Body/Voice/Tunnels!

As a Judge I see many interesting things out there on the Barn Hunt courses! Some of them brilliant, some of them funny and some of them, well “interesting”. I have the distinct advantage of being on the outside of the fishbowl and looking in. I also have an advantage of having my own place to train whenever I want and having been in both Obedience and Agility for many years.

I see teams struggling with <gasp> tunnels all the time! The dogs find the rats without fail, but absolutely will NOT go into that tunnel, causing the handler to become nearly hysterical. I’ve seen red faces, I’ve seen pleading, I’ve seen begging, I’ve seen tears! All because of a tunnel.

Ok, let’s talk about it and why your dog does it in class, but doesn’t do it at the trial. It’s probably YOU. Yep, there I am pointing my big index finger right atcha! “UGH,” you exclaim, “It cannot be me! He/she knows how to tunnel. He/she is an AGILITY dog.”

Hmmm... let’s take a look at this from the dogs’ perspective. Here is an agility tunnel. It’s nice and round looking all smiley and friendly, not surrounded by anything. It’s inviting and it’s 24” in diameter! Add a couple of eyes and a mouth and you have a veritable smiley face! Yay!

Here, is a Barn Hunt tunnel. It doesn’t look anything like an agility tunnel. Also, add in the fact that it turns suddenly right or left once the dog is inside and it is supposed to be dark. It’s also 18” in diameter and not nearly as appealing. It’s also surrounded by lots of things --- a flat top with foam at the edge, other bales of straw and is also made of straw, not flexible light-colored material. Dogs do not generalize very well. What is awesome and fun in a class is not the same somewhere else! With experience and/or a really good grasp at why dogs don’t do the same thing in all places (generalization) we can make sure our dogs are successful whether it’s at class or at a trial.

So, if you can’t get to somewhere to train use U-haul boxes. They are a near perfect fit. You can configure them easily and store them flat. A virtual barn hunt course in a box; um, oh yeah – they are boxes. They are very portable, so you can move them from room to room, to the garage, to the back yard, to the park, etc. Dogs need to do the same behavior in various locations to generalize. Some dogs are better at it than others, but that doesn’t matter because consistency in what your commands are is as important as location. But, that’s for another article!

As a trainer who teaches a lot of classes every week, I see many people putting the emphasis only on finding the rats. They don’t really think the tunnel is as important. Well, if your dog finds the rats and won’t do the tunnel, you aren’t going to qualify. It’s as simple as that. It’s part of the game. You wouldn’t go into the Agility ring with your dog and not have trained weave poles and then beg them over and over to do it
when you haven’t really trained it, or go into the Obedience ring and expect your dog to do scent articles when you have never trained them to do so!

Now, meat and potatoes of this tunnel game. Many times the tunnel problem boils down to not just lack of training, but body and voice cues.

Indulge me with this example: Handler is pointing at the tunnel and says, “Go tunnel!” in a cheerful manner. The dog immediately runs in a different direction.

Well, why did that happen? Here’s the graphic:

Here are the problems:

Handler’s feet are not aimed at the tunnel. They are aimed toward a wall or gate across the tunnel entrance. The body and foot position of the handler is telling the dog to go out and around, not in the tunnel.

The handler is also not moving at all. The handler is standing there and flapping their arm trying to get the dog to understand to go into that entrance.

The dog is very positive that the tunnel is a bad place to go, because the handler is now distressed about it. So, the handler changes to another form of the game to try to convince their dog to go into that tunnel. The handler is now using a high-squeaky voice, still flapping their arms about and begging the dog to go in the tunnel. Well, this is music to the canine ears and the dog is saying, “Yay! Game ON!” and jumps up above the tunnel.

Handler calls the dog to them. The dog complies and looks at handler waiting for the new game! Again, handler is standing sideways, feet aiming across the tunnel entrance.

Handler is pointing at the tunnel entry.

Dog turns and goes around the tunnel entry again.

Handler calls the dog back and repeats the same command, now standing with their feet aiming across the tunnel entrance again, and is now clapping their hands, using a high pitched voice and probably whirling their arms around again, pleading for the dog to do the tunnel.

Dog again, does not tunnel.

Handler/dog team run out of time. NQ. Bummer.
Solving this problem:

First, be aware of your body position. If you want your dog to go in that tunnel, make sure your body and feet are aimed in the direction you want your dog to go! If not, you’ll be sucked into the “stand and flap” mode.

Secondly, make sure you’ve got a little space to move forward.

Get your dog on the side of you that allows you to move forward and not cross behind the dog once he actually DOES go into the tunnel. Dogs have great peripheral vision. If you send them in then move quickly behind them, they may very well see it and decide you are going elsewhere, and they should go with you. Thusly, causing them to back out or turn around and come out of the tunnel. See Graphic below!

Dog goes in tunnel, sees handler behind him crossing behind him, thinks handler changed their mind and comes back out of the tunnel to follow handler.

Proper position and movement:

Handler gets dog on whichever side they want to approach the tunnel.

Handler indicates the tunnel with the correct hand/arm --- the one on the side that the dog is on -- and says “tunnel” and moves forward.

Dog goes into the tunnel, handler is able to continue to the other side of the tunnel.

“But, what if my dog doesn’t go in the tunnel and I clap and say “tunnel, tunnel, tunnel” in my squeaky, let’s get excited voice and my dog jumps up on top of the tunnel?!
Well, let’s break that down! If you’re using a high, squeaky voice you may just be inviting your dog to go UP. Your voice and body language are usually doing the same thing! You’re probably saying “tunnel” and your hand is flicking at the entrance to the tunnel, indicating to your dog to jump UP and play! Good dog! Naughty handler!

Take it down a notch! One very simple method is something I use with one of my dogs. He doesn’t really love the tunnel. However, if I call him to me in front of the tunnel and ask him to sit, it breaks his insistence on hunting. I then say in an authoritative, but not a punishment tone, “tunnel”. It is not a question “Tunnel?”, it is “Tunnel”, no question in it. It isn’t a suggestion. It’s a command. For most dogs it’s enough to break the “hunting spell” and get them back under control enough to go through the tunnel.

Also, make sure you’re in a neutral body position. What’s neutral? Standing up straight, not hovering over the top of the dog. If you hover over the top of your dog, they may feel a little threatened. Being that your dog is a flight kind of animal, their first thought about something looming over the top of them is to get away, you included. So, stand up! You don’t need to be in a military posture, but a neutral one. You know, “ain’t no big thing” type of stance! Then say your command to tunnel and move forward. It’s usually enough of a break that they can pull their adrenalin down a bit and do what is asked. You can also use a “down” as well. Obviously, you cannot lead out. You must not leave your dog at the entrance to a tunnel, tell them to stay and go to the other end and call them through. It usually doesn’t work anyway, and it’s against the BHA rules!

Another handy hint is to take a look at your tunnel configuration. Try to find the fastest way from one end of the tunnel to the other. Often, I see people putting their dogs in the tunnel on the wrong side of their body and having to race to get to the other side. First of all, you don’t need to race the dog. Second of all, make it easy on yourself.

Example: Arrows indicate the shortest path.
In conclusion: Make it easy for your dog to understand. Make it physically easy for yourself as well. Stay in motion with the tunnel and take the shortest path to the other end. All in all, if you train this and get yourself familiar with these techniques you shouldn’t need to worry about the tunnel any longer! It’s just a part of the game. In a future article we’ll also talk about “trap door” training for Senior/Masters tunnels.

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