

Flyball Training Articles

By Kevin McNicholas

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This part of your dogs Flyball training will be to improve and speed up it's recall.

Flyball is all about safety and speed, with dogs travelling at speeds of up to 30 mph on the course it is essential that a flyball dog is under control at all times. I would recommend that all dogs that wish to become involved in Flyball initially join a dog training class.

The Recall

There are many ways in which to teach a dog to recall, the purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of the restrained recall into your training. The restrained recall is used in many ways during Flyball training and competition. If you never train your dog to compete in Flyball it will do no harm to teach all of the elements of the restrained recall, it can do nothing but improve your dogs understanding and provide a further incentive for it to recall faster.

Start Training From Day One

You should start to train your dog or puppy to recall using it's name, from the first day it arrives in you home. Recalls must always be a reward based exercise. It is very important to find out what rewards your dog considers to be best. The mistake most owners make is that they give the dog a reward that they prefer to give rather than the reward the dog would prefer to have.

Finding the Right Reward

Every dog is different, some like praise some like games but without doubt most pet dogs like food. To achieve the perfect recall use the reward that suits you dog best. My dogs like playing with a ball, so therefore I use a ball on a rope to reward my dogs when they recall. It is important that the owner controls the reward, by playing with a ball on a rope I can keep possession of the reward and produce it when I decide. The same apply's to food when it is used as a reward, it should be used 'little and often'. Which ever reward you use make sure that your dog know s it's available and NEVER stop using it.

Restrained Recalls

The restrained recall as used in Flyball training is simply a method of someone (called a 'helper') holding the dog while the owner walks away. Then the dog being recalled by the owner from the helper. Do not be surprised when you first try this exercise if the dog tries to pull towards the owner, that is the idea of the exercise. The helper must remain silent and passive, not trying to give the dog commands or dampen its enthusiasm to get to its owner.

One important point to remember is to use someone as a helper that your dog knows well and who has held your dog regularly before you ever attempt leave it with them while you walk away. Start training this exercise at home with family and friends holding the dog while you recall it up and down your hall, lounge or garden.

How the dog is held for the restrained recalls is important. In Flyball, dogs can only wear flat collars, all types of checking device are banned (even half checks or slip leads).

Step 1

Use a friend (the 'helper') to assist you with this exercise. The helper holds the dog with both hands on its collar, never hold the dog's skin or fur. With a very excitable dog it may be better to hold its collar with one hand and place the other on its rear quarters to help prevent it jumping up. If the dog is so enthusiastic to get to its owner that it is difficult to hold it then just let go. There is no value in holding at all costs.

Start off the training in familiar surroundings at home, with the dog being held by the helper the owner should walk a few feet away and face the dog. On the owner's command (preferably the dog's name) the helper should release the dog. The dog when released should run at speed towards the owner, who should stand perfectly still and be offering the reward to the dog. The reward is only released when the dog allows the owner to put their hands in the dog's collar.

Progress the training until the dog is successfully recalling at speed over distances of 30 or 40 yards. When this is achieved we can move on to stage two.

Step 2

This part of the recall training really speeds the dog up and you will eventually achieve an extra burst of speed as the dog returns to you. Start with the dog being held 40 yards away, the owner is facing and calling the dog, a signal is given and the dog is released by the helper. When the dog has run 15 yards the owner turns and starts running away from the dog. This is a real chase and will speed up the dog considerably, remember that for this system to succeed a reward must be given every time, even if sometimes you just throw a ball when the dog reaches you.

Benefits of a Fast Recall

Whether you decide to train your dog for Flyball or not, every dog owner must have a reliable recall, it could save your dog's life and will often prevent problems occurring. The golden rule for a successful recall is to ensure that the dog sees you as being the provider of the greatest games, the best food and the most fun in every situation.

Fitness and Diet

The previous article on Flyball training explained how to improve recalls and gain extra speed.

This article deals with FITNESS & DIET, this very important aspect of dog training, is sometimes paid little or no attention as part of the dogs overall training regime.

Flyball stands alone because there is no other dog sport that is more demanding on our dogs. Not only do they have to race at top speed every time they run, but they also have to be able to maintain their speed over one or two days of racing. During the course of one Tournament each dog in the winning team may run between 30 and 40 races, during each race it will be running at the peak of it's performance.

It goes without saying that top canine athletes would hardly be able to give their best week after week if they did not receive the correct exercise and the correct diet. The Tornadoes Flyball Team, one of Europe's fastest Flyball Teams, are very lucky because they are sponsored by Hill's Science Diet and the dogs in the team are fed the Hill's Performance Diet. This top quality high calorie, low bulk food keeps our dogs in top form and gives them the energy and balanced diet they need to perform all day at Flyball shows. I would recommend this type of diet for any competitive dog.

It is very important to ensure that dogs are not exercised if they have a full stomach, I feed our dogs in the evening if they are racing during the day, and always leave at least a one hour gap between eating and any running type exercise.

Exercise is just as important as the correct diet, conditioning a dog to achieve and maintain racing fitness. There are many good methods of fitness training for dogs, I use an exercise system of throwing a ball on a rope up a lightly graduated hill. This is short burst training and exercise routines are altered depending on when the dogs have to race competitively. I always rest my dogs prior to competitions and also afterwards. Weighing dogs is also a very useful way of checking condition and using this information to achieve optimum racing weight. Everyone should weigh their dog regularly, it is essential to feed your dog according to it's correct weight.

When dogs are Flyball racing, especially on hot days, they can get very thirsty, there is a risk of torsion if a dog gulps water quickly. Incidentally I am told that one of the best way to cool a dog down is to immerse it's feet in water. Flyball is a very demanding sport for dogs, do not enter unfit dogs. People that enter flyball do not necessarily have to be quite as fit as the dogs. In fact one of the very positive sides of Flyball is that disabled people can compete on equal terms. People with disabilities are welcomed at British Flyball Association Sanctioned Flyball Events.

I have heard that in North America there was a team that competed with their dogs from wheelchairs. We have had one lady competing on crutches and I look forward to our first wheelchair competitor in Britain. If any readers are involved with training dogs for disabled people, I would recommend Flyball as a superb recreational or competitive hobby for all dogs and owners, get in touch we can probably help your group get organised.

Training Flyball Jumps

On first appearance it would seem a relatively simple task to train a dog to run away and return over 4 low hurdles. Most well trained dogs that have already learned to jump hurdles should adapt to Flyball jumps easily, but under distracting conditions or with another dog approaching at speed, the normally 'obedient' dog may choose to avoid the hurdle and run around the side. Flyball like any 'expertise' with dogs requires a great deal of training to teach the dog exactly what is required. I have heard people that compete in Agility say You do not need to train dogs for Flyball they just do it. I heard the same comments 15 years ago by obedience handlers and trialists when agility first appeared on the dog scene. In my experience there will always be

people that want to mess about with their dogs and have a go. Fortunately there will be others that will want to train and compete safely. The safest way for dogs to compete in any activity is for the handlers to learn as much as possible and then to teach their dog in a structured and systematic way. Initial training can commence with Agility jumps and wings but only if the pole can be set at 8 inches, I would discourage anyone from jumping dogs any higher to start with. The sooner you build or buy a proper set of jumps the sooner you will be able to really get your dogs working properly.

Flyball Jump Construction

By far the best Flyball Jumps are the flat pack design, I have looked at many types of flyball jumps and these are by far the easiest to transport, and the fastest to adjust the height on. If anyone would like a copy of a cutting plan to make 4 jumps from one 8 x 4 sheet of 1/2 inch plywood, Email request to: kmcn@flyball.ftech.co.uk

Flyball Jump Safety

Dog Safety is always the PRIMARY consideration in British Flyball Association sanctioned flyball tournaments. The preferred specification for flyball jumps is that they should not be constructed of heavy materials using thick wooden uprights and slats. They must be able to fall over reasonably easily if disturbed by a dog, this means the base must not be too wide. The latest development in British Flyball is using foam covered flexible plastic slats which absorb impact if they are touched. The BFA is always developing the sport of Flyball to make it as safe as possible for every type of dog that wants to compete.

Jump Heights and Spacing

The basic height of a Flyball jump is 16 inches this must be adjustable in one inch increments between 8 and 16 inches. The width between the uprights should be 24 inches and the sides should be between 2 - 3ft high. The base should be about 16" wide. The jump height in competitions is set at 4" below the shoulder height of the smallest dog that runs in a race. The layout of a Flyball course is a very important and an integral part of the Sport. The course must be measured exactly every time, even for a practice session. The success and safety of well trained dogs depends on everything being exactly the same every time they run. In Flyball, dogs reactions and movements become automatic responses IF every jump is in exactly the same place every time they practice. It is these automatic responses that give the dogs their tremendous speed and confidence over the jumps. If jump heights and spacing are radically altered dogs will hit jumps, lose confidence and also speed.

Setting up a Flyball Lane

The first jump is placed 6 feet from the start line and the second third and fourth are positioned 10 feet apart in a straight line. It is essential that a great deal of time is spent making sure that these distances are measured exactly every time you practise. For further information about the spacing and distances of Flyball Equipment, a full electronic set of BFA Flyball Racing Rules are available free of charge, send an email request to: nigel@nigelb.demon.co.uk

Starting Flyball Jump Training

The best method of training Flyball Jumps is without doubt the 'reversed training system'. The method requires you to start at the end and add further elements as the dog becomes more competent. I have used it successfully in many dog training environments, and is particularly

well suited to Agility. Start with the complete flyball course set up, place the dog (an assistant should hold the dog see the previous article on Incentive Recall) on the finish line facing away from box, as if it had just completed the course. The handler walks away from the dog showing its favourite reward (food, toy, or game.) The assistant lets go of the dog and the handler runs away and then when the dog catches the handler the dog receives its reward. When this element is being carried out enthusiastically the next part of the course can be added. So the dog would be held behind the 1st jump facing away from the box and the assistant and handler proceed as above. When the first jump is mastered every time consistently the second from last jump is added. This system continues until the dog learns to return over the jumps from the point where the box will eventually be. It may take several sessions to learn the course but the advantage with this system of training is that dogs taught this way rarely make mistakes. Each stage may take around 20 or 30 repetitions to imprint the exercise on the dogs memory. Some dogs will learn quicker but the more repetitions done at each stage the better the dog will be at remembering what is required at a later stage.

Train 3 or 4 repetitions then take a break, put the dog away and let it relax especially if the weather is hot. Continue further repetitions after 10 - 20 minutes. Never let inexperienced dogs watch other dogs being trained for Flyball. First it may put the dog that is being trained off its work, or worse still it may just "hype" up the dog watching into wanting to chase dogs. When the dog is happy to come to you EVERY time over the 4 jumps, introduce the Flyball box. DO NOT allow the dog to trigger the box! Use your helper/holder to position the dogs back legs on the box and have the dog facing you. From the Start/Finish line call the dog, the helper should release the dog, you will notice how the dog will use the box to push off. This is one of the ways in which the dog learns to use the box safely. Dogs can only achieve this safe "swimmer turn" on wedge fronted box, preferably with 2 or 3 holes. So by now you should have a dog that will return to you at speed from a Flyball Box your now half way there. The next Stage is to take away the Flyball box again and start "reverse training" the dog from the first jump before the box. The handler stands where the box should be and the helper holds the dog behind the jump nearest to the box. Continue training as before until the dog will jump from the start/finish line over the 4 jumps.

Proofing

This is the way in which we teach the dog that the route up to the box and back must always include ALL of the hurdles. Occasionally with inexperienced teams the ball may roll a few yards to the side of the box. From the dogs point of view the "as the crow fly's" route is much easier for it to take on its return run. Training the dog to "do it" correctly. Most dogs when they start Flyball hurdling will quickly accomplish the 4 jumps on the way to the box. The problem which often occurs is when an inexperienced dog catches the ball from the box and turns for the return run but ends up without a jump in front of it.

The other problem for all dogs is the miss caught ball that can end up anything from a few feet to a number of yards to the right or left of the box. I have even seen the ball being knocked behind the back boards and the dog retrieve it, having taken a 7 metre detour back to the jumps and return to win the race. Flyball dogs need to be trained to "seek and find" the first jump and then start its return run. There are many ways in which this training technique can be achieved. Directional control sending the dog left and right with arm and voice signals is a favourite. The best method I have found to "proof" dogs on the hurdles, is to provide the dog with an environment where it always succeeds. This is a positive reinforcement training system, it works well because the dog never makes a mistake. Again we use the incentive recall system of a helper holding the dog slightly "off line" and the handler standing at the Start/Finish line encouraging the dog back. The amount of "off set" can be slowly increased so that the dog gradually learns to accomplish larger distances to the first jump. In the early training sessions

Agility Hurdles can be put beside the flyball jumps to create a "funnel" effect to channel the dog to the correct jump. In a similar way helpers can be positioned to create the same effect and they can guide the dog to the first jump. One problem that can develop with a fast dog when "off setting" for proofing is that the dog can achieve the first (return) jump but in doing so is off line for the second (return) jump and can run past it again jump wings and helpers can be of assistance here.

Jumping Style

The ideal action in flyball jumping is a single bounce between each jump. To achieve this desirable trait, keep the jumps low when you start to practise and if necessary reduce the distance between jumps to achieve single bounces. When the dog is confidently single bouncing gradually raise the jumps to the "teams" running height.

Putting a Bit More Together

When a dog is able to consistently "find" the first jump from any angle and distance every time, you can now start to think about training with the Flyball Box. Never rush into racing any dog up and down a Flyball jumps and expect it to trigger a flyball box before you have taught it what you want it to do, expecting an inexperienced dog to perform, will only cause confusion and accidents.

Change overs (passing) and Box Training

Box Training

The time has come at last to put it all together, your dog should be consistently running up the line of hurdles to pick up the ball which you have placed on the ground where the flyball box should be. The box can now be placed in position, the dog should be able to trigger the box from a static position, it must have learned that pushing the front pedal releases the ball. In fact the dog should be straining at the leash when it sees the box and the ball being loaded into it.

Bring the dog up to the box on its lead and hold its collar. Throw a ball to the box loader, move backwards two steps ensure the dog is allowed to watch the ball all the time. Ask the loader to insert the ball into the box, immediately allow the dog to move forward and trigger the box, at this stage it does not matter if the dog catches the ball but let it have the ball. The dog should be encouraged and praised because it has 'possession' of the ball, it is very important that the dog is ONLY praised when the ball is in the dogs mouth, if it drops the ball, praise should stop and the handler should control and hold the ball.

The exercise is repeated but the handler now encourages the dog to approach the box from one side, rather than straight on, this is because in British Flyball Association flyball where the boxes are normally 24" wide the dog is able to achieve a *swimmer turn*. This type of turn substantially reduces any impact on the dogs shoulders as it triggers the box. In North America there is clear evidence that dogs can make many thousands of flyball box turns without any detrimental effects on their shoulders, they have been playing Flyball for 15 years and always use the flat fronted boxes rather than boxes that throw the ball in the air. When I recently judged a Flyball competition in California the American flyballers could not believe that dogs at some flyball events in Britain are actually encouraged to leap in the air to catch balls. For advice and information regarding the safest type of flyball boxes send a S.A.E. to:

The British Flyball Association
50 Tudor Road
Barnet
Herts
EN5 5NP

When the dog is confident at triggering the box from 6 feet. The next step is to put the dog on a retractable lead and stand in front of the last jump, 15 feet from box. Again hold the dog by the collar, throw a ball to the loader and release the dog as soon as the box is loaded, when the dog triggers the box and catches the ball, use the lead to recall the dog. Continue progressing this exercise with the dog on the retractable lead over all four jumps. The dogs jumping should never be restricted by the retractable lead and it should be allowed to run freely until it has crossed the finish line. After you have achieved 20 successful 'on lead' flyball runs you can attempt the exercise 'off lead'.

Commands are very important in the early stages of flyball training, you will need a 'hit it' command to encourage the dog to trigger the box, a start command 'go' and the box loader will have to call the dogs name to encourage the dog to the box. Often in the early stages of training, once the dog has started it's run it is best not to continue with commands until it has the ball in it's mouth, then give encouraging recall commands. The box loader can be very vocal to get the dog to the box but should be quite when it is returning to it's handler. Every dog is an individual and should be treated as such, sensitive dogs may not perform well initially if are shouting or moving around too much. Box loaders should practise standing still during training sessions.

Change Overs

Changeovers are one of the most important skills in the sport of Flyball. The Americans and Canadians call changeovers "passes" and this is where most Flyball competitions are won or lost.

A change-over is simply the action of one dog finishing it's run by passing the finish line with any part of it's body and the next dog starting on the course by crossing the start line. Keeping the gap between the finishing dog and the startin dog to an absolute minimum is the key to fast Flyball. Many teams can better their times by seconds simply by practising and improving their change-overs.

Changeovers are the only part of the Sport which is mainly under the control of the Humans and naturally this is where most of the mistakes are made. There are two problems that occur with changeovers, the first is where the dog is sent to early and the team is faulted, so that dog has to run again. The other is when the handler holds the dog too long and precious time is wasted.

Electronic sensors are often used to decide whether dogs have "passed" correctly, judging dogs changing when each dog is travelling towards the start finish line at speeds of 30mph.

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