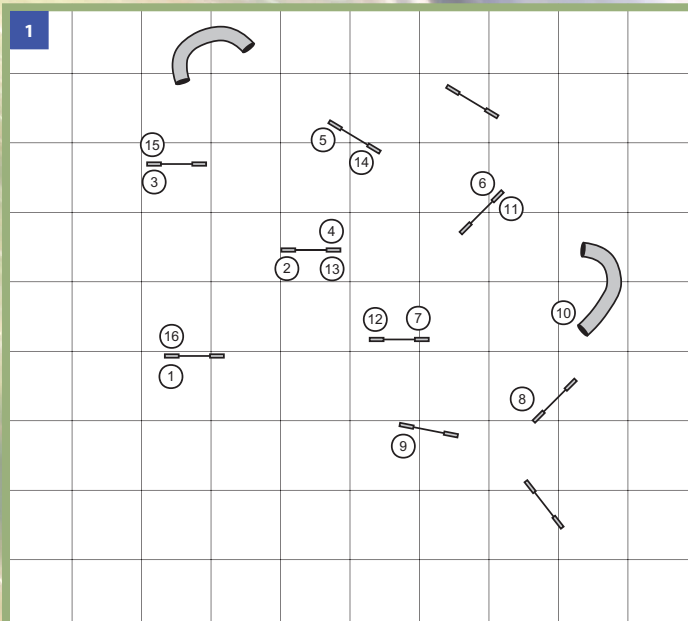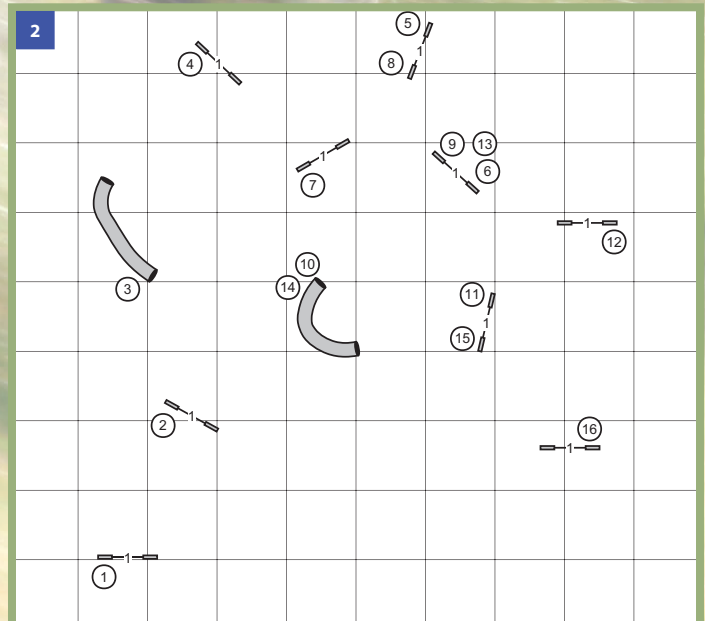# ACHIEVING BALANCE
in Course Design

By Stuart Mah

Everybody at one time or another has gotten to a trial, taken one look at the course and said something along the lines of, "The judge must run little dogs," or "The judge must run slow dogs," or "The judge must have Border Collies." Why do we do this?

One reason is that the course appears to be favoring one particular type of dog or type of handler far more than the rest. This kind of course tends to be "out of proportion" or "unbalanced" in design. What do we mean by unbalanced? Several items can make a course unbalanced.

A dog that works close to the handler will be better at handling the "technical" twisting type of course work shown here, whereas a fast wide-working dog is more likely to have a problem with tight turns and obstacles in close proximity.

A fast wide-working dog is more likely to excel on open-field running sequences like those shown here, whereas a close-working dog might find these open spaces harder to deal with since he will try to take obstacles that are closer to the handler rather than ones that are farther away.

Areas of Control vs. Areas of Freedom

A dog that works in close and tight to the handler may be able to handle the "technical" twisting type of course sequence work shown in **Figure 1,** but that dog may find open spaces much harder to do well since he will try to take obstacles that are closer to the handler rather than ones that are farther away**.** In contrast, the fast wide-working dog is likely to have a problem with tight turns or obstacles in close proximity (such as discriminations), but this dog will usually find the open-field running sequences like the ones seen in **Figure 2** much easier to do.
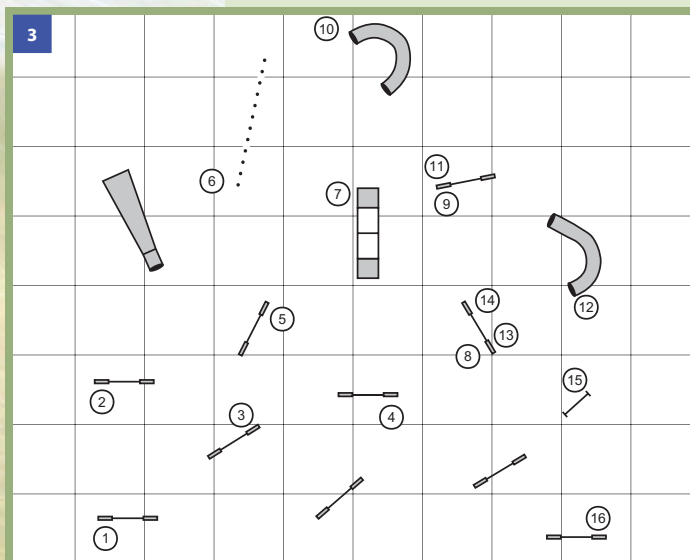
In an ideal course, there should be a blend or mix of sequences where one sequence may require control and another sequence may require the dog to "open up" and extend to cover ground. It does not have to be an equal 50/50 balance. The point is to consider using both types of sequences and create a course that does not necessarily favor one type of dog over the other. It is a good idea is to use the "take one, give one" philosophy. If a course designer "takes one," or takes the course and puts a difficult problem into it, then the designer should "give one" by offering a softer area, free of such tight control.

When designers fail to consider this blend is when we all have problems. For example, a course that is dominated by "challenges" ends up supporting one type of dog. An overly technical course with multiple call-offs, frequent rapid side changes, numerous difficult jump patterns, and multiple discrimination problems tends to favor the faster handler (one that can stay up with the dog and lead the dog around the course) with a slower methodical dog that doesn't have much initiative to take an obstacle on his own. The dog just trots or moves at the speed of the handler until right on top of the obstacle and then does whatever obstacle is required. In essence, the dog is doing "obedience over obstacles."

This is one way in which we can inadvertently create a slow dog. If a handler has a faster dog and the dog constantly makes course errors, eventually the dog will just decide that there is no reason to go fast so he ends up running only as fast as the handler runs. This is one of the reasons you see so many dogs that were initially fast as novices and then slow down (sometimes considerably) in upper-level classes.

Courses that require a handler to constantly "call off" the dog from an obstacle that is directly in front of him test only one skill. They also can de-motivate a dog.
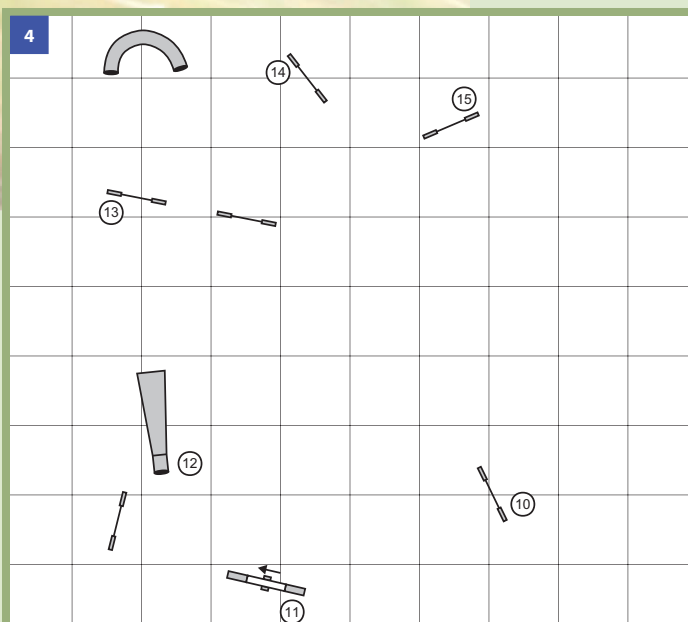
Type of Challenges

A course that has mostly all one type of challenge can also be unbalanced. For example, if all that is required is to constantly "call off" the dog from an obstacle that is directly in front of him like in **Figure 3,** we create a situation where only one type of skill is needed. Speed on these courses is not even desirable, let alone necessary, since the more speed the dog has the more likely the dog is to take a wrong obstacle. These courses tend to be de-motivating since the dog is constantly being told that the obstacle he is moving toward is wrong; they also tend to take the initiative out of the dog so that now he moves merely as fast as the handler

moves. A better course would be one that 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. Now dogs that run differently (fast vs. slow, handler vs. obstacle focus) have an even chance of qualifying rather than the course design favoring only one type of dog.
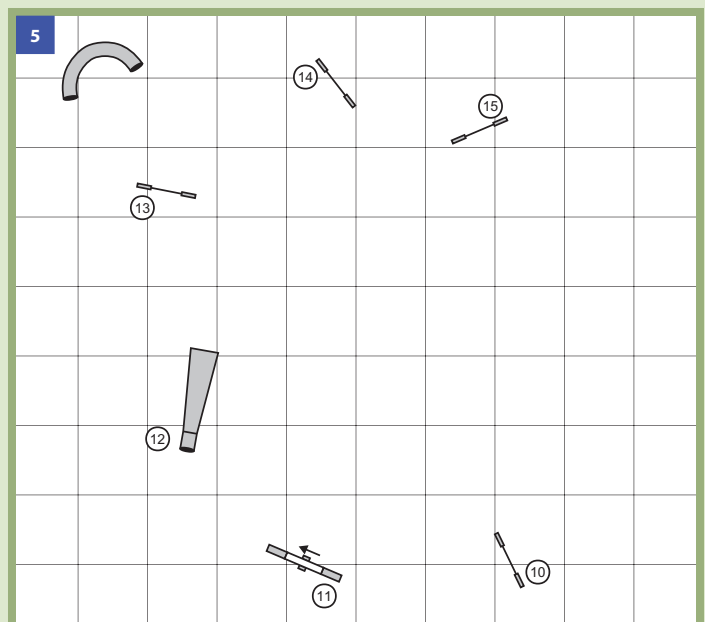
In addition, by balancing the types of challenges, the course designer can restore some initiative for the dog. For example, including a spacing or angle change in a speed-line sequence can cause more problems than including constant call-off challenges, but will not be

so de-motivating to the dog. Compare the sequences in **Figures 4 and 5.** In the sequence in Figure 4 with call-off type challenges, the handler will be required to constantly slow down and control the dog; moving quickly is discouraged despite the open lines. The chute/jump combination in Figure 5 is more likely to cause course errors like refusals and run-outs due to the dog being allowed to move along the sequence quickly. 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.
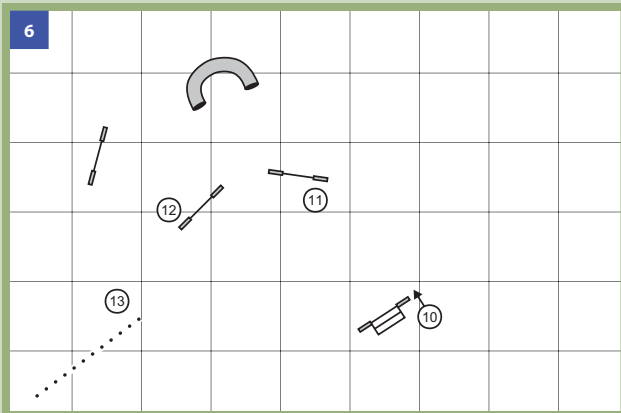
One misconception is that courses for upper-level competition have to be hard; otherwise the judge or course designer in question is thought of as an "easy" judge. Usually this perception is not true since the much harder course can often have a higher qualifying rate than the "easy" course. This is because the harder courses have challenges that are easily recognized so handlers commonly try to take steps to avoid them. The problem, however, is that these courses tend to be somewhat overbearing. By contrast, a course that contains more subtle challenges tends to catch the handler "napping" more often because problem areas are not as obvious. Despite the often low qualifying rate, handlers tend to have a better (or at least more enjoyable) time on courses with more subtle challenges since they don't feel like they are constantly haranguing the dog about this or that problem on course.
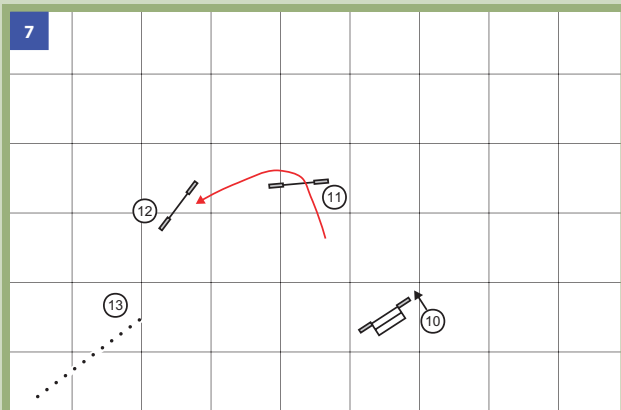

In this sequence with call-off type challenges, the handler will be required to constantly slow down and control the dog; moving quickly is discouraged despite the open lines.

The chute/jump combination is likely to cause errors like refusals and run-outs due to the dog being allowed to move along the sequence quickly. Despite what some judges might believe, allowing the dog to move at speed is not going to necessarily make the course "soft" or "easy."

The 270 turn will be difficult since the off-course tunnel has been placed close enough for a little dog to take. A large dog is probably going to land almost on top of the tunnel and the handler will be relying on a call-off.

Changing the setup of the 270 keeps the challenge, but creates an opportunity for either a small or large dog to actually turn too tight and take an off-course over the second jump.

Small and Large Dogs

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 as shown in **Figure 6.** Here, the 270 turn is going to be difficult since the designer has placed the off-course tunnel close enough for a little dog to take. The problem is that the large dog is probably going to land almost on top of the tunnel. Now we're back into "calling off" the dog from an obstacle.

What may be needed is to simply change the way the 270 is arranged. If the jumps are split apart slightly and the first jump of the 270 is rotated a few degrees, for example, the handling challenge of the 270 still exists but now there is more opportunity for the dog to actually turn *too tight* and take an off-course over the second jump as seen in **Figure 7.** This challenge is better since either a large or small dog can easily turn too tight and take the second jump in the wrong direction. Now the course is balanced for both sizes. In addition, since the call-off challenge was removed, the course appears easier and more open, adding to the speed and the willingness of the dog to move since the handler isn't as likely to shut the dog down trying to avoid the off-course.
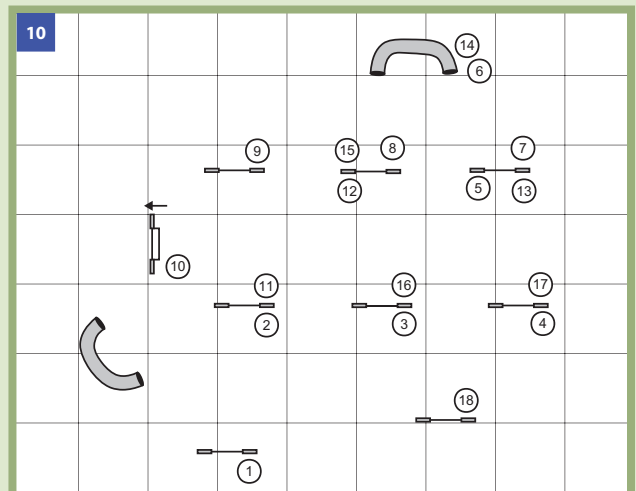
Handling Options

Whether you are "old school" and doing rear crosses or "new wave" and doing front crosses (or any other type of handling maneuver), every handler has a distinct style or type of handling that he or she prefers to use. Course designers should always consider how to offer different options to the handler. A course designed so that only one type of handling maneuver works is going to have a high failure rate and will tend to be equally de-motivating to both handler and dog. In **Figure 8** the judge has designed a sequence such that only an extremely fast handler or a dog with exceptional distance skills is going to be even moderately successful. While this sequence will have some dogs and handlers getting through successfully, course designers have to remember that they are trying to design for the "average" dog and handler team. In this example, the average dog and handler team is probably not going to have their skills honed to such an extent that the sequence becomes effortless. Most likely, the dog is going to struggle with finding the correct obstacle or direction while the handler is going to struggle with getting around the handler restriction of the dogwalk.
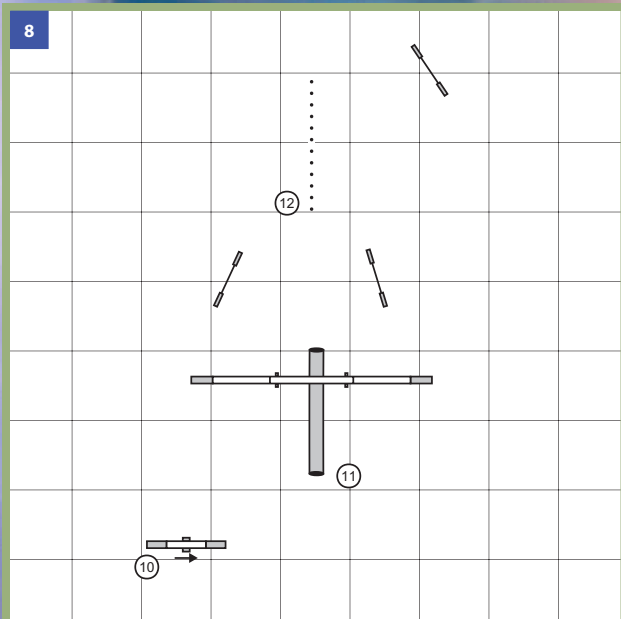
A better plan would be to change the flow of the sequence such that somewhat slower handlers or dogs with more modest distance skills can still achieve success while demonstrating their handling or training skills as shown by **Figure 9.** This change in the design allows a little more flexibility since the handler can use both the dog's distance skills and handler speed to get through the sequence. Thus, the handler as more options than just an either/or choice.
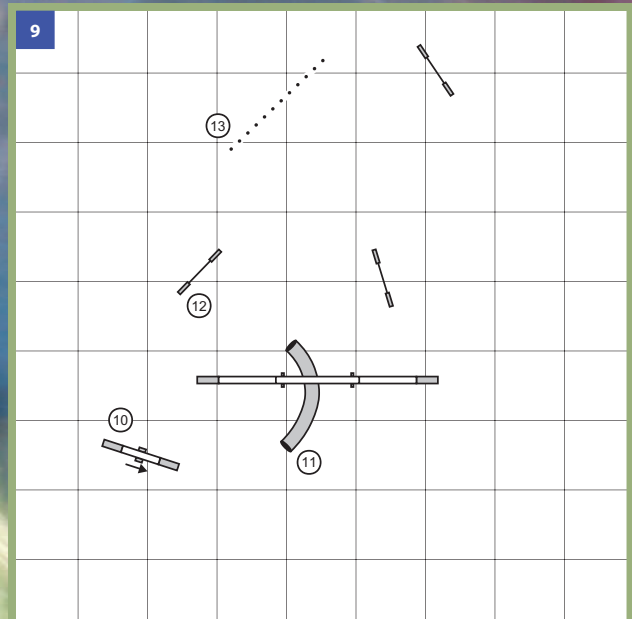
Training and Competition

Many judges instruct as well as judge so there is a tendency to incorporate training type sequences into course designs. This is good because it gives the handlers and dogs exhibiting under the judge ideas on where to take their training, which skills need to be improved, or what other parts of the country are seeing in courses. The problem arises when the course designer decides that the course itself needs to become a training exercise as seen

While there's nothing wrong with using a training exercise such as a threadle in a course, it does become a problem when the exercise becomes the sole focus and source of the complexity of the course.
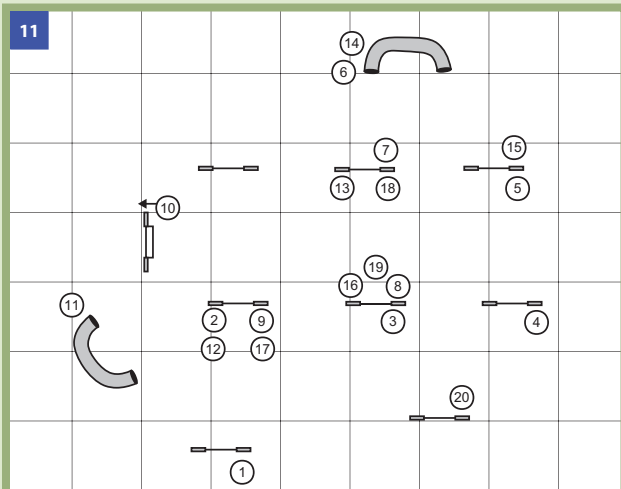
This sequence is designed such that only an extremely fast handler or a dog with exceptional distance skills is going to be even moderately successful.

Changing the flow of the sequence allows somewhat slower handlers or dogs with more modest distance skills to still achieve success while demonstrating their handling or training skills.

in **Figure 10.** Here the course is composed almost entirely of a distinct type of jumping pattern, the threadle. While there is nothing wrong with this type of jumping exercise, the problem is when the exercise becomes the sole focus and source of the complexity of the course. For the course designer to maintain a good balance, the course should "mix things up" a bit so that are different types of challenges in addition to the threadle type of training exercise as shown in **Figure 11.**

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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 population. Course reviewers should make an effort to guide the design process so that the course designer is constantly learning, both when and why to incorporate certain elements of design, and equally importantly, when not to use those same elements. Having course reviewers who teach or instruct course designers as well as review their designs can give us all better, more enjoyable agility courses to run.

Stuart Mah, a leading innovator of canine agility in the U.S., has been active in the sport since 1989. Stuart has excelled as a competitor and as an instructor, and has competed at the highest levels of agility to include 12 USDAA Grand Prix finals and five AKC finals. He has represented the U.S. seven times in international competition. His students have attained top honors in agility, including six national champions and two United States Agility Team members. His dogs, Shannon, Recce, Qwik, and Alley Cat are all in the USDAA Hall of Fame. All have won national titles in AKC or USDAA. Qwik is also a current IFCS World Champion. Stuart is a noted author and a leading expert on course design. He has written more than 30 articles for various publications on the sport of agility and has also written agility books: Fundamentals of Course Design for Dog Agility and Course Analysis for Agility Handlers.