

Teaching Off-Contact Flanks

Using The Box Exercise

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I do not and cannot claim ownership to this exercise. It is an exercise Bob Vest taught us.

This is my best interpretation.

This exercise is used to help a dog in doing and maintaining mentally off-contact flanks and maintaining a set distance from the stock while flanking. It is not an exercise to be used until the dog understands what a flank is and will flank smoothly toward you, behind you and past you.

This exercise is best done on good dog-broke sheep that can be settled in one place. If you have someone to help hold and settle stock all the better.

If you have a dog that needs off-contact flank work this is an excellent exercise. Depending on the dog, you want to settle stock in a larger area. For loose-eyed uprights an arena may be a good starting point. For dogs you want to get wider for AKC B course or field trials you may wish to start in about a 3-5 acre field with fencing.

The object of this exercise is for the dog to maintain a specific “distance” from the stock without turning in or encroaching on the stock while flanking.

Most dogs will flank past their handler then slice in toward the stock. The millisecond the dog goes mentally on-contact and leans, turns toward, slices in toward the stock is usually a predictably consistent distance from the handler as seen on a clock face. For instance the dog will leave the handler and slice in on its Away outrun predictably and consistently at 2 o’clock. Young dogs just learning flanks will turn into stock consistently and predictably around 6 to 8 feet away from the handler as that is where the influence/pressure as applied by the handler usually lessens.

The problem here isn’t the dog slicing but that the dog is mentally working stock on its flank. The dog is anticipating MOVING stock and starts mentally working stock, before it reaches whatever balance point you have chosen or is needed, for a proper lift. The dog then follows thought with action with the physical act of turning in or slicing toward the stock, prematurely effecting stock movement. With some dogs they need only THINK about moving stock to get a reaction from the stock but there WILL be some physical cue to show they are working stock.

This exercise is an exercise to help the dog understand to stay mentally off-contact until the handler tells the dog to orient to the stock in preparation for moving the stock. (Go mentally on-contact, which is usually achieved with a There command.)

You have been flanking your dog around stock but not requiring distance. You have your dog moving freely around stock. You have stood with the stock and asked the dog to continue to move freely around the stock in 360°+ circles. You have him Downing anywhere on the clock face. You have worked hard to teach him to flank away from you at a 90° angle. You have stood in front of him and flanked him away from you and you have called him toward you and flanked him behind you, turning into the dog as he gets close to you and asking him to continue on flanking away from you. BUT he is not flanking off-contact and may be continuing to flank all the way around stock but continues prematurely turning in or to slice or strafe stock while flanking.

It is now time to help the dog understand that he needs to maintain whatever distance you set and maintain that distance all the way around the stock; not just from 6 o'clock to 12 o'clock. But all the way around the clock face without you standing with the stock.

Imagine the stock are in a box. Each corner of the box is 10 feet away from the stock. We decide we're going to work an Away flank (counter-clockwise). You set the dog up to flank from one of the corners on the box, which is 10 feet away from the stock. You walk away from the dog in a straight line to the next corner of the box (going counter-clockwise) for an Away flank.

Before you flank the dog imagine where the next corner of the box is past your current position. That's your first goal for the dog when starting this exercise. If the dog stays outside your parameters then let him go until he turns in at whatever point on the clock face.

You face the dog and flank the dog Away, which is TOWARD and BEHIND you. After your initial command to flank (verbal with physical posture) you IMMEDIATELY RELEASE PRESSURE on the dog and you LET the dog continue on the flank without you holding pressure on the dog with your stock stick. You may follow the dog with your body but do not MAKE the dog keep his flank going. If the dog flounders as he approaches you then redirect with you body posture and stock stick but IMMEDIATELY RELEASE THE PRESSURE on the dog once he commits to continuing on with the flank.

Wherever the dog turns into the stock after passing you, DOWN the dog. This may be an arms length away, 10 feet away, 30 feet away. It is wherever the dog mentally goes on-contact with the stock causing him to physically turn in/slice in on his flank. The movement will cause the dog to step inside/encroach on that 10 foot perimeter we've established that he needs to stay outside of during his flank.

At this time you will walk past the dog to the NEXT corner and repeat the exercise. Be sure to maintain your distance from the stock. Adjust your corners as needed to maintain that distance from the stock.

You will repeat this exercise until the dog slows down nominally. When the dog shows stress and is slowing down, it is time to stop the dog with a THERE/DOWN command, which is the command used to orient the dog to the stock. It is NOT a "move stock" command. It is simply another positioning exercise BUT it orients the dog to the stock and allows him to go mentally on-contact with the stock.

You will walk up to the dog and position yourself for a Walk Up. If the dog is properly oriented to the stock with the There command and will give you a straight Walk Up without you going to the dog hen fine. But the last exercise you do is the reward to the dog for playing your game.

You WALK UP with the dog until the dog is ON-CONTACT and has turned all the sock's heads.

DOWN THE DOG.

THAT'LL DO. EXERCISE OVER.

The ending Walk Up is the reward for all the off-contact flanking you did with the dog. You have allowed him to move stock, which is what he wants to do and why he originally was on-contact during his flank.

You are now patterning a behavior in the dog so that reward is ONLY received AFTER the off-contact work.

The distance you walk away from your dog is not set in stone. If the dog cannot achieve a flank toward you for more than 5 feet then walk only 5 feet before stopping and commencing the exercise. You should be able to flank TOWARD yourself with relative ease, as that is part of what should have been taught during the beginning phases of training you dog.

This exercise should not be drilled ad nauseam. The dog's energy level determines the length of time to train; not whether or not you feel you have had complete success.

You drill the flank but the reward is received in the Walk Up and the dog moving heads.

For upright loose-eyed dogs that just "don't get it" for big, wide flanks, this exercise helps them see the reward in altering their behavior to accommodate the handler and maintain distance from the stock.

Once the dog gives you a 10 foot perimeter around stock you try for 20 feet; then 30 feet; then more. Try not to leap ahead in distance from stock but go by increments so that the dog wholly understands that whatever distance you set should be maintained.

Notice there are no THERE commands in this exercise UNTIL you are through and going to Walk Up the dog. The There command is counterproductive to what you are asking of the dog. STAY OFF CONTACT WHILE FLANKING. If you say THERE every time you down the dog you are giving them a reward for NOT staying off-contact.

Bottom line, we are trying to eliminate self-rewarding behavior that makes working livestock harder. We want to create a soft minded dog.

Once the dog maintains whatever distance you set off stock you can add an Out to the exercise. You can Out the dog to whatever distance you want the do to flank off stock. I the above exercise has been taught until absolute understanding in the dog you can use the Here and Out commands like a steering wheel for positioning of the dog.

Patisms

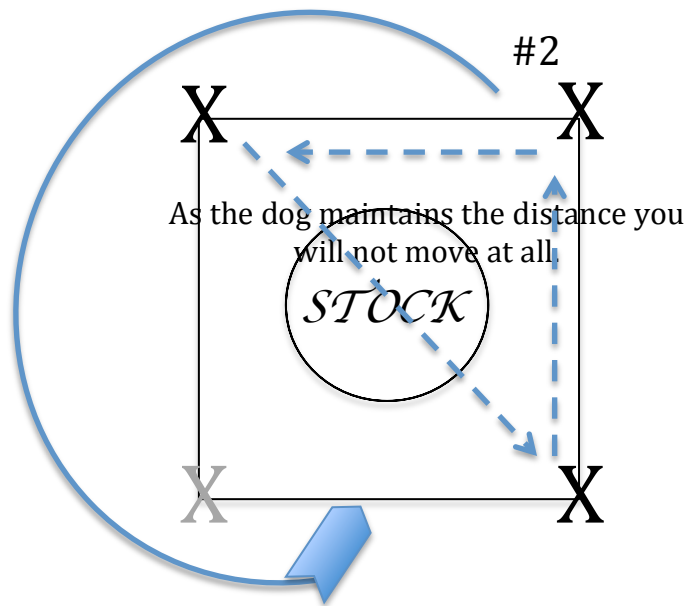
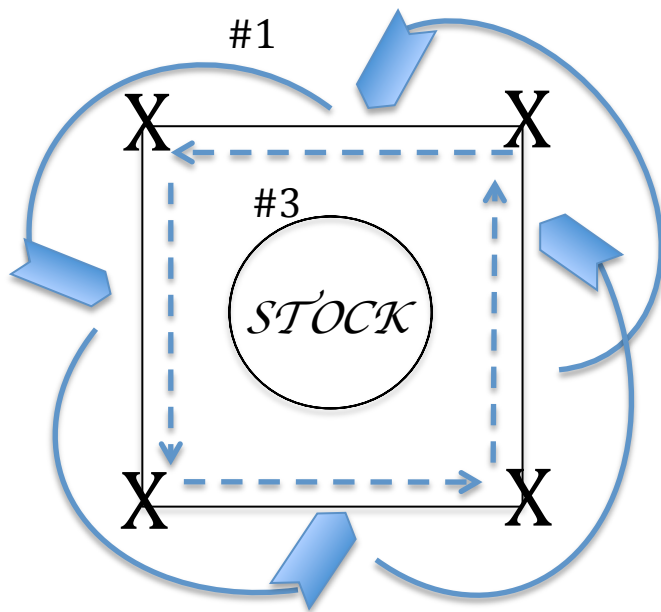
- *Time spent training is not the answer to a well-trained dog; it's the quality of understanding in the time spent.*
 - Modification of technique per the need of the dog is the key to success.
 - Intensity in the handler during training builds intensity in the dog while working.

DIAGRAMS for The Box Exercise

- Intensity in the handler
- Intensity does NOT translate

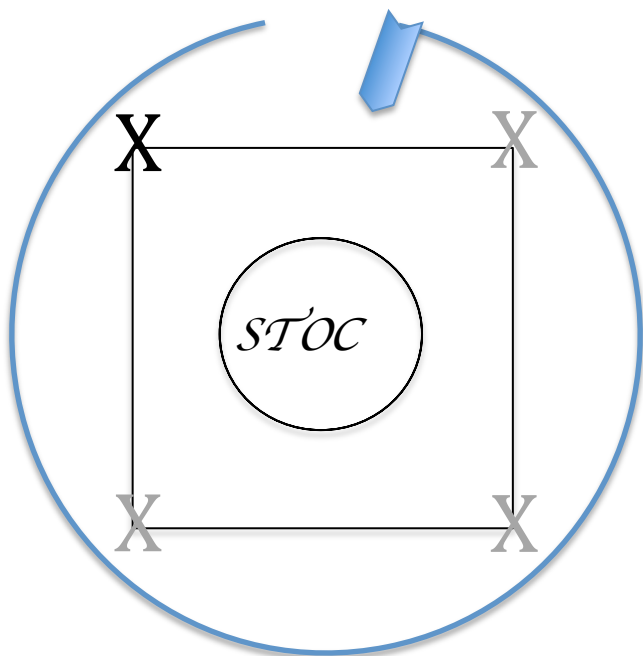
equates to intensity in the dog.
into cheerleading a dog to keep them

working.



This may be how the exercise looks at first.

As the
dog progresses you will be able to leave a corner out
as the dog stays off the stock for a greater distance.



When the dog freely flanks all the way around the stock, stopping anywhere on the clock face, you are ready to use the Out command to set your distance from the sheep.

The commands Out and Here are your steerage for your flanks. But don't bastardize those commands by combining them with a flank command. Use them