

WEAVE POLES AT HOME



Kevin Devine Photography

Go to any major agility event or watch agility videos online, and you'll see one of the most amazing moments in dog sports. When a well-trained dog flies through the weave poles, it's truly spectacular! The best dogs can find the entry from seemingly impossible angles, drive through the full set without a misstep, then exit with gusto towards the next obstacle ... and it all happens so quickly and looks like so much fun.

If you're just starting your first dog in agility, you might be wondering, "How can I possibly get my dog to do that?!" For newcomers and old-timers alike, every agility participant needs to know the best way to train the weaves so that dogs can learn them quickly, perform them consistently and, most importantly, stay healthy.

Dogs need to be ready, both physically and emotionally, to be introduced to the weaves. Don't start training when your puppy is too young. Healthy dogs may be taught simplified versions of certain skills when they're still puppies. But repetitive training of *any* regulation agility obstacle before the dog's growth plates fuse (14-18 months old, even later for some breeds) is definitely not advised. You also want to be sure your dog has no structural problems to begin with, so check with your veterinarian.

Agility experts agree that weave poles are the most difficult obstacle to train. If you think about it for a moment, that makes a lot of sense. In nature there's nothing quite like them, whereas there are plenty of things to jump over, to

Weave pole basics

Whatever training method is used, a dog in competition must:

- 1) Find the entry (first pole on the dog's left),
- 2) Start the weaving motion, and
- 3) Continue until the end of the set.

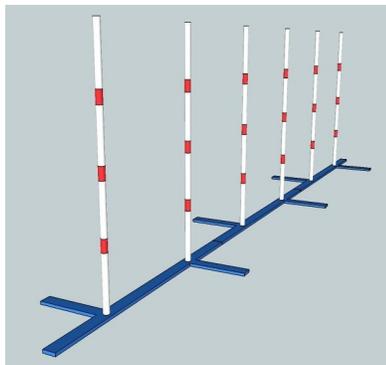
Most agility organizations stipulate 6 poles at the beginner level; at higher levels, 12 poles are the norm. The standard spacing between poles is 24 inches, although some organizations also allow shorter spacings.

Regulation weave bases are relatively heavy and often secured to the ground or floor. The poles themselves are made from 3/4" PVC pipe (about 1" outside diameter), between 36" and 48" tall, and striped with colors that contrast with the pole. For exact specifications check the regulations for the organizations in which you plan to compete.

The weaves obviously require an incredible degree of canine concentration. They are a skill that is visually challenging like no other. And when the course design is difficult, weaving also demands independent execution by the dog; the handler must be able to send the dog into the weaves from either side, any angle and sometimes long distances. Handlers must also be able to reposition themselves so that they're ready for the next obstacle when the dog finishes weaving.

tunnel through and to climb on. Having a set of weaves in your own back yard or basement is almost essential for any serious agility enthusiast. If your dog sees the weave poles only once a week during class, it will likely take a long time to learn them.

But what equipment do you actually need?



Regulation weaves

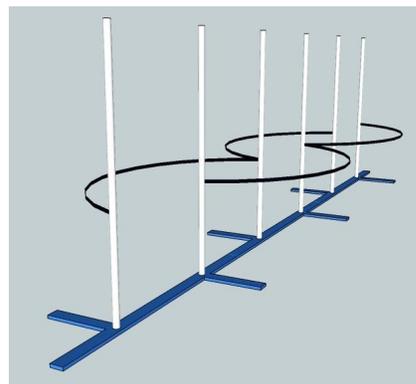
Historically there have been 4 main ways to teach dogs how to weave. The methods and equipment depend on slightly different configurations of a set of weaves (and sometimes accessories) at different stages of training. In general, they can be described as:

- 1) Poles are in-line, as in regulation equipment
- 2) Poles can be angled outward from the base (Weave-A-Matic or WAM)
- 3) Vertical poles can be offset to alternating sides of the main axis (Channel or Chute)
- 4) Poles are introduced in pairs, then pairs of pairs, then longer sets (2x2, pronounced “two-by-two”)

In-line, regulation weaves

In the early days of agility, most handlers used in-line poles for a set of 6 or more. At that time there were very few options for specialized training equipment. Today most experienced trainers don't recommend this regulation configuration for beginner dogs. A dog taught with in-line poles must move carefully during the initial stages of training in order to be correct ... in and out, left and right, pole by pole ... and the ultimate performance is often cautious and slow as well. That being said, there are dogs who have been trained with this method and have gone on to become amazing weavers. It's yet another testimony to the greatness of our canine companions!

When starting dogs on in-line poles, some trainers use guide 'wires' (plastic tubing that connects every other pole) or other path restrictions. These accessories help make the correct path very clear to the dog. In fact path restrictions are often combined with other methods, such as WAM and Channel. While such aids may be extremely useful for some dogs, problems tend to develop if your dog perceives the extra equipment as part of the finished picture. Don't get stuck in a rut relying on training accessories; when your dog no longer needs them, remove them and push forward with your training.



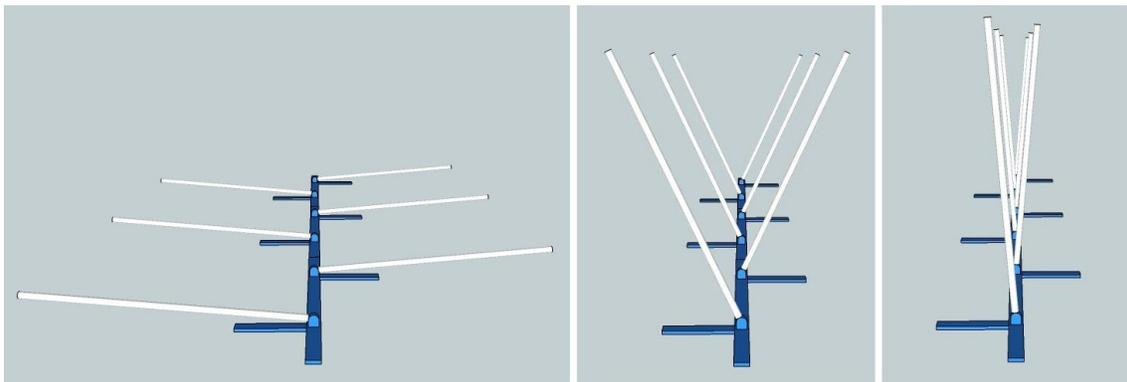
Guide 'wires'

The other three methods make it easier for dogs to develop speed and footwork at the same time they learn the weaving motion. Each of these methods has certain advantages as outlined below.

WAM

Angled or slanted poles are often referred to by the name Weave-A-Matic (WAM for short), a device designed by Monica Percival in the early days of the sport. From the dog's perspective, the configuration looks like the letter 'V' throughout much of the training process. Starting with the tops of

the poles tilted widely outward (first pole to the left, second to the right, and so on), the dog is encouraged to run the full length of the set. As the dog becomes confident and consistent, the poles are slowly raised, bringing the tops closer and closer together until all the poles are vertical.

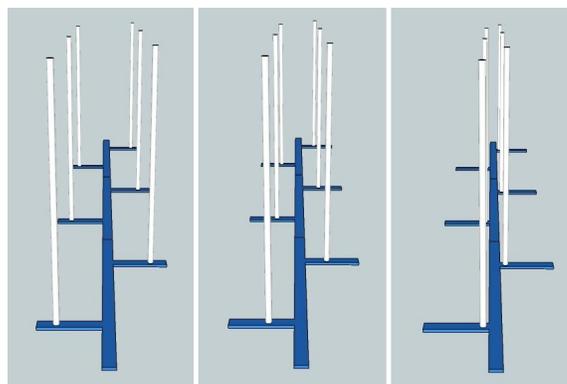


WAM method

The WAM method, which is often used to facilitate footing, stride and rhythm, is especially popular with handlers of large dogs. Any dog who seems to be shy about touching the poles with his face or body might be a good candidate for the WAM method, at least in the beginning stages of training.

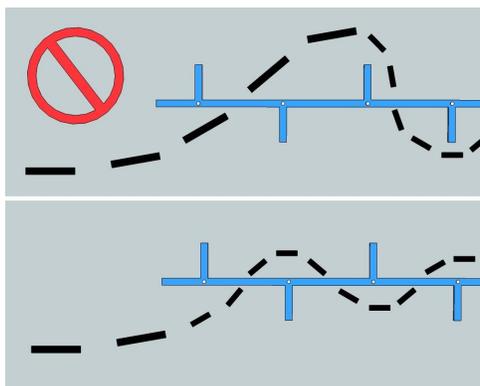
Channel

An offset pole arrangement, called the Channel (sometimes Chute) method, gives dogs an unobstructed, straight path along the main axis right from the beginning of training. The poles stay vertical throughout the process. In the early phases of training they're positioned on either side of the center line, first pole on left, second on right, etc. The poles are systematically brought nearer and nearer together until the dog starts the weaving motion, and eventually the poles are aligned.



Channel method

Like the WAM method, the Channel method helps develop speed at an early stage of training, often even better than the WAM method, because the dog simply runs straight ahead without having to step over the bottom of each pole. This method also has the advantage of visual consistency in that the poles are always vertical, the way they are in competition.

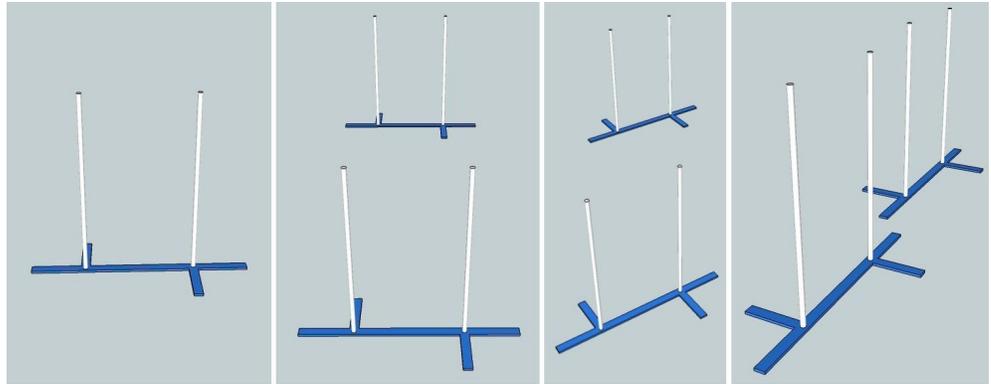


Collecting stride

A potential drawback to either the WAM or Channel method is that dogs tend to blast through a wide-open arrangement at a much faster speed than they can handle when the poles are in-line. Getting dogs to collect their stride as they enter the weaves is an important aspect of training; otherwise the dog's momentum makes it difficult to execute the critical first turn in a regulation set, between poles #2 and #3. This is especially important for large and speedy medium-sized dogs.

2x2

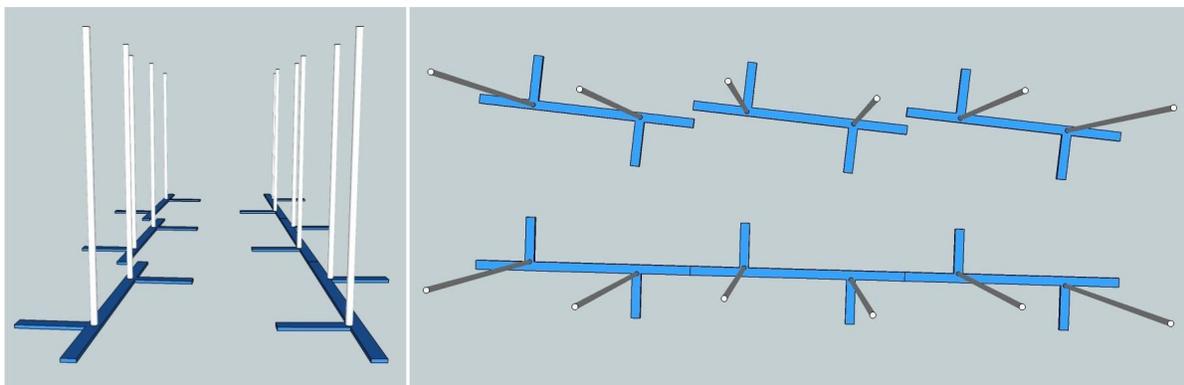
An increasingly popular method, 2x2 training has been extensively developed by Susan Garrett, Canadian agility expert. The dog starts simply with a set of 2 poles. When the dog can fly through that pair, confidently and consistently from all approach angles, then a second set of 2 poles is introduced a few strides distant from the first pair. As the dog becomes more proficient at doing two pairs in sequence, the 2-pole segments are rotated and the spacing between the pairs is diminished until the dog is weaving 4 poles in-line.



2x2 method

Dogs who learn with the 2x2 approach are usually very adept at finding the weave entry, the #1 problem for novices. And probably most importantly, 2x2 training helps teach dogs to collect their stride on entry. For many dogs, 2x2 is also a very quick and efficient way to learn how to do an entire regulation set of 12, correctly and with speed. Moving from 4 poles to 6, then from 6 poles to two sets of 6, and finally to a fully connected 12-pole set can often be accomplished soon after the dog begins training.

At some point in the process, the 2x2 pole arrangement starts to look similar to a Channel, especially if you start your Channel training with groups of 4 or 6 poles. One difference between the two is the view of the base relative to the poles. In most Channel sets, the base is straight and uninterrupted, creating



2x2 vs Channel, same pole spacing

the main axis of the weaves from the beginning to the end of the set, as in regulation equipment. With 2x2 sets, the dog sees each 2-pole unit as an independent part of the base, and there's empty ground between them.

There are probably dogs that 'read' one arrangement better than the other. Many dogs don't even notice the base, just the poles themselves. In some competition venues, the base is covered with dirt anyway. If your dog does seem to be confused by the short 2-pole base segments during this phase of training, then a Channel set might be more helpful.

Weaving styles and other equipment issues

As dogs become proficient weavers, they tend to develop their own particular weaving style. Some handlers encourage their dogs to achieve 'single-step' weaves, where only one front paw is placed on each side of the base as the dog passes each pole. This is a smooth, speedy, reliable and comfortable



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Single-stepping vs. bouncing

way for many long-backed dogs to perform the weaves. Most smaller dogs (and even some larger dogs) prefer to hop or bounce through, using pairs of paws on both sides. Ask a more experienced agility person whether single-stepping is something your dog should be encouraged to try. For single-step training, handlers often use WAM or Channel sets with very slight adjustments from the regulation configuration.

If you're a first-time equipment buyer, there are several other issues to consider as you embark on your weave pole program at home. Do you have enough space for weaves? A full set of 12, with 24" spacing, takes up a whopping 24 feet of space! And you'll need some room for entries and exits too, with another obstacle (a jump or tunnel opening) about 15' away from each end of the weaves. To save space and money, many beginners start by purchasing a set of 6 poles, but it's a good idea to progress to 12 soon after your dog can do 6.

Fortunately weaves are not the most expensive piece of agility equipment. But don't hamper your dog's progress by choosing the most economical products. For example, stick-in-the-ground poles and PVC bases won't give your dog the real feel of regulation weaves. Find a set with metal bases and pole supports no higher than 4" (AKC regulations); these will hold the poles securely and allow the PVC to flex enough to be safe ... and it's similar to the equipment your dog will use in actual agility trials.



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Many competition sets are sold in 2-pole units, which is ideal for both 2x2 training and regulation weaves. They're also easy to transport from place to place, an essential part of proofing your dog's weave pole performance.

Scope out the equipment options in all the ways you can. Find out what your local dog clubs and training centers are using. Talk to people at agility trials and see what equipment they like. Go online and search for weave pole suppliers. There are numerous manufacturers of weaves, and you can often get a good idea about the quality of their equipment from their websites.

No matter what methods you try, watch for opportunities to encourage your dog to achieve the ultimate skill (in-line, regulation weaves) in whatever ways you can. Neither your training program nor your equipment should impede your dog's progress in any way. Small numbers of in-line poles, usually 4 or 6, should be introduced when your dog is ready for them. The sooner you can get your dog comfortable with regulation weaves, the better. You want your dog to think that a set of 12 poles constitutes a single obstacle, not 12 separate obstacles.

Individual training goals

Beginner If you don't yet have an agility coach, shop around in your area and see who's available and what their philosophy is. They probably have their own unique approach to training, and they probably have a weave method (or two) that they like to use, especially for beginners. See if they're open to exploring what's right for you and your dog. Always remember that you and your dog are a unique team, so when you interview instructors, use your intuition ... *and* that of your dog.

Intermediate If you're not exactly a novice, but your dog is still having problems, you may need to consider re-training the weaves. Your dog may need work on hitting entries consistently, not popping out along the way, or simply feeling more confident and happy about the weaves in general. The 2x2 method is often a great way to address these problems. If you're working with WAM or Channel sets, you can slightly 'open up' portions of the set to address specific problems.

Advanced Even if you've been successful at weave poles for a long time, it doesn't hurt to re-assess your training techniques occasionally, incorporating new ideas and possibly new equipment as necessary. Most experienced trainers have tried all of the above methods, and many of them probably use some combination of methods. There's not a single answer that fits every dog/handler team at every stage of training or re-training.

Keep your training sessions short. As dogs learn to weave, they bend their spines and use their muscles in ways that they haven't before. Work every other day at first, so their bodies can heal and they can attack the weaves with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

Sturdy and safe equipment is essential. If you're buying a training set with movable parts (WAM or Channel) you'll want equipment that's easy to adjust and secure at all settings. For training in a variety of locations, your set should be easy to take apart and reassemble. The environments in which you train should also be safe for you and your dog. Exercise caution and common sense before you start your dog on a weave pole training program. First talk to experienced handlers, read as much as you can about the sport, and be sure to get your veterinarian's advice.

Then have fun weaving! If taught well, it truly is one of the most fun things you and your dog will ever do!

[Ace Russell is the owner of the Agility Center of East TN, and the founder/designer of Way To Weave dog agility equipment. He has been involved in agility since the late 1990's and his Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Ollie, was the first AKC Champion dog of his breed to achieve the Master Agility Champion (MACH) title. He has served as Trial Chairman and Trial Secretary for numerous AKC and USDAA events, and he's the Training Director for the Tennessee Valley Kennel Club, Inc. Ace can be reached at www.waytoweave.com.]