

But it LOOKED EASY!

By Carol Mount

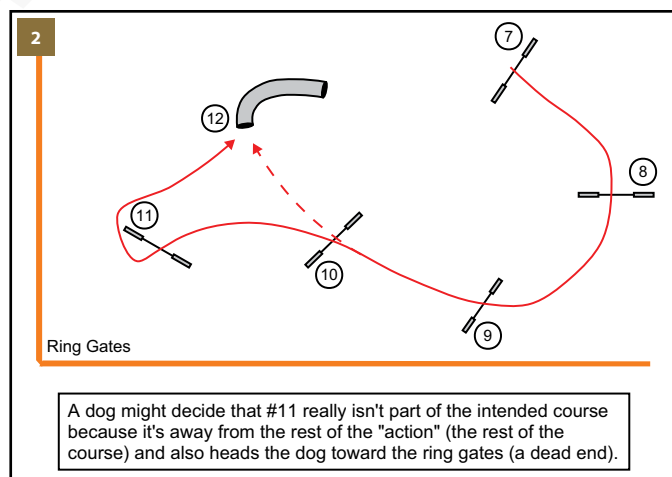
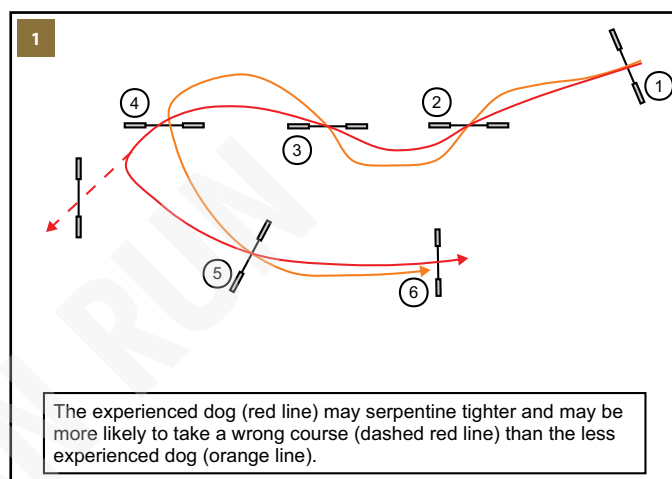
We've all been there. We analyze and walk a course and determine that the course seems straightforward. When the walk-through winds up, we leave the course highly confident that we can handle and perform on course. And then, wham! Dog after dog, team after team make mistakes and only a few dogs qualify. We all stand ringside shaking our heads and muttering to ourselves, "But, it *looked* easy." What happened to make the seemingly straightforward course "eat up" dog after dog?

Several variables can influence courses other than the normal challenges judges count for course design, and these "hidden" challenges can add unexpected complexity to a course. You should be aware of these variables when you analyze course, so the next time the course truly will be easy.

Experience Counts

No matter what challenges are presented, hidden or visible, you can place a safe bet that the experienced and seasoned team can execute the course well. We expect experienced teams to handle a wide range of challenges and do it smoothly. It makes sense—the more a dog and handler see, the better equipped that team is to handle that situation in the future. This is easy to see at local trials when you watch experienced dogs with a championship title in their chosen venue and compare them to dogs that just reached the upper-level classes. The experienced dog makes it look easy. The less experienced dogs will show you every challenge on the course.

There are times, however, when experience can work against a team. Consider the sequence shown in **Figure 1**. A less experienced dog may not recognize the serpentine pattern and will allow the handler to shape the turn from #4 to #5 to take the off-course jump out of the picture; the green dog might even go wide at #4 on his own. An experienced dog can start this sequence and say, "I got it! I got it! I know this move. I can do it." The experienced dog, on his own, takes the serpentine tight, no matter what the handler tells him. And in this case, the experienced dog that takes a tight line can open up a wrong-course possibility.



Similarly, experienced dogs sometimes decide that the course cannot possibly be going in a particular direction because it's not the logical flow or there's a barrier ahead (such as a wall or the ring gates). He *knows* where the action is. **Figure 2** shows an example of this scenario.

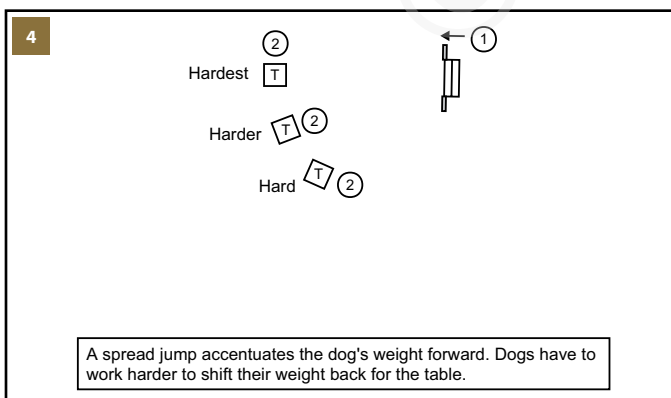
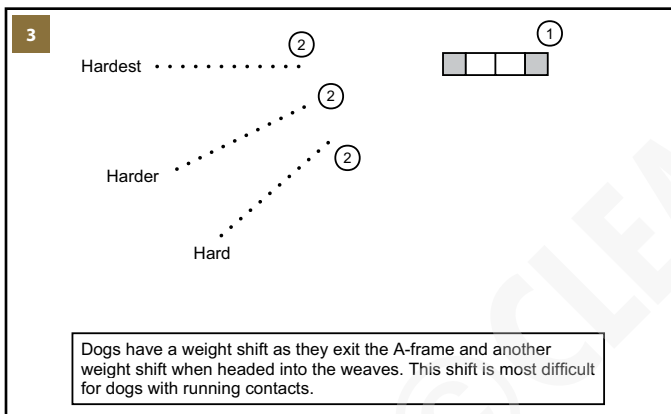
The bottom line is that no matter whether your dog is green or experienced, you need to know your dog and how the dog is going to react. When you analyze a course, remember to take into account what your dog knows and how your dog performs common sequences in agility.

It's a Balancing Act

Another key element in identifying hidden surprises on course has to do with your dog's ability to rebalance himself while running a course. Some sequences that seemed easy on walk-through are subtly difficult, because the dog has to shift his weight. If the dog is unsuccessful with his weight shift, he will likely incur faults.

The following obstacles usually require a weight shift to enter or exit the obstacle. When running a course, handlers often expect the dog to perform these obstacles without handling input: A-frame, dogwalk, seesaw, weave poles, chute, table, and tire.

Negotiating the course gets even more difficult when you "stack" these weight shifts or where the dog needs a greater weight shift. Once you realize this, you can expect the following type of obstacle sequences to be difficult if the dog cannot shift his weight appropriately: chute to weaves, A-frame to weaves (see **Figure 3**), dogwalk to weaves, spread jump to table (see **Figure 4**), spread jump to weaves, tire to weaves, weaves to tire, chute to tire, tunnel to weaves, and tunnel to tire. The level of difficulty for these combinations increases as the path between the obstacles becomes straighter, since turns generally help with dogs shifting their weight. Difficulty also increases as more speed is involved.



To help combat the effect of these weight shifts, you need to practice with your dog so that the dog knows when a shift is coming. Sometimes handling can help. For example, you can do a front cross to assist in a stride break, or you can use body language or a verbal cue to add a stride. Bottom line: When a weight shift is needed, being an experienced team is good, so you should try to teach the dog these types of combinations.

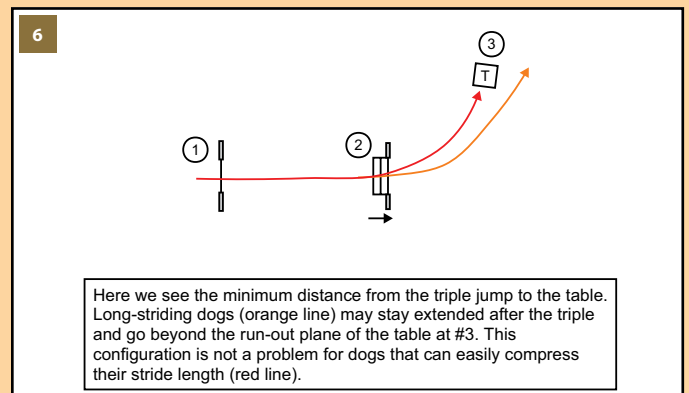
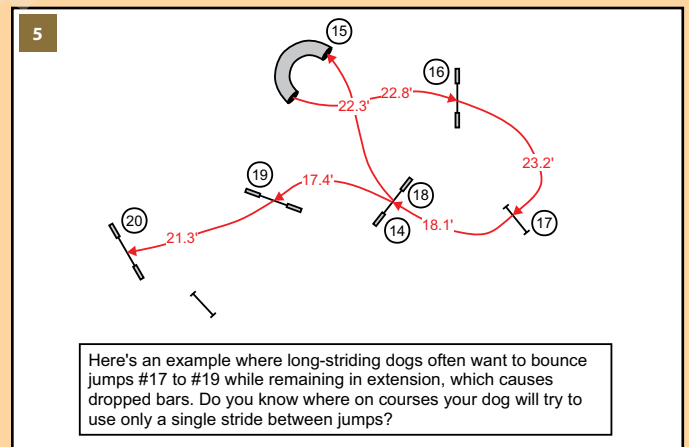
Size Does Matter

How well a dog rebalances himself depends on size, structure, stride length, and speed. For example, a weight shift off the A-frame for a deep-chested breed may be difficult. You may find that a combination like A-frame-weaves is very difficult, particularly if the dog has a running A-frame. Likewise, small dogs can usually readjust themselves between obstacles because they take more strides than large dogs. Generally it seems that small dogs don't have the same problems as some big dogs do.

But that doesn't mean small dogs have it easy. Smaller dogs have problems that larger dogs do not have, particularly when two obstacles are in a straight line and the smaller dog has a running contact. These obstacle combinations are: A-frame to table, A-frame to tire, dogwalk to tire, dogwalk to table. Problems are often seen in the 16" AKC height class because the table and tire are basically at the dogs' eye level as they are looking forward to come off the contact. Dogs that have a stopped contact rarely have problems with these obstacle combinations. Likewise, smaller dogs are also affected by large distances. We'll discuss this later.

And at times dogs that jump 24" to 26" and have a long stride can have some challenges that other dogs do not. For longer striding dogs, understanding when they are going to try to single stride is key; it will not happen at the same place for all dogs.

Figure 5 shows one example of this. **Figure 6** shows jump sequences that can be difficult for 24" dogs because the line they take over the obstacles uses the minimum distance allowed between obstacles.



Do You See What I See?

Sometimes it's simple: Do you really know what the dog is seeing? And how attractive it is to the dog? For example, we all joke that little dogs are definitely attracted to tunnels, but it's a fact. Tunnels are a huge, fun roller coaster just calling their name. **Figure 7** shows an idea of how a small dog sees the tunnel as opposed to larger dog.

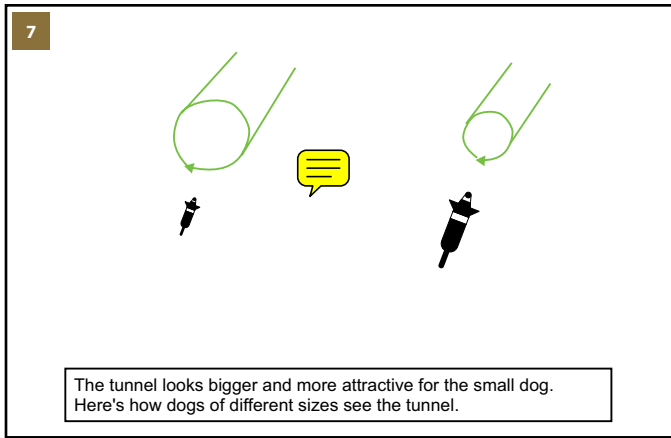


Figure 8 shows a sequence I saw several years ago at a trial. I knew even before the dogs started running that the small dogs would have trouble; and as the jump heights increased, this still difficult sequence would get easier for the larger dogs. Why? The jump bars on the off-course jumps become less and less

interesting because the bars are less visible to the larger dogs while they are in the tunnel. The smaller dogs had a very good look-see at the jumps since the bars at their jump heights could easily be seen while they were in the tunnel.

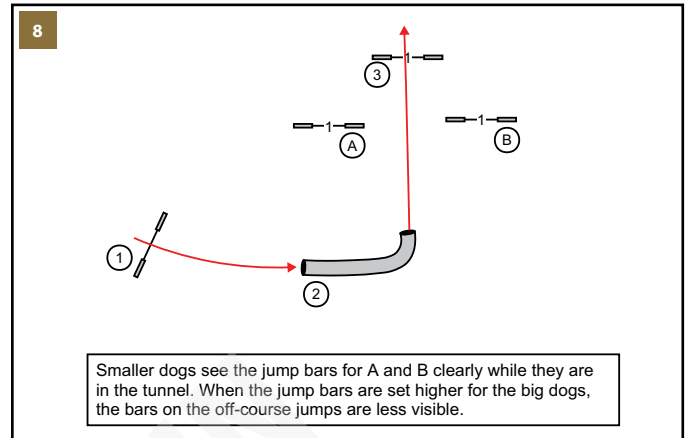
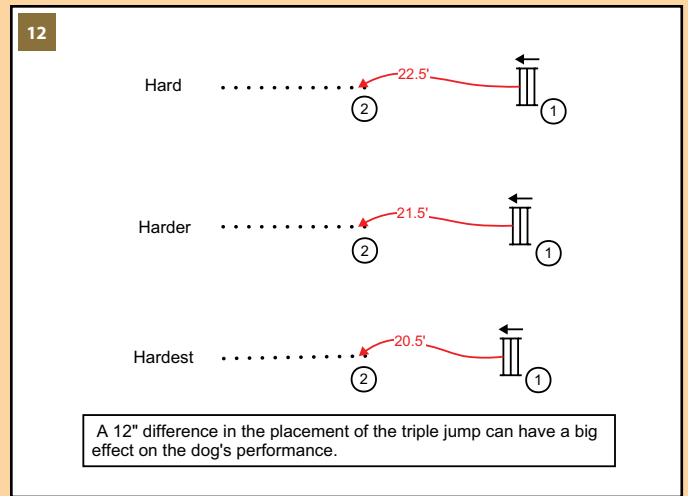
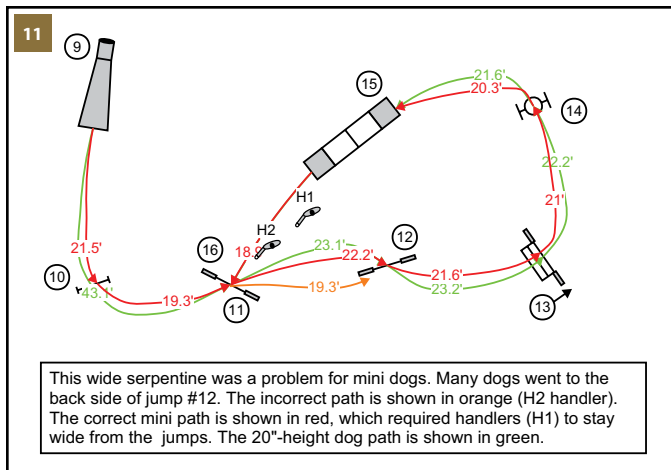
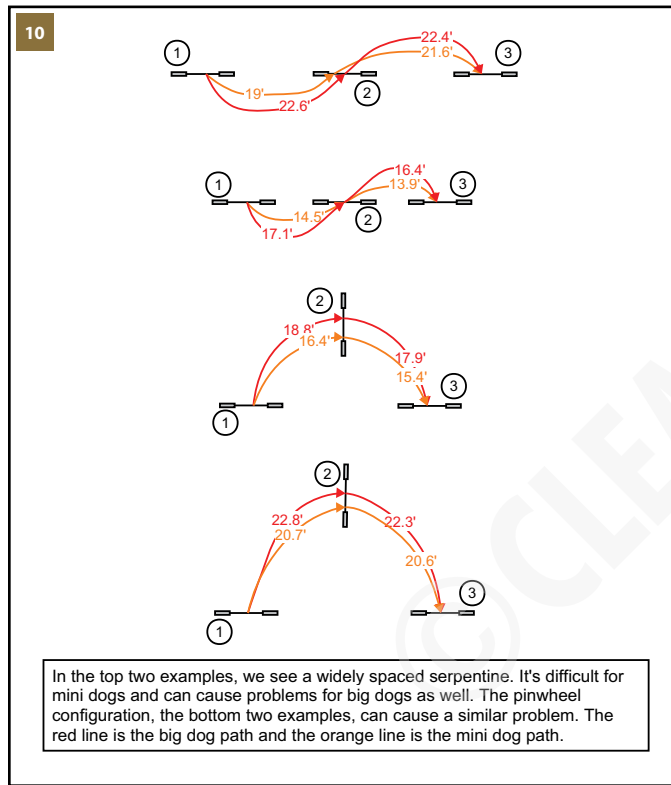
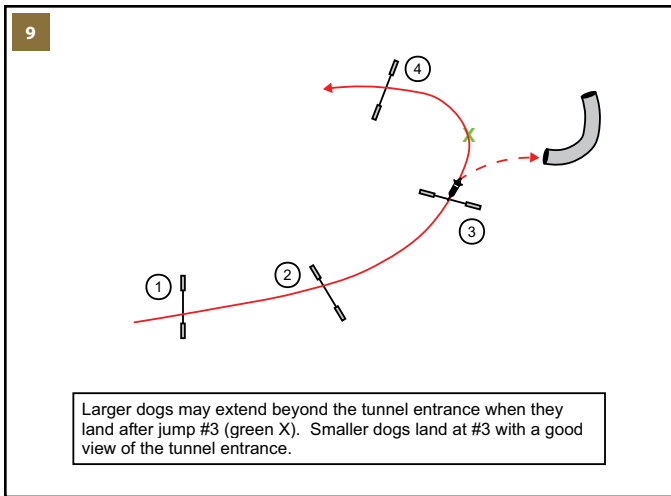


Figure 9 shows a sequence where larger dogs do not see the tunnel entrance as easily as smaller dogs. This is partially due to where the dog lands when jumping and where he lands is related to the dog's size.

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Spacing, Speed, and the Handler

In agility a handling foundation axiom is that we rely on the dog turning toward the handler for direction. The dog's lead defaults to the side where you are located. This is what makes long, straight sequences and lines difficult. The more your dog gets ahead of you, the more likely it is that he's going to start to curl back to look at you.

Likewise, added space in common patterns like serpentine and pinwheels is more difficult, especially for smaller dogs as seen in **Figure 10**. In **Figure 11** you can see a sequence where the extra space caused many problems for the 8" class and in other height classes as well.

Even a Foot Matters

Do you recall the earlier examples where weight shifts can make a course easy or hard? As an extension of that and of whether size matters, **Figure 12** shows even one foot or a few inches can matter.

You need to know exactly how tight or how wide a sequence is. You need to be able to pace off distance and understand the effect distance has on your dog. In the case of a weight shift, every extra inch the dog has to rebalance makes the sequence easier to do.

It's Environmental

Environmental challenges that can make a course more difficult include (but are not limited to):

- Weaves set toward barriers
- Contacts set toward barriers
- Jumps set toward barriers
- Unexpected activities or items on course (like those cameras for TV, if you make finals)
- Flow away from the center of the course
- Tunnel color: yellow and red tunnels are normally more inviting than dark ones. Dark tunnels sometimes are hard to see. Likewise, a yellow tunnel next to a yellow contact makes the contact harder to see.

- **Lighting:** Are there shadows or are you casting a shadow? Sometimes dogs are jumping into the rising or setting sun, depending on the season, and can be blinded.
- **Weather:** Rainy? Windy? Dry? Dry grass can be slick like glass.
- **Uphill:** Jumping uphill can add an inch to the jump height and have an even bigger impact when it's a spread.
- **Downhill:** Might make a dog extend even more over a jump
- **Reflection:** Sun reflecting off the equipment
- **Noise:** How loud it is (can the dog hear you?)
- **Wind:** Blowing trash or leaves outside the ring
- **Judge:** Yes, judges can be an environmental factor, from the path they take, to where they stand for the table, to what they wear. But most likely this affects only small percentage of dogs.

It Is Easy.....

As I write this article, I wish I had written it several agility trials ago, because I could have used some of these reminders myself. It's so easy to forget all the considerations when we're handling our dogs, and remembering may seem to be a daunting task. The more you and your dog see and experience, the fewer problems course challenges (even the hidden ones) will cause for your team, and your team will be one of the teams making it "look easy." 🐾

Learn Your Stride Length

One of the first things that AKC agility judges learn at the judging clinic is how to pace off the distances between obstacles. AKC judges tend to have a pretty good idea of the number of strides it takes for key AKC distances: 15', 18', and 21'. You can gain an advantage if you also know how to do this so you can determine how important that extra 12" might be. Ideally it takes two people.

Measure an 18' distance. You can use a measuring tape like those for centerline course building. Mark the start and finish lines for the 18' distance. With your head up and looking forward, start walking a few feet before the start line to ensure your natural pace and an accurate stride are measured.

Have the second person count the number of steps it takes you cover 18' at your normal pace. The second person should count because most people have a tendency to slow and look down to find the finish line and this will throw off the count. Repeat at other key distances.

Don't have a second person to help? Just try to fight the urge to look down and slow down. Or alternatively, drop something at your sixth stride then go back and see what distance correlates to that marker. Repeat for 7 strides, 10 strides, and so on to get an accurate count for various distances. Or you can do this on a surface where you can see footprints (wet surface or sand), and go back and count strides.

Carol has an MS in Mathematics and works for AT&T. She is an agility judge, part-time agility instructor, and active member of JAG. Carol and her husband, Paul, have trained and titled several breeds in the dog sports of agility, obedience, Rally, herding, and flyball. They have also shown Basenjis, Malinois, Chinese Crested,s and Border Collies. Carol's current partners are her Chinese Crested, MACH2 Louie-Louie, and Belgian Malinois, Fusion.

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