

*Because you'll be in motion and only able to see your dog from one angle, making progress toward a good-looking gait with a clicker is more easily accomplished by two people: one to click, one to walk or run with dog and give the treat.*

All too often, however, the behavior of both dog and handler make fair evaluations impossible. If your dog trots on a diagonal (known as “crabbing”) or lugs on its lead as if pulling a milk wagon, the judge has no chance to see anything but poor movement. Down go your dog’s marks, down go your chances to win. But these handicaps can be avoided and your dog’s movement improved by clicker training.

### **Team Training the Gait**

The essence of clicker training is to use the clicker (or any other distinctive sound) to mark the exact moment your dog does something right. After clicking, tell your dog with petting, praise, and treats that you are pleased. The crucial information, however—what the dog did to earn all that—is provided by the marker signal. (As noted in Chapter One, you can ring a bell, blow a whistle, or jingle the coins in your pocket, but a clicker is both distinctive and easy to use, and it’s important to use an artificial sound as your marker signal; research indicates that it is much clearer to dogs than any spoken word.)

Because you’ll be in motion and only able to see your dog from one angle, making progress toward a good-looking gait with a clicker is more easily accomplished by two people: one to click, one to walk or run with dog and give the treat. Find a partner—perhaps someone who is also preparing to show a dog—and schedule some practice time. As you gait your dog, have your partner click when your dog does what you want. Stop instantly on the click and give your dog a treat of cubed cheese or diced chicken. After that, resume gaiting, giving your dog another chance to earn a click and treat.

It’s important not to tease or bait your dog with the treat. Waving food around defeats the purpose of the clicker. It makes your dog watch and follow your hands instead of looking straight ahead; it also makes your dog think about food rather than what it is supposed to be doing to earn the click. Keep the treat out of sight until after the click. Also, don’t click at the end of a run. At first click at random points during the exercise run, or you’ll soon have a dog that looks bored during the run and elated only at the turnaround point.

Next, decide what needs improvement. Remember, you want your dog to be near you, perhaps even a little in front of you, and moving straight. You can put your partner alongside you to work on positioning your dog, or at either end of the track to work on its straight-line movement. You can also trade positions with your helper, so you can watch and click your own dog and see how it’s coming along. Finally, keep the sessions short. Don’t push yourself or your dog to the point of boredom or fatigue.

Working with a partner will enable you to teach your dog in just a few five-minute sessions to move in a straight line, to keep its ears and tail up, to have a happy look on its face, to move on a slightly loose lead. The goal is to hand these responsibilities over to your dog. If you use the clicker to explain what you want, your dog will be thrilled to oblige.

A loose lead is important. If you hold the lead taut, your dog will almost certainly resist, pulling sideways or backwards. Even a little resistance throws the gait off completely. Nevertheless, stringing your dog upon the neck seems to be the fashion these days. I recently saw a “professional” handler, in a major show, gaiting an Australian terrier with such a tight lead that the dog’s front feet were completely off the ground. What the judge thought I can’t imagine, but the dog was visibly miserable.

### **Problems You Can Fix**

You can also use team training to correct flaws in your dog’s gaiting. By clicking at the right moment, you can tell your dog that you want it to trot, not pace, or that it should keep its front paws aligned with its shoulders, not flying wide. Here’s an example of how it’s done.

Jennifer is a young St. Bernard that, like many big dogs, tended to shamble along with her head down. Her owner wanted Jennifer to look proud and confident by carrying her head

