

Teaching Position using an X Pen

canine freestyle moves database

An X Pen is a wire paneled pen where the panels are clipped together allowing each panel to rotate around its hinge in a 360 circle. Some X Pens include gates like the one shown, some do not.

X Pens come in various heights and usually are sold with 8 panels. You need an X Pen tall enough to discourage the dog from jumping out.



When the X Pen is opened up it can be re-shaped into a variety of configurations.

One such configuration that is extremely useful in dog training is a v-shaped corridor, where the corridor is wide enough for the dog to enter and back out, but cannot turn around in without touching the sides. This sets the dog up to move straight, that is, enter the X Pen straight and back-out of the X Pen straight. The length of the corridor should be longer than the dog's body length.

The X Pen can also be used for shaping circular movements, forwards and backwards, clockwise and anti-clockwise around the handler.

The various "heel" positions can be taught using an X pen. Through careful layout of the X Pen, positioning of the handler and width of the corridor, you can set up the dog to always come in straight to a body target and be marked for the same position every trial.

You can reward in position as well as toss a treat outside the X Pen so the dog leaves the X Pen and sets himself up for another trial. Initially, tossing the treat to the side where the opening is, makes it easy for the dog to re-enter the X pen once he has got his treat and turns around to return to position. By tossing the treats in various directions around the X Pen (i.e. in directions around the face of a clock) the dog learns to approach a position from various angles and straighten his body so he can enter the X Pen straight and hence position himself straight.

Judicious use of the X Pen is much more reliable and accurate than the "Squaring the Dog" method for teaching the dog positions, but it is not as efficient and reliable as rectangular platforms, which are by far, the most superior technique for teaching positions.

Notes:

- For dogs that have never been crate trained, allow the dog plenty of time to become comfortable moving forwards and backwards, in and out of the X Pen as well as being confined in the X Pen. The X Pen needs to be a "safe place".
- For dogs wary of the X Pen set it up so that the sides are not close to the dog and move the dog in and out of the area enclosed by the X Pen, rewarding the dog while in its confines.
- Make a game out of it by tossing treats in, allowing the dog to go in and find the treats. Make sure the dog does not slip inside the X Pen and slide into one of its sides resulting in frightening the dog through making noise or even knocking the X Pen over and having a part of it fall on him.
- Place your X Pen configuration in a place with plenty of room around it so that the dog can comfortably approach, enter and exit the X Pen.
- When starting to teach a position in an X Pen configuration, toss the treat to the side where the opening is. This makes it easier for the dog to simply turn around and re-enter the X Pen without having to think about it.

- When the dog is comfortable entering and leaving the X Pen, start tossing treats in all directions around the X Pen, gradually having them fall further and further away from the opening. This is to teach the dog to move into position from any direction. The dog approaches the X pen from all directions, but once near you, the X Pen guides the dog into position so the dog learns to put himself into that position the same way every time.
- For a given position you may need to start with a very simple X Pen configuration and as the dog becomes comfortable moving in and out of it, change the configuration to hone the precision of the position.
- With some positions the dog may initially move out of position after the click to make eye contact from a position he is used to. Reinforce in correct position. Eventually he will learn to remain in position because that is where the reward will be delivered.
- With the dog in position you can click, then treat, just for him maintaining position.
- Don't introduce the position cue until the dog can attain correct position 80% of the time. Say your cue when the dog has got his treat and starts to turn around to return to position.
- Note: If the dog does not make correct position after giving the cue, DO NOT then lure the dog into position. Simply toss a treat outside the pen to reset the dog and do some more silent training.
- When you have the cue working well in one direction, turn the X Pen 90 degrees and train that position again, lowering your criteria for the change in context. Repeat, turning the X Pen 90 degrees twice more.
- Videoing the different aspects of the X Pen layout and then observing yourself and the dog you can easily see weaknesses in the training, how the dog is coping and how effective the X Pen layout is for the position you are training.

Using an X Pen to teach position is similar in concept to using square platforms for teaching position. It is not as efficient as the platforms are, because, for example you can set up 3 platforms for teaching front position and move from one platform to another. With the X Pen there is no such versatility.

For each "heel" positions the X Pen is shaped to enable the dog to approach the handler straight and stand straight "next" to the handler as dictated by the layout of the X Pen. (Here "next" implies, side, front or rear of handler.) You are only limited by your imagination and the number of X Pens you have.

To illustrate the use of the X Pen in teaching the dog a position, Face-to Back, will be used here. Position is taught *before* you start moving with the dog in the given position.




Face-to-back

Suggested cue ... *Behind, Rear*



How to train

For this, the X Pen is configured into a U-shape (V-shape can also be used) with the sides placed to form a corridor or chute via which the dog approaches and stands centred behind the handler.

		
<p>1. Set up the X Pen in a U-shape so that you can stand at the closed end and have the sides form a corridor that is longer than the dog's body length and narrow enough for the dog to stand centred behind you. Stand facing forwards.</p>	<p>2. With your hand behind your back either lure with a treat or encourage a nose touch to the hand. The dog will come into the chute, approaching centred behind you. As soon as you feel contact with your hand, click and treat.</p>	<p>3. Toss a treat outside the confines of the X Pen. Initially make it simple by tossing the treat straight out behind you, so that the dog can come straight back into the chute without having to think about how to get in.</p>

As the dog gets used to approaching you and standing straight behind you, start tossing the treat outside the X Pen around the points of a clock so that the dog learns to return, approach you straight and stand centred behind you. This needs to become muscle memory and through habituation the dog will target your back. Initially the dog will target your hand centred at your back, but eventually you will take the hand target away.

Over time remove the treat from your hand if you are using a food lure, and get the dog to just target your hand.

When the dog is comfortably approaching and standing behind you, add the cue. In this example we will use "rear". When the dog has picked up and eaten the tossed treat, as he turns to return to the X Pen say your cue. The dog will then come and stand centred behind you, click, then treat.

Over time, reduce the length of the corridor formed by the X Pen by either standing closer to the mouth of the corridor or folding the end panels. Eventually you should be able to remove the X Pen altogether and have the behaviour under stimulus control.

Finally, for "normal" positions where you can "see" the dog, you want to be able to click for eye contact in position, as opposed to looking at what your hands are doing. Once the dog understands position, withhold the click until you get the head position you want. When the dog is standing behind you, click for the dog standing with his head directed at you, or perhaps looking up at your head. Unless you have an assistant, you may need a mirror to get the timing right. This will come with practise.

Troubleshooting

The principle behind the "Using an X Pen to Teach Position" technique is the same for all orientations/positions. The panels are shaped to control the dog's environment so as to

- minimise mistakes by both handler and dog,
- maintain consistency of position every time so that
- the dog can always be rewarded in the *same* position for a given position.

If the dog will not enter the chute you have created, widen the corridor and do more desensitizing to the pen. Spend time on this because it is invaluable when the dog thinks the X Pen is a safe place. Gradually narrow the sides of the corridor until you have the width you need for training position.

If the dog freaks out by accidentally touching the X Pen or even knocking it over, you may have to start desensitization all over again, or use another technique for teaching position.

If the dog stands crooked, ie not centred, the corridor is too wide.

PROOFING

If you have been training in a particular location facing the same direction, eg North-South, change the set up to face East-West.

Once the dog will come into the cued position and give you “eye contact”, without the X Pen present, you are ready to proof the behaviour.

First practice this in a few different locations. Because of change of context you may need to do some re-training. When you re-train, lower the criteria.

For proofing Face-to-Back, the dog needs to be taught to move into that position from anywhere around the handler’s body. Note that not all moves will “look good”, this is where “transitions” come in. Here we are proofing the dog’s understanding of the Face-to Back position.

- Front to back - dog moves from front of handler to face back of handler
- Face to-back - side-passes, handler steps right or left, dog maintains position centred behind handler.
- Left to back - dog moves from left side heel position to stand face-to back
- Right to back - dog moves from right side heel position to stand face-to back
- Forwards - handler moves forwards, dog follows maintaining position
- Backwards - handler moves backwards, dog moves backwards maintaining position. This requires a verbal cue for the dog to move in sync with the handler.

Example pen layouts

back to fundamental orientations

back to start

PRINT THIS PAGE

COPYRIGHT 2015 MUSICAL DOG SPORT ASSOCIATION