

Agility

Contacts... what a journey!

Over the past 25 years of training dogs for agility I have seen lots of times when people don't act entirely logically. But the "red mist" descending in the ring when a dog is approaching the contact zone really takes the cake. So what is this "red mist" you speak of?

Definition of red mist: When you have trained a perfect behaviour to be released on a certain cue, but in the stress of competition you lack the ability to remember what the cue was or when you should be giving it. Or an alternative definition: When in the stress or excitement of competition you lack the self control to maintain your criteria.

What is a perfect contact anyway! For some it might be a perfect two feet on the contact, and two feet on the ground – the 2o2o. For others it might be a running contact which can be extremely impressive to watch, though pretty hard to judge the up and down of the dogwalk. There have been other methods such as "four on the floor" – where the dog is trained to lie down at the base of the contact, and "one rear toe on". Any of these methods require a lot of training, and more importantly the ability to be very consistent.

I remember visiting a couple I knew a few years ago. He was showing me his four on the floor with his young dog, and I think the commands were "walk" and "flat". The contact looked pretty good to me, but then his partner said hmmm, I am using "run" and "drop", and she had been doing quite a bit of the training. I did think at the time that it wasn't that consistent!

So my journey...

I started agility in 1993 with my German Shepherd "Konig". Like many shepherds at that time, and particularly at the slower speed that all dogs went at, he was pretty good at striding down contacts and getting them but struggled with the up-contacts. I still have videos of me running towards contacts saying "ut ut utthhh" in a loud voice. It wasn't pretty! I had 2 other GSDs after that, and their contacts were similar. I can't remember actually training contacts at that stage, but telling my dogs off as they approached the contact meant they went slower, and had a better chance of getting them!

In the mid 90's, we had an English trainer over to do some seminars. I vividly remember his way of getting dogs to think about the A-frame contact was for someone to perch on the other side and leap up as the dog came over the apex. In hindsight, it was lucky he wasn't bitten as it was a pretty scary thing to happen, and surprise surprise, it wasn't that effective except for again ensuring the the dog went a bit slower up the Aframe, in case there was someone on the other side.

In 1998 I got my first border collie "Mr Lucky". He was a rescue of around 4 years old, and I was determined that he was going to



Sharky - waiting for that special word (photo Fiona Ferrar)

have really reliable contacts. My plan for him was to always be at the end of the contact with my hand out, and he could go when I took my hand away. Hmmm, you guess it, not the fastest method. Lucky was pretty successful during his career though, so it didn't matter as much back then. I liked the surety of the contacts so much that I trained my Standard Poodle – "Inca" in a similar way. But I improved on the method, so that in training Inca needed to nose touch my hand before moving on. In the ring, my hand had to be in exactly the right place for that to work – so much for lateral distance on contacts!

Around this time it would be common for handlers to have commands like "slow" "stop" "steady" with the aim of ensuring the dog went slowly over the top of the dogwalk, and then would have a better chance of still being slow going down the ramp, and enhancing the chances of getting the contact. Recently I saw a video of Ian Gray doing a dogwalk with his dog. Ian was one of the founders of agility in NZ and had a huge input into the sport. He stopped doing agility when he was in his 80's. I think he is 95 now, and just took the opportunity to do the dogwalk while visiting a friend. It made me laugh to hear him say "sloooooowwww" when his dog was going over the top. You don't often hear that in the ring now, particularly not at the top level of our sport.



Cannon - Must have slipped (photo Fiona Ferrar)

In 2000 I got my 2nd border collie "Jay". Jay had already done agility before, and came with beautiful contacts, ie it was like they were electrified, and he didn't want to get anywhere near them. I did even resort to the English trainer's idea, but that just made him jump off the side. Poor Jay, he would have been an amazing jumpers dog, but that was just a novelty event then. I really didn't have much idea of how to train contacts, and the 2 on 2 off method was just starting to appear in the ring. My method again relied on me telling him off on the bottom of the contact until he put one foot in the contact area, and then he could go. I think we might have had about a 20% success rate on contacts! He did make agility champion as was very speedy, and occasionally could get more than 1 successful contact in the same course.

Cannon was my first border collie that I really tried to teach a 2o2o to, and he would have had the fastest contacts out of any dog that I have owned so far, in particular his dog walk. My method was just to reward him in the position, and to try and be consistent about his release cue. Cannon was a really honest dog, and for most of his career had a good success rate on contacts. Though after he was around 4 the red mist was descending for me in the ring, and we started early releasing more and more which caused a few misses. Cannon was my first agility grand champion and retired when he was 7.

Then I got Sharky who is now 11. I wrote a monthly article in the NZ Kennel Gazette (as this publication was formerly known as) called Sharky's Diary from around 4 months to 18 months old. That put quite a lot of pressure on me to have a relatively well-trained dog as people were following his journey. I taught Sharky to do a nose touch away from the contacts, and also worked on his 2o2o position on a travel plank. I took the travel plank to lots of shows – was pretty committed in those days! Sharky was a pretty fast dog, but his contacts were just ok in terms of speed because he tried very hard to do the right thing, and that was easier to do if he was going

slower. If a course had a contact in the first few obstacles, he did it more carefully, but if it was later in the course when he was flying, he was a lot faster. I initially had intended to keep the nose touch in the ring, but unfortunately Sharky's 2nd show was the NDTA of the muddy Feilding show. After the first couple of contacts when he was putting his whole nose under the mud, I felt sorry for him and stopped asking for it. It was never that strong after that. At that stage I was a proud member of our group TACC – Totally Anal Contacts Club, and Sharky pretty much did a solid 2o2o until he was at least 5. I used to be able to count the number of contacts he had missed on 1 hand. There weren't many people in our TACC group, and there still weren't that many people with reliable contacts. A few people were starting to experiment with actually training a running contact as opposed to letting their dog run and crossing their fingers.

Cuda is 9 months older than Mako, and their contacts were trained the same way. When they were quite young I did Susan Garrett's on-line contacts course. Her stopped contacts method relied on the dog having a simultaneous nose touch and 2o2o. This was different to the way Sharky was trained, as he ran into a 2o2o position, and then did a nose touch. Theoretically doing them at the same time meant the body was always in a straight line, with the head down while descending the ramp. This did require a huge amount of training as well as having a set of specific steps built so I could practice my dogs doing their nose touches regardless of where I was, or what I was doing. They both did a lot of foundation work particularly as I moved away for work and didn't have access to equipment. I remember having discussions with friends at the time as to why I wasn't teaching running contacts. But I quite liked having a detailed method to follow, and Sharky's had been pretty good so I was happy with that. Poor Mako didn't ever really have his

contacts finished off. I competed with him in jumpers and starters for a few months, and then when I was at my home over Christmas I just started him doing contacts, relying on his foundation work. That worked reasonably well. I have had a few injuries over recent years, so Cuda and Mako have been run by other people. It is surprising how well their contacts have held up as many of their runs have not included stopped contacts even when I have been handling them.

Last year I was talking to a friend who was training a running contact, and I thought why not. So I spent 2 solid months training both Cuda and Mako to do a running AF and DW. It was amazing how difficult it was to break a 2o2o in training. Every time they got confused, they would revert back to a stopped contact, and would even start offering nose touches. I gave up with Cuda earlier, as his stride seemed to take him over the contact every time. But I did running in the ring with Mako for a few shows, and every show he got a bit slower, and started thinking he should be stopping again. It really was quite surprising how effective that early training had been. So now, they both are quite capable of doing stopped contacts in training, but not so much in the ring. And I really don't care that much about it!

A few years ago there was a video available of a cartoon character talking to their dog. The interesting part for me was when the dog was talking about the yellow part being electrified because when he was approaching that area, the handler slows down and yells "easy easy" – that freaked the dog out. If you google "If Agility Dogs Could Speak" you can find it, and the link is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2MBo6GX8ro>. It really made me think about the handler's reactions when their dog missed a contact. The thing that makes dogs slow or miss the contact, is when they are unsure about what their job is. And if they don't do it right, and get negative responses from their handler, then they get worried and the performance gets worse. So if you do compete with your dog, and they don't understand what their job is, don't blame them when they don't do it! Currently I think Cuda and Mako are not quite sure what their job is. They like going fast, and they like it when I am happy, and I

try to be happy regardless of what they have done because if they miss a contact, it really is my fault.

So now I have a 14 month old dog Loki. I have had many discussions about contacts over the last couple of years. Some of my friends who have trained a running contact before are now doing stopped contacts. Partly because our contact equipment is not standardised in NZ, so it is hard to teach a good RC based on a stride pattern when the stride needs to change depending on the venue. And partly because with a great RC, the dogs just go so fast. I initially did RC with Cuda and Mako as a bit of a practice as I was preparing to train that with Loki. I have since changed my mind, partly because of my lack of success, and partly because I am getting slower as a handler. I have been doing foundation work with a mat though and do intend to train a running AF. I think this is much easier than a running DW, and also easier for the dog to differentiate ie for a wide plank they run, if it is a narrow plank, they stop.

The agility game has also changed over the years. Training a good contract used to be more important as every course included them after you had won out of starters. That is not the case now, and if you just compete in jumpers classes, you can still do a lot of runs. I enjoy running jumpers as much as agility though there is not as much time to think as the dog never stops. Some of my friends think that jumpers isn't real agility, but if you haven't got great contacts it still looks pretty good to me! I am not so concerned about Loki's contacts currently as I intend to only compete in jumpers with him for a while. This is because I don't really need to be competing with 3 dogs, so as long as Cuda and Mako stay sound and well, Loki will do less. So hopefully with taking a bit of time to train them, his contacts will be spectacular I know from the work that I have done that they will be spectacularly fast, and hopefully it will not be the leaping from the top that is spectacular!

Enjoy your training!

Fiona Ferrar

Bullseye, faster, faster, faster (photo Betelgeuse Photography)

