that dogs have emotions. But after a lifetime with animals, I'll happily go out on a limb and say I believe they do have emotions. (Of course, science has yet to "prove" that love exists but even scientists persist in falling in love! The most wonderful things in life are usually ones that cannot be proven, but we're glad to have them anyway.)

When we talk about the intellectual aspects of training or what a dog "knows," what we usually mean is what the dog understands about a specific skill in a specific context. When a handler moans, "But he knows this!" as a dog looks blankly at them, the truth is probably that the dog knows the skill but not in that context. Good trainers know that teaching a skill does not end with the dog comprehending that "jump" means hurl yourself over this bar. Training needs to continue so that the dog learns that "jump" means the same thing under many conditions and despite distractions.

As with any physical skill, it takes a progressive approach, meaningful practice and considerable experience to learn to jump well under any and all conditions. Many dogs jump differently under the pressures of competition. A deeply experienced dog has learned how to use his body under varied conditions, and has also learned to moderate and handle his emotional responses to the situation. The easiest parallel in most humans' experience is driving a car. While we all quickly learn (and thus "know") how to drive a car, driving in snow or fog, while upset, or over muddy fields, or with a yelping puppy is quite different. If our training and experience as drivers systematically includes these conditions, we will develop our skill accordingly. Though not smarter than teenagers in Texas, Vermont teens are better at driving in snow, assuming they've been taught. A middle-aged Vermonter, however, will have more experience and thus know more about driving in snow.

Jumping practice needs to be meaningful. With each session,

the trainer should have a specific goal in mind, and should be aimed at developing or refining particular jumping skills - lengthening, shortening, take-offs, odd distances, diagonal approaches, etc. A dog who has never seen a jump flanked by brightly striped frogs holding petunias may very well hesitate or refuse to jump. Jumping indoors on various footings and under sometimes odd lighting may need to become part of the dog's knowledge base. Jumping outside on dry grass is different from muddy footing which differs from light dewed grass which is not the same as sand. It is up to the handler to creatively and systematically expand the dog's understanding so that when you say he "knows" how to jump, that covers a lot of ground!

Emotional states are just that: emotions at work in the dog's body and mind. Anyone who's ever stood outside the ring feeling the butterflies in their stomach multiply and organize into the 200th Anxiety Squadron knows that emotions can have powerful effects on our bodies and our minds. Generally speaking, the stronger the emotion, the less we are able to think clearly and use our bodies in precise ways. As a quick experiment, stand up, suck in your breath and hold it, clench your jaw, tighten your buttocks and widen your eyes. Hold that for just ten or fifteen seconds. Now, try to jump in place. Most people simulating fear in this way are unable to even get off the floor!

If a dog already has physical limitations, a non-productive emotional state can make things even worse. In a relaxed, comfortable setting, a dog may be capable of compensating for any physical limitations, yet present jumping problems in more stressful situations. Dogs that are anxious or afraid or confused (and this may be caused by the situation or by the handler or both) are not going to be able to use their jumping knowledge or their bodies to the fullest degree. At the other end of the emotional spectrum, a dog who is wildly stimulated will also have a great deal of trouble using his body precisely or carefully.

The dog who is not relaxed and confident runs a higher risk of being injured. Tense muscles (whether due to irritation, injury or an emotional state) are more prone to tearing, and cannot function well. Try simply walking around your yard with tight fists, and you'll get a quick sense of how much even one seemingly unimportant group of muscles can affect your overall movement. That's just walking - it gets a lot more difficult for a dog who is afraid of strangely dressed judge or an impending thunderstorm or a handler who has become The Adrenaline Beast, complete with sweaty palms and tight muscles of her own.

Once you've identified or ruled out possible physical causes, the next step is to consider the mental aspects - a lack of knowledge or an emotional state or a combination of both might be affecting the dog's jumping. Problems that arise due

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SUZANNE CLOTHIER
PO BOX 105, ST JOHNSVILLE,
NY 13452
TEL: 518 568 3325
SUZANNECLOTHIER.COM



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to a lack of knowledge (the dog simply doesn't know how to jump, or how to jump under those conditions) are handled by broadening the dog's understanding of jumping under many conditions, and through experience. Emotionally based jumping problems are revealed in shifts in the dog's emotional state; compare what you see when the dog is jumping without problems to what you observe when problems arise. As with any training situation, jumping difficulties need to be evaluated in the context in which they occur, since the situation itself usually offers some helpful clues as to the source of the problem.

When a dog tells you he doesn't think he can do something, believe him! Even if his body is capable, if his mind perceives

this to be beyond his abilities, it IS. Back up as many steps as necessary to where the dog feels sure about what he can do; slowly work towards the point where the dog is a bit unsure but is still able to say, "I think I can." Success at that magical point results in a happy dog dance. "I knew I could! I knew I could!"

In the next article, we will look at a third possible cause for jumping problems - mechanical ones such as footing, lighting, and distances before, between and after jumps.

Read all in this series:

Why Fluffy Can't Go Hup / Can or Can't? / I Think I Can! / Just Right Jumping