



Handling Your Heeling

by Denise Fenzi

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Preface

I'm not a big fan of using specific footwork, so I find it more than a little ironic that I wrote an entire series of blog posts on the topic of handling for heeling, which is really just another way of saying footwork.

It started out simply enough: I wanted to say something about how I handle left turns, and the next thing I knew, there were cries for help for every aspect of heeling footwork, from the fast pace to smooth halts. After responding to each of these requests individually, I realized that it would be helpful to have it all together in one place so people can easily find it when needed.

So here it is, the e-book I was sure I would never write: *Handling your Heeling*.

As you read, remember that the suggestions I make are just that – suggestions. The way you handle heeling needs to work for you. If you really need to perform every turn exactly the same way each time for your mental comfort, then do that! If you have issues with balance, or if you find that your gait is uneven, then the fewer rules you hold yourself to, the happier you are likely to be.

No matter which way you go, train with affection and respect, for both you and your dog. Find a path that works for you both, and enjoy the process. Good luck!

Part 1: Left Turns

Generally speaking, I'm not a huge fan of any particular footwork for obedience. If you're smooth, your dog will be able to follow you. However, there is one exception to this: left turns. I am very specific in how I teach left turns. The footwork I use will work with any dog, but it's most effective with dogs who show both excellent rear end awareness and a very strong understanding of heel position. My goal is to teach my dogs to move their rear ends in completely before we proceed in the new direction.

The key to left turns is to think of heeling like driving a car. Both you and your dog have your own lane, and it's important that you stay in your lane. I do not round corners when I turn. Instead, I turn left using my left foot to start the turn. I straighten out my hips so that my right foot points in the new direction. My left foot crosses over the right foot in the new direction in a single track, then proceed normally. The dog should be totally pulled into heel position by doing this; I do not move forward until he is.

This is a tricky thing to describe, so here's a video demonstration without a dog:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUzNNtpZPcM>

To teach my dog this footwork, I use a simple drill that uses the footwork shown above, but with a halt on each corner. This drill has two goals. First, I want my dog to know that after a left turn I may not move forward. This makes forging less likely. Second, I want the dog to pull his rear end all the way in after the turn to help prevent crabbing.

Here's a video of Lyra and I working on this drill:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D143KQ5iFMA>

Some dogs read the left turn but fail to pull their rear end in after the turn. While this is not likely to be scored, it's not as pretty as a dog who moves all the way in. To encourage a dog to move their rear all the way, I will ask the dog to do a spin to the left and then complete the left turn. As the dog begins to associate these two activities, he will soon get ready to pull his rear in as soon as he sees my shoulders starting to turn in the new direction.

Here's a video demonstrating the spin. Note that my hand cue for spin also pulls my left shoulder back the way a left turn does:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rem9KiNGHDY>

And finally, here is the end result using a small dog. Brito is still mastering his left turns, so I help him as needed, both verbally and with body help. You can see he is very successful on some turns and less so on others. This video shows some of the turns at about 90% of what I would do in competition. I also slow down on the turns to make it easier for him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8Svxuq0pn0>

Part 2: Right Turns

Here's how I polish up right turns. I don't worry too much about what exactly my feet are doing, although I do have a few general guidelines that I follow. This style of handling is ideal for a dog who moves wide or tends to "crab" on right turns; that is, the dog leaves his butt out during turns.

As I approach a right turn, I slow down slightly and take a small step with my right foot. Then I pivot on that foot to create the turn. I bring my left foot around the corner and take a very small step before heeling normally again. Some handlers will do a very rigid T shaped move through the corner. My movement is similar, but less precise.

To teach this to my dog, before I ever introduce right turns, I teach the dog to pull in close to me when I sidestep to the right. Once my dog can do that well, I ask him to do it at the slow pace. Teaching these components creates a dog who really understands how to move his body to maintain heel position. After my dog has mastered these foundation skills, I make the turn and then sidestep to the right. This encourages my dog to move in with me and prevents wide turns.

Here's a video demonstrating the process. My commentary is below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S94HnIaIrcs>

The first 13 seconds illustrates a box made up of four right turns. I do not have a dog here and I'm wearing bright pink socks to make it fairly obvious what I'm doing. I'm working in a small space so I'm moving more slowly and with a shorter stride on the straight portions than I normally would. Note that I keep my feet relatively close together on the corner - that prevents me from kicking my dogs (especially my small one!) on the corner.

From 14 to 28 seconds I add Lyra to the picture and I repeat the same right box. Note that Lyra is crowding me a bit - under normal training circumstances I would break off from right turns and address the crowding behavior.

From 28 to 38 seconds you can see Brito performing the box. He is also crowding a bit.

From 38 to 49 seconds I show the footwork that I use to train a dog to stay close and tight on the right turn. This is also ideal maintenance footwork for a dog prone to wide right turns. I did this footwork almost exclusively with both Brito and Lyra for months before adding a regular right turn because both would heel wide; as a result of this training, you can no longer see those tendencies in their current work.

From 50 seconds to 1:03 I show Lyra with the training footwork. Note that I'm pulling my shoulder back somewhat. That was poor handling on my part because Lyra needs to learn to follow my shoulder, correctly aligned over my feet, in the final behavior. Leave that part out!

And from 1:04 to the end, I show the training footwork with Brito. Here I use slight shoulder help and also hand help because he is younger and needs more support. The hand help makes sense; the shoulder help needs to stop.

Part 3: About Turns

When you get right down to it, an about turn is just a right turn that keeps going. You may turn 120 degrees for a #1 glove, 180 degrees for the #2 glove or a formal about turn, 235 degrees for a #3 glove, or a full 360 degrees, just for fun.

So... what's the difference?

If you've trained your dog to respond to very small changes in your behavior, then not a whole lot. Ultimately, your speed through the turn and the direction of your gaze will tell your dog when the turn has ended. Your dog also needs to be able to follow you; small changes in your upper body and where you are looking will tell your dog whatever he might need to know. Your feet should also be directly under you; the closer your feet are to each other, the easier it is for your dog to stick with you without getting kicked or pushed out by a wayward toe or heel.

The direction you turn shouldn't matter much either. Whether that's into your dog (to the left) or away from your dog (to the right), if you are turning on a spot and if your upper body remains aligned with your feet, your dog will respond accordingly. The only thing I change based on direction is my speed. When working into the dog (left), I turn much more slowly to allow the dog time to back up and pull his rear end in.

Once again, success with the footwork I use assumes that the dog follows some part of the handler's upper body and that the dog knows how to control his rear end. No footwork will matter if your dog is not responsive to what you are doing.

Ideally, you should be able to change your mind at any point in the middle of a turn, and your dog should be okay with that. For example, if you start an about turn, change your mind and instead complete a full 360 degree turn, your dog should have no problem following along. If he stays aligned at each step of the turn, he will be able to succeed.

I see no benefit to pre-cuing so that my dog knows what direction I plan to travel next. If my dog is following me continuously, then he will be successful. In addition, he will be less likely to anticipate and lose points for surging through the turns.

Enough talk. Let's look at a video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FGj24mJA80>

The first 20 seconds shows me demonstrating some footwork without a dog. Note that I show you a right turn, an about turn, and an endless turn both to the left and to the right. I try to keep my feet under my body and my shoulders aligned with my feet. I do look slightly in the direction that I am planning to turn, but then look straight ahead again when I plan to continue on forward. This head cue should be so subtle as to be almost unobservable on a video. I move more quickly to the right than the left. I usually turn slightly faster for an about right turn than a right turn - but not always. Sometimes it helps to look at your right foot when making right or about turns, and your left foot when turning left towards the dog. If you look towards your dog (who is on the left) when you plan to turn to the right, you're providing very confusing signals to your dog because it's very likely that your upper body is signaling a left turn when your feet are going right.

From 20 to 27 seconds I add Lyra to the picture and we work right turns, right about turns and endless right turns.

At about 27 seconds you'll see Lyra's butt start to come out. This is because we worked to the right without balancing it with work to the left. Lyra needs plenty of left turns, left pivots, and various other moves that pull her rear end in to maintain balance during work.

From 35 to 41 seconds you can see that Lyra has remembered that she has a rear end because I've added in a left about turn. To reinforce "butt in" I send her to her toy after a spin to the left.

From 45 seconds to 1:10 I work on my dog's ability to be able to change direction mid-turn. This helps cement a dog's flexibility and gives the dog a lot more to think about than trying to outguess the handler. I start with simple pivots left and right. When I combine them, switching back and forth from a left pivot to a right one and back again, I choose when to change direction according to the dog's behavior; if she begins to forge to the right, that is the moment I will change to a left pivot. If she begins to lag to the left then I'll switch to working to the right. And if she is close to perfect, then I work more to the right, because it is more fun for her to push through a right turn than to pull back on a left turn. Great left turns are really quite difficult so I tend to minimize how much I ask there. Eventually, your dog will

stop anticipating what you plan to do and will simply follow you, paying careful attention. For the life of the dog, you will maintain balance by working in this manner when heeling.

I end with Brito. Brito can do right turns reasonably well. His about turns are a bit weak because he still sometimes swings wide. He's still in training, so that's okay. To fix it, I will use the footwork I used in the video on right turns by stepping to the right before going back to a straight line. I make the choice to pull to the right according to his behavior; the moment I think he might go wide is when I add my pull.

From 1:31 to 1:38 I do more of a serpentine move with Brito. This is because he's not ready for a change of direction mid pivot just yet, but I want to introduce the idea to him. Note how I am also teaching him my left turn footwork with the pull in the center of the serpentine. When he can consistently complete a serpentine with his rear end tucked in and driving forwards to the right without forging, then I'll combine those into the left/right pivot combination.

Part 4: Halts

This one is easy! I have no formal footwork for halts but I do have a rule.

Write it down and make sure that your feet are listening when you read it back. Are you ready? Okay, here it is:

NEVER LET ME HEAR YOUR FEET.

It's that simple. It doesn't matter if you stop on your left foot, your right foot, off a long stride or a short one. If I cannot hear your feet, then you are being smooth and quiet. That's good. If I can hear your feet when you halt, then you smacked some part of your foot into the ground. That's bad. Quiet feet are good feet, and good feet make good dogs. Good dogs make happy dogs, and happy dogs make happy handlers. Honestly, what else could you want?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Binz9m3KnOg>

In this video I start by working alone. Then I follow it up with every one of my dogs. Lyra - she's climbing up my leg and wants to heel too close. I stop quietly. Raika - she's heeling a little wide. I stop quietly. And Brito - he's just about right. I still stop quietly. I haven't worked halts with any of these dogs in a very long while and that shows in their positioning - but they can follow quiet feet.

You cannot hear my feet. Now admittedly, you won't be able to hear that on a video, so get up from your computer, walk around your house, and practice your halts without a dog. Practice stopping on either foot. Practice near walls. Practice after your turns. And never, ever let your feet make a sound. Now add a dog.

See? Quiet feet are good feet.

Part 5: Fast Pace of Heeling

I can't discuss the fast pace of heeling without also discussing the issue of gait – yours, not your dog's.

The human gait when walking is distinctly different from the human gait when running. In most cases, a running gait is faster than a walking gait – but not always! The first video is without a dog, and shows how the gait differs from speed.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x_O1A_mUuU

In the first 15 seconds, you can see that I change gait but I do not increase my pace.

In the second 15 seconds, I start by changing my gait and then add an increase in speed by leaning forwards and extending my stride. The video is a bit of an exaggeration so you can see the distinction.

You need to separate out the ideas of gait change and pace change when training your dog to understand a fast pace. This next video shows the effect that a change of gait has on a young dog:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fneBMPbfZ2g>

As you can see, even though I have not changed pace at all, Brito is all over the place! I will not increase speed until he can handle this simple change of gait.

When it's time to bring the two criteria together, start by changing your gait and then increasing your speed. That is now your fast pace. Here's Raika demonstrating this approach.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36yLf0rY7Ak>

I start by warming her up with a change of gait separate from a change of pace, and when I do my first true fast pace, I have one "up" stride to set the change of gait before I accelerate forwards. As a result, there is no surge when I change pace. Note that on this video I do not exaggerate as I do on the one above, so the transition step is harder to see - close to impossible actually. This is a ring acceptable fast pace.

I keep this distinction between a change of gait and a change of pace fresh in my dog's mind for life. It will do wonders for dogs who surge into the fast pace when they see you lean forwards because the first stride of your fast pace will only change your gait, not your pace. The same is true for dogs who lag into the fast. By showing one stride of a changed gait before you change pace, your dog can prepare to accelerate with you. And for dogs who get excited by the bounce of the human gait, as shown in the Brito video, separating out the bounce from the increase in speed during training helps them settle. Personally, I'm very comfortable "running" at a slow pace for minutes on end until my young dogs stop over-reacting to my change of gait.

Part 6: Slow Pace of Heeling

Now let's look at the slow pace. There are two main challenges people tend to face with it. One issue is with enthusiastic dogs who struggle to get into the slow pace. They tend to take an extra stride before they decelerate, leading to momentary forging. The other issue occurs for sleepier dogs who struggle to get out of the slow pace. They tend to be sluggish when returning to a normal pace, leading to a stride of lagging.

The first issue can be helped with smooth handling that allows your dog to quietly transition down in speed. I do not waste energy on specific footwork, but instead on body posture. When transitioning into a slow pace, "close" your body, bring your gaze in a little closer to your toes, and keep your feet very quiet. The better your enthusiastic dog is able to read your posture, the more likely he is to slow down appropriately.

The second issue can be helped with good training that emphasizes the unpredictability of the slow pace. One example of unpredictability is a game that I call "exploding tree." To do this, go into your normal slow pace, ideally for slightly longer than you would normally. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, explode forward into a run and have a party with your dog. Don't worry about the quality of the heeling at this point. Instead, just emphasize that slow heeling can lead to a huge explosion of energy. Once your dog is paying more attention within the slow pace and shows more intensity, then you can worry about quality.

This video shows both a smooth down transition and an exploding tree:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEPgAg8NuNA>

Wrapping Up: A Word on Training

This series has been about the basics of footwork and handling for heeling, but it's not particularly helpful if you are trying to actually train your dog to heel. Training and handling are two very different things and this series focused on handling over training.

When training heeling, I'd suggest that you add in many more movements beyond forward, halt, left, right, about turns, and changes of pace. Include 270 and 360 degrees circles and spins in both directions. Add in a change of gait that does not represent a change of pace. Think about concepts like fast, faster, and fastest! Large, rhythmic right circles should be a mainstay of confidence and drive building work, punctuated with a variety of other possibilities. Straight lines should show up near the end of your heeling training. When combining patterns, think about how you can combine options. Try fast to halt or fast to backwards. Experiment with a left turn to fast or an about turn to halt.

The sky is the limit, but consider your interests when choosing your combinations. If you're trying to build motivation and drive, choose combinations that are intuitive and encourage your dog to drive forwards with little or no thought. How about a fast, faster, right turn combination? If you have plenty of drive and enthusiasm and now you'd like to see a bit more precision and control, how about left turn to slow followed by fast to halt? These combinations require a lot more thought and control than the ones suggested for building a dog's enthusiasm.

Good heeling training rarely looks like what you'll see within the competition ring unless you are specifically working on the skill of trial readiness or preparation. Good heeling is dynamic and your choices should be driven by the needs of the dog in front of you.

Regardless, you'll need enough awareness of your footwork and body positioning that your dog can follow you as smoothly as possible, which is why I wrote this series. Personally, I find fluid, dynamic, and engaged heeling with a dog one of the most beautiful and awe inspiring displays of teamwork possible between a dog and a person, and I hope this series has helped you achieve this. Good luck!

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