

# Four-on-the-Floor Contacts:



## Speed, Accuracy, Comfort, and Fun

By Ann Croft, photos courtesy of Ann Croft

In the four-on-the-floor contact method the dog runs up and over the A-frame or dogwalk and assumes a contact position, a down or crouch, just off the obstacle and is released with a verbal release. The four-on-the-floor contact can be considered both a modified version of a running contact and a modified version of the two-on/two-off contact. The four-on-the-floor behavior differs from a true running contact in that the dog performs a contact behavior at the end of the obstacle and waits for a verbal release. It differs from the two-on/two-off contact method in that the dog performs the contact behavior just off the board—all four feet are on the ground and the dog assumes a down or crouch position. I do not teach the four-on-the-floor method on the teeter because of the motion at the end of the board, but I do use this method for both the A-frame and dogwalk.

Speed, accuracy, comfort, and adaptability are among the benefits of the four-on-the-floor contact method and these attributes just might make this contact performance the best of both worlds for you and your dog. Like a running contact, it's fast! The dog is able to run the whole obstacle and does not slow significantly on the descending ramp. My dog Trigger typically performs the entire dogwalk in 1.8 seconds and the descending

ramp of the A-frame in 0.25 seconds. Like the two-on/two-off method it's accurate and predictable. The dog comes to a stop just off the end of the board which ensures a paw in the yellow contact zone, allows the handler the opportunity to catch up if

behind, and provides a predictable location for the handler to plan how to guide the dog to the next obstacle. Like the running contact it appears to be comfortable for the dog. Many dogs seem uncomfortable coming to an abrupt halt on an incline in the two-on/two-off position, especially on the A-frame. Teaching the dog to run the board first and to assume a down just off the obstacle seems to result in a dog that is comfortable performing the A-frame at different heights and transitioning between the 6'3" A-frame required by USDAA and FCI and the lower A-frame

heights required in regular AKC competition and in other organizations.

Training the four-on-the-floor contact method can be broken down into two primary parts: training the dog to run up and over the obstacle, and training the dog to perform the contact behavior—the down at the end of the obstacle—which is ended by a verbal release. The two parts are trained separately and then combined when the dog is ready.



*Position of dog performing four-on-the-floor contact on the A-frame. The dog is in a down or is crouching, and is maintaining a straight body position just off the ramp.*

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## Training the Dog to Run Up and Over the Dogwalk

You will start by teaching the dog to run boards on the ground and then gradually add height and angle until the dog is performing the regulation dogwalk. This will lead to a dog that has a confident and fast performance on the obstacle.

### Step 1

To start training the dog to run up and over the dogwalk, the trainer should first establish a foundation behavior of focusing and driving forward to an object to earn a reward. The trainer should identify what object she can use to motivate her dog to focus and drive forward. A tug toy as a motivator, and a game of tug as reward, is ideal, but any object the dog can be taught to drive to and touch to earn a food reward may be substituted. If tug toys are used, the dog is taught to drive to the toy and the game of tug is the dog's reward. Dogs that are uninterested in toys or tugging, but are food motivated, can be taught to touch and/or play with a container filled with treats (such as a sock, a water bottle, a bait bag, or a toy with a food pouch and Velcro closure) to earn a treat from the container. Dogs can also be clicker trained to touch an object (such as a ball on a stick) to earn a food reward.



*Begin by teaching the dog to interact with your chosen motivator. A game of tug is fun and is the reward for this dog.*

### Step 2

Begin by teaching the dog to interact with the object—tug the toy or touch or play with the object—that has been paired with a food reward and then introduce a verbal cue for this game. For example, pair the phrase “get it” with offering the toy and this will become the cue for the dog to take hold of the tug toy and play with you, or to touch a food container or target to earn a treat.

With tug you also need to teach your dog to release the toy on command. Do this by reaching and touching the dog's mouth to get him to release the toy and then quickly offering the toy to the dog again with the *Get It* cue so that the dog doesn't perceive giving up the toy as an end to the game and knows that he will be invited to continue playing. Gradually lengthen the time intervals between ending and reinitiating the game. You may pair your hand reaching in with a word, or simply treat your hand reaching in as a signal to the dog to release the toy. My dogs learn my hand reaching in means release the toy. I then start taking gentle hold of the dog's collar as I reach in, he lets go of the toy, and then I release him to retake the toy on the *Get It* command and resume the tug game.

If you are using a food reward, deliver your treat with your hand in contact with the object and practice taking hold of your dog's collar while your dog is still eating. If you can hold your dog by

his collar rather than asking for a sit-stay between receiving the reward and getting his object again, it will help to maintain the fun, playful mood for the dog and make it easy to move your dog about in a playful way as you add distance to getting the motivator.

### Step 3

At this point the dog is ready to learn to move toward his motivator. After having the dog get the toy and play tug or touch the container/target with a food reward in your hand a few times, drop the object on the ground just in front of you and the dog and then command *Get It*. If your dog readily grabs the toy or touches the object without further information from you then you are ready to add some distance, just a few inches at a time. As long as your dog focuses on his motivator and moves confidently ahead, continue to add distance, a few inches at a time, to a distance of about 10'. Be sure to work on both sides, releasing the dog from both your right and left. Always follow your dog to the motivator and deliver the reward (tug game or food) where the dog was targeted to go to rather than having him return to you as in a retrieve. Drop the toy, and while taking your dog by the collar or slipping on a lead, run quickly back to the starting point and release dog to his motivator with the *Get It* command.



*Teach the dog to drive forward to his motivator when you give a Get It command. Dog and handler stand parallel facing the object. The dog is held by the collar and released when focused on the toy.*

Be sure to drop the toy in place and run the dog back to the starting point, rather than throw the toy from the starting position. As we progress it will become increasingly difficult to throw the toy with accuracy over the distance that we are building. So the dog must believe that even if he can't see his toy, if we release him in a given direction with his *Get It* command, he will find his motivator when he drives forward. Have fun with this part of the training: a happy dog that will go forward with confidence just ahead of you will pay off in many ways. If you have trouble at any point, make it easier for the dog by shortening the distance and returning to a point where the dog was last successful. Always keep it fun.

### Step 4

To help us teach the dog to drive across a board, we are going to use a “hoop” that’s a little taller than your dog. It can be made of stakes and tubing, framed using PVC, or framed using two fiberglass fence posts placed in the ground at an angle and crossed to form a tepee-like structure. The hoop will help your dog maintain a low profile as he exits the board. The goal in this step is to get your dog used to going under the hoop to get his motivator so that we can introduce the board. Set up your hoop and get your dog and motivator. Play with your dog or feed him from his motivator a few feet away from your hoop structure. Drop his motivator and set him just in front of the hoop—he



*Teach the dog to be comfortable playing his Get It game running under a hoop to his motivator. First release him from just under the hoop. Gradually increase the distance to the hoop and then the toy.*



will *not* be going under the hoop yet. Release him to his motivator with the *Get It* command and follow and deliver the reward. Take him back and this time place him so that his head is just under the hoop facing the motivator. Release with *Get It* and follow and reward. Repeat this step, gradually adding distance, until the dog can be released 3' to 4' from the hoop and will happily run under it to his motivator beyond. Then gradually move the motivator further out from the hoop to a distance of about 10' to 12'. Continue working until the dog can be released 4' to 8' from the hoop and will run under the hoop to his motivator which is 10' to 12' beyond.

### Step 5

Now we are ready to teach the dog to run the board. You will need a single dogwalk board or a simple 12' plank that will lie flat on the ground and that has a non-skid coating. Place your board so that one end is under the hoop, with the hoop about half way between the end and the first slat. Place your motivator 10' to 12' beyond the hoop. Pick up the dog and place him on the board so that his head is just under the hoop facing the motivator. Release him to his motivator with *Get It*, follow, and reward. Once again slowly add distance, placing the dog further and further back on the board, a few inches at a time. Be sure to change sides regularly and throughout the training. As long as your dog continues to stay focused ahead and is running the board and exiting under the hoop to his motivator, continue adding distance until he is running the entire board.

*Teach the dog to run across a board to the motivator with the hoop in place, starting with the dog at the end of the board closest to the hoop. Gradually move the dog further and further back on the board until he is running the whole board and going under the hoop at the end to get his motivator.*



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## Step 6

Once the dog is running the whole board, place a second board so that it's end to end with the first board. The goal is for the dog to run 24' of board and go under the hoop to get his motivator which is 10' to 12' beyond the hoop. Continue to add distance, backchaining the two boards. Now add a third board. Again you want to add distance, backchaining the three boards until you can release the dog to the boards from 6' to 8' away and have him run the 36' of board, exit under the hoop, and continue 10' further to his motivator.



**Add a second board at the end of the first board and continue backchaining. After this you will add a third board.**

## Step 7

Next go back to working with a single board, but add some height and angle. Start by placing something small under one end of one board (such as a brick) and again backchain your dog until he is at the top of the small incline and running down, under the hoop, and then to his motivator. Add a center board with a brick under each end, and backchain. Then add an ascending ramp with a brick under one end, backchaining until your dog is running up the small incline, across the board, down the small incline, under the hoop, and on to the motivator.

Now repeat this step using a larger object (such as a cinder block or additional bricks) to elevate the ramps. Start with just a single board, add a center board, and finally an elevated ascending ramp.

Next you may repeat this step on a 24' dogwalk, if available, and then on a full-size dogwalk.

Note: Monitor your dog's stride at the exit of the board carefully as you add height and angle. If he is starting to lift or jump off the end, lower the height of your hoop a bit to keep his profile low.

## Training the Dog to Run Up and Over the A-frame

The same basic steps may also be trained on the A-frame. When you start the board-running training with the dogwalk, you can start the same training on the A-frame. You don't need to wait until the dogwalk is fully trained before starting to teach the A-frame, but it's advisable to focus on one obstacle or the other in a given training session.

Start with the A-frame on the ground and backchain with the hoop placed close to the first slat and the dog's motivator about 10' from the end of the board. Raise the A-frame slowly and backchain with each change in height. Adjust your hoop as needed to keep your dog striding comfortably through the contact to the ground.

## Training the End Contact Behavior

Some dogs, especially very small ones, may become so patterned and comfortable running through the contact that the handler may elect to forego adding the end behavior of a down off the obstacle to the performance. Still, all handlers are encouraged to train the end behavior *away* from the obstacle so that they will be able to add a down after the contact at a later time if needed. Handlers of larger and/or very high-drive dogs should plan on training the full four-on-the-floor performance to maintain contact accuracy.

We will teach the dog to come to a stop in a down or crouched position just off the end of the board. This behavior is taught separately and then added to the obstacle after the dog has been taught to run up and over it with confidence and speed. We will use a mouse pad and a clicker to teach this behavior.

### Step 1

The first step is to teach your dog that click means reward, and if you have never used operant conditioning to train a dog, please start by reading more about it in past issues of *Clean Run* or in books, or on the Internet. It is also advisable to teach your dog some fun tricks or other behaviors with a clicker before trying to teach the contact behavior. You'll feel more comfortable when you and your dog better understand the relationship

between click and reward, and the teaching method will be better understood by the dog. Pair the click not only with food, but with the motivator you have been using to teach your dog to run the boards: for example, click, produce his toy, and start a tug game.

### Step 2

Start by assembling your clicker, mouse pad, and the motivator you've trained your dog to go to for reward, and your dog on a leash. Click and reward your dog with his motivator, drop the motivator, and place your mouse pad on the ground just in front of it. Move your dog a few feet away and release to the motivator keeping hold of the leash. As the dog steps on the pad to get to the motivator, click and reward with the tug game or treat associated with your motivator. Repeat this a few times, then gradually start moving the pad away from the motivator. Work up to a distance of about 3', clicking as the dog touches the pad on the way to the motivator. Now is the time to try to increase the time spent on the pad while still maintaining focus on the motivator. As the dog passes over the pad, apply light pressure to the leash before clicking and releasing with a *Get It* to the motivator. Once the dog will pause, click and treat in place and then release to the toy. At this stage the dog can be encouraged to down or crouch on the pad, then you can click and treat, and release to the toy.

### Step 3

Add some distance to the pad, working up to about 7' to the pad and an additional 3' to the motivator. As the dog gets better about pausing on the pad, add a contact cue like *Tap*, *Target*, or *Contact*. Strengthen your dog's understanding of his pad behavior and build an independent performance by working on both sides and stopping in different places (behind, in front, and laterally away from the pad) before releasing him to his motivator.

Training the contact behavior in this manner, with the pad between the dog and the motivator from the beginning, will help to keep the dog's focus forward and maintain speed. It also may help to ward off weakening of the performance when sequencing is introduced, since the dog learns his contact behavior at speed and with self-control in the face of something inviting.

Teach the dog to touch a mouse pad on the way to his motivator.



Encourage the dog to down or crouch on the pad on the way to his motivator while still maintaining a forward focus.



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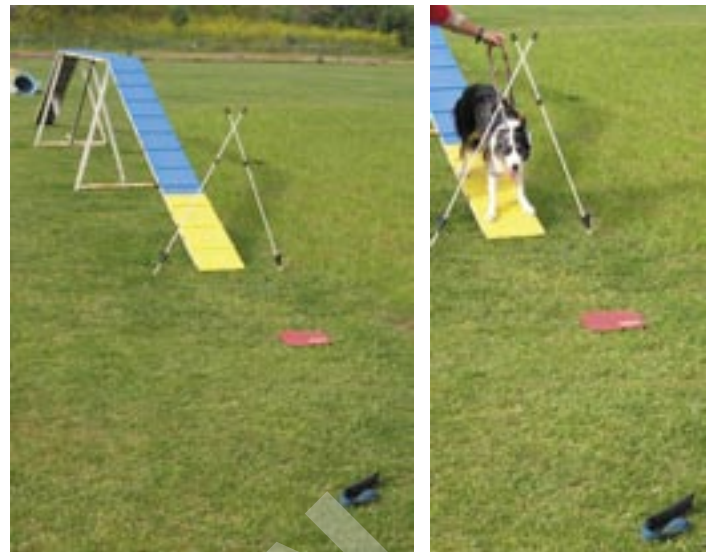
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Position of the dogwalk, hoop, mouse pad, and motivator when you start combining the two trained behaviors.

Take your dog by his collar or leash and place him at the end of the dogwalk, just under the hoop, and release him to the mouse pad.

### Putting the Two Parts Together

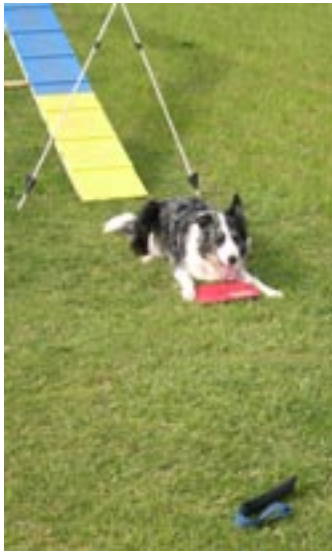
When you have the dog running up and over the contact obstacle, under a hoop, and to a motivator; and separately and away from the contact obstacle, he understands a verbal cue to run straight to a mouse pad and assume a down or crouch position to wait for release to the motivator, then you are ready to put these two parts together.

#### Step 1

Assemble your clicker, mouse pad, motivator, treats, and dog. Go out to the dogwalk equipped with the hoop structure. Show your dog his motivator and place it about 12' from the end of the dogwalk. Place the mouse pad 3' to 6' from the motivator so that it is in between the exit of the dogwalk and the motivator. Take your dog by his collar or leash and take him to just in front of the exit end of the dogwalk, facing him toward the pad and motivator beyond—he won't be going under the hoop yet. Release the dog to the pad with your contact cue (such as *Tap*, *Target*, or *Contact*), click and treat when the dog goes into the crouch or down touching the pad, and then release the dog to the motivator. Run to meet him at his motivator and reward him as before. Next take the dog and place him at the exit end of the dogwalk with his head just under the hoop. Release the dog to the pad with your contact command, click and treat when the dog goes into the crouch or down touching the pad, release the dog to the motivator, and then follow and reward him.

#### Step 2

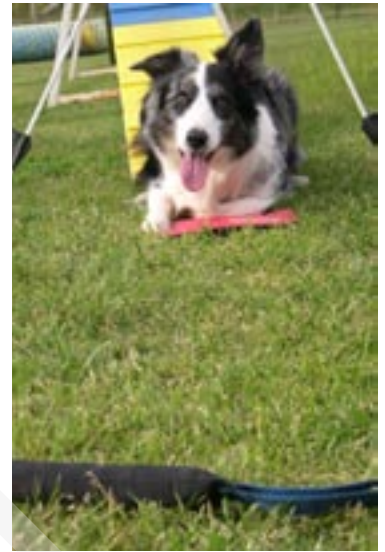
Continue backchaining the dogwalk in this manner. It should go fairly quickly as the dog has already learned to negotiate the dogwalk and you are now just teaching him that he should stop at the mouse pad when asked before being released to his motivator. As you backchain the descending ramp, give the contact cue when you release the dog. Once you move the



*The dog receives a click and treat for stopping on the mouse pad and is then released with a verbal cue to the motivator.*



*Gradually move the mouse pad and motivator closer to the dogwalk, asking the dog to stop closer to the end until he is just off the board.*



*The dog is just off the board, in a down, with his body straight and focused on his motivator ahead, waiting for release.*

dog back onto the center ramp, start to give your contact cue when the dog passes the point where the center board and the descending ramp meet.

### Step 3

Once the dog can complete all the steps (run up and over the dogwalk, crouch or down at the mouse pad, receive a treat, and be released to the motivator for reward), it is time to train the dog to stop at the pad just a body length from the board instead of a few feet out. This is done by simultaneously moving the mouse pad and the motivator incrementally closer to the dogwalk until the pad is just the dog's body length from the board.

Follow the previous steps for the dogwalk to put the two parts of the training together on the A-frame.

### Proofing the Performance

Go to new training centers and fun matches to practice, and take your training aids with you and use them. Do many repetitions before removing your hoop, pad, and motivator. Over time experiment with removing the hoop first, since your dog has been working with this in place the longest. Carefully monitor your dog's footfalls and the depth he drives into the contact zone. You may find using an electronic "Hit It Board" is helpful for this, or specifically clicking and rewarding for zone depth. Then experiment with removing the motivator occasionally and releasing the dog from the mouse pad to another obstacle. The last aid to fade is the mouse pad. You can make it smaller and smaller or simply occasionally remove it in training until eventually it is not there at all.

As you are training be sure to reward the dog for downing just off the board and for maintaining a straight body position. Remember to run behind, in front of, and on both sides of the dog as he runs the obstacle, and to stop yourself in various locations since your dog is expected to perform his contact behavior and wait for release. To further proof your dog's understanding of the behavior, occasionally release your dog while you are in motion in practice. Be sure that the dog is released on cue, not on your body motion.

Once you begin competing, ask for a down at the end of the board and expect your dog to hold the position as you would any trained contact behavior.

### Goal for Four-on-the Floor Contacts

The goal of the four-on-the-floor contact method outlined in this article is to produce a fast and accurate performance, and a willingness on the part of the dog to maintain the contact behavior because it is comfortable, fun, and rewarding. The dog is taught first to run the boards so that he can become comfortable with the surface, width, and length of the obstacle, and then later, the height and angle. He develops the confidence and muscle memory to negotiate and run across the entire obstacle. He does it with drive and forward focus. The dog learns to perform a comfortable contact behavior, and wait for his release in the presence of an inviting object, his motivator, which helps to maintain speed, to teach self-control, and to ease the transition to sequencing. 🐾

*Editors' Note: Ann's instructional DVD "4 on the Floor: Modified Running Contacts" is available from [www.cleanrun.com](http://www.cleanrun.com).*

*Ann lives in San Diego, California with her two Boston Terriers, Chance and Prix, and three Border Collies, Caper, Trigger, and Flurry. Her Bostons, Mystic (1992-2004) and Chance, achieved many agility firsts for their breed. Chance, Caper and Trigger are all double agility champions, MACH and ADCH, and have all been AKC Nationals finalists with Trigger placing second overall in 2003. Trigger and her teammates won the 2004 DAM National Team Championship. Ann now teaches full time at her training center, Paws on the Wind Dog Sports, and is also an AKC and USDA judge. Learn more at [www.pawsonthewind.com](http://www.pawsonthewind.com).*