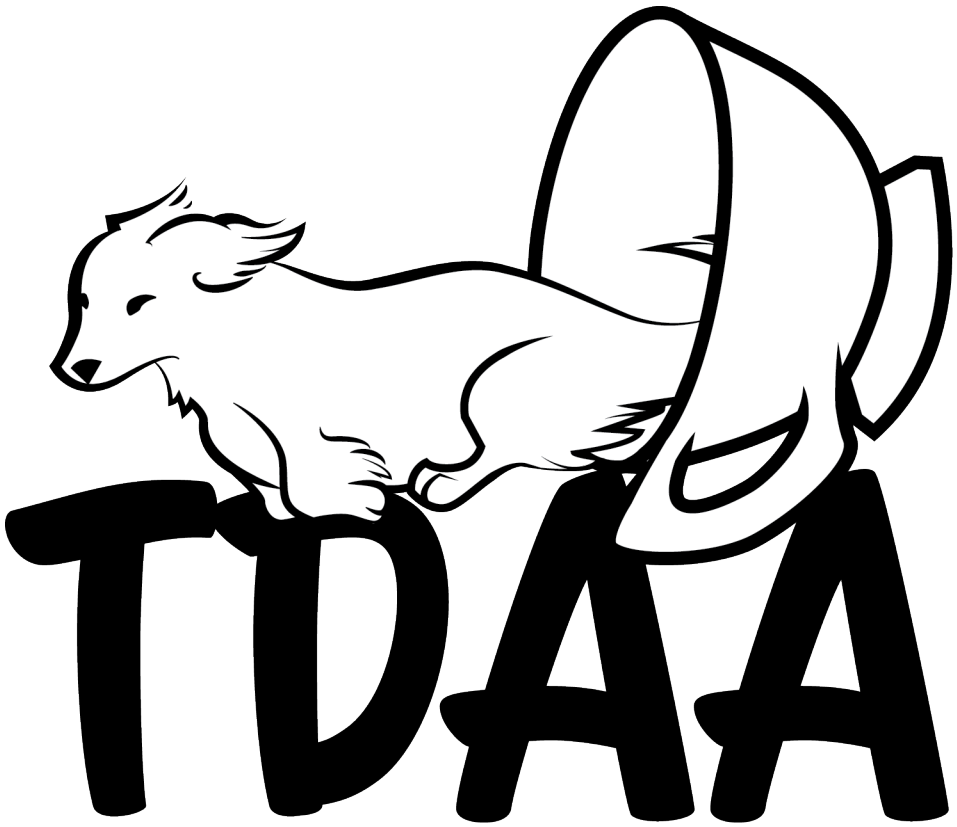


TEACUP DOGS
AGILITY ASSOCIATION

Course
Design
Guidelines

v 2.0 – February 2023

Course Design Guidelines for the TDAA

This document presents guidelines for TDAA course designers that exemplify the key characteristics of the TDAA's philosophy in recognition of the size of the dogs and the recommended equipment sizes. These guidelines are just that: guidelines. The goal is to attain a level of consistency in the challenges presented to handlers and their dogs when faced with courses developed by different judges, in different locations, while ensuring that the dog's safety continues to be of paramount importance.

The TDAA focus on dogs of smaller stature, by design, results in shorter transitions, tighter turns and more rapid handler decisions. This document provides support to our judges when considering spacing between obstacles, and develops working definitions for the kinds of challenges that are appropriate for each level of competition in the TDAA.

The tighter courses may discourage handlers who compete in other agility organizations, as the challenges presented are different in a number of respects, and may require a different approach to handling, timing, and strategizing.

Appropriate Class Challenges

The TDAA has no firm rule that says certain challenges, in any given number, must appear on course for the three levels of play, beyond the requirements listed in the Rules and Regulations for Standard courses. Having said that, there is a clear understanding that the difficulty of handling and performance escalates as the dog progresses. Further, at Superior and Games III level, the expectation is that the challenges will require substantial skill and training. This encourages our judges to design challenges that they've seen and apply them in course design without feeling obligated to force any particular challenge.

A good course will include one or two key challenges and will typically incorporate sections where speed is the focus, as well as areas where handling is more important. Over the course of a trial, designing the courses to emphasize various challenges is part of the fun of course design, and makes for a trial that engages the dogs and their handlers. The judge should use their experience to provide challenges appropriate to the level of the dogs competing.

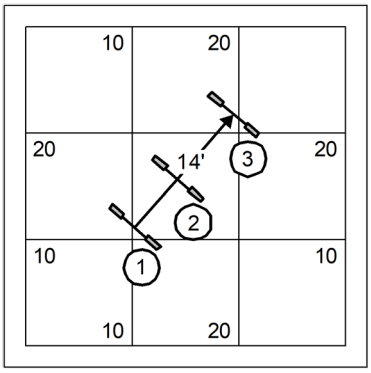
Typically, it is a good idea to design for flow. This means that the course should allow the dog to get up to full speed without having to start and stop frequently. Flow breakers include: technical obstacles (contacts, and weaves); the table; and turns (mindful that the degree of turn has an inversely proportional relationship to the break in flow).

Challenge	Beginner	Intermediate	Superior
Tunnels under Contact Obstacles	No	OK	OK
Discrimination Challenges	Minimal	1 - 2	1 - 3
Angled Approaches	90^{o} or less	OK	OK

180º Turns	Rarely	OK	OK
270º Turns	No	Rarely	OK
Back-Side Approaches	No	Rarely	OK
Turning to the Dog (Front Cross)	OK	OK	OK
Side Changes to Dog	0 - 2	1 - 3	2 – 4+
Dummy Obstacles	No	Rarely	Rarely
Wrong Course Options	Rarely	OK	OK
Number of Obstacles in Standard Course	12-15	14-18	17-20

The challenges for progressively higher level classes are expected to require the team to demonstrate increasingly extensive experience and handling.

Distance between Obstacles

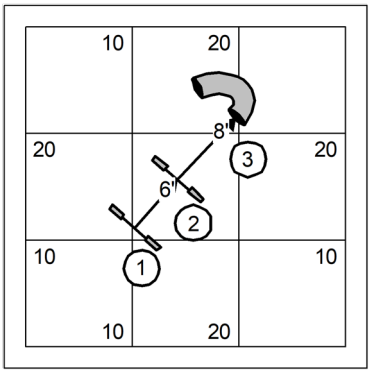


It is acceptable in a straight-away series of jumps to have an average transitional distance between obstacles in the range of 8′. This actually encourages some of the big dogs in the TDAA (the 12″ and 16″ dogs) to *bounce* between performances of jumps.

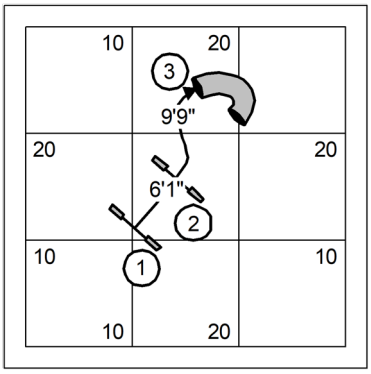
The 12′ Rule (minimum)

There are certain challenges which require a minimum approach of 12′. The list of challenges requiring a 12′ minimum includes the following:

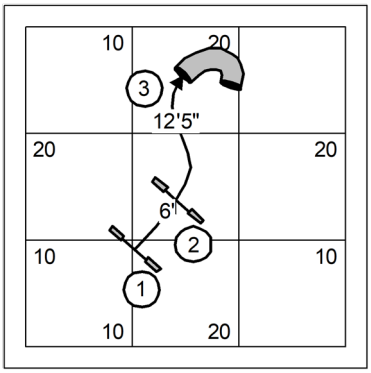
- Shaped approach to a contact obstacle, or the weave poles (8' to 10' if perfectly square)
- From the down ramp of the A-frame and dogwalk to the next obstacle
- A transition between obstacles that requires a turn of 90º or more (and a turn of *any* degree deserves a transitional distance above the minimum)
- An option such as obstacle discrimination
- A tunnel exit, regardless of the next obstacle



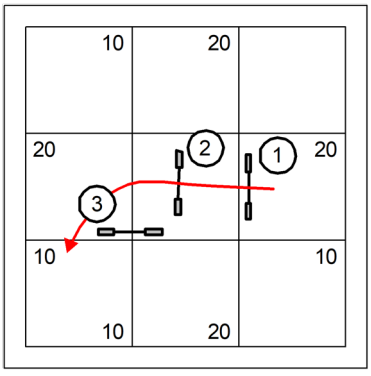
It would be permissible in this sequence to present the terminal obstacle in the line as a tunnel or a contact obstacle, so long as the approach is square.



It is unfair to the dog to present a wrong-course option and give only 8′ for the handler to effect the turn away from that option, as shown in this picture. While the measured distance to the opposite side entry to the pipe tunnel might be only about 10′, the option presented to the dog was a short 8′.

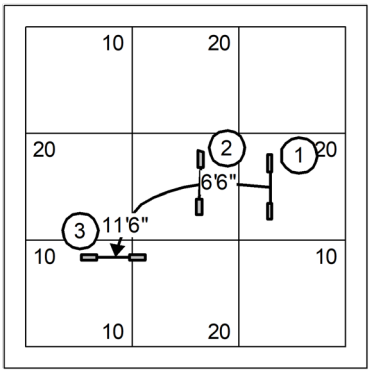


The opposite side pipe tunnel entry is fixed by giving at *least* 12′ for the handler to solve the change of directions.

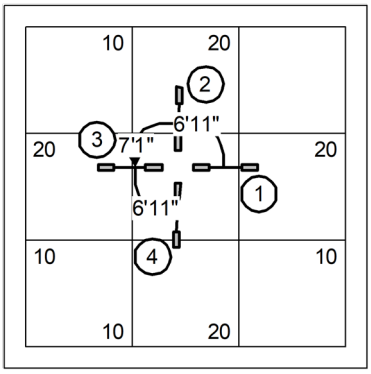


Turning Radius

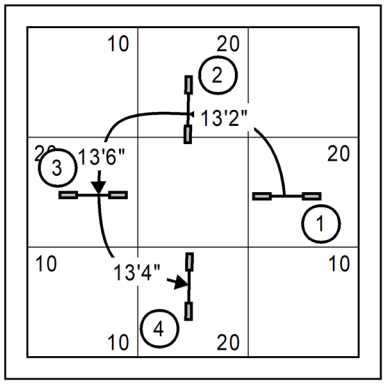
This drawing indicates what happens to a faster and long-striding dog when not enough room has been given to make the turn. The spacing of jump #3 clearly needs to be modified to allow the dog to make the turn safely.



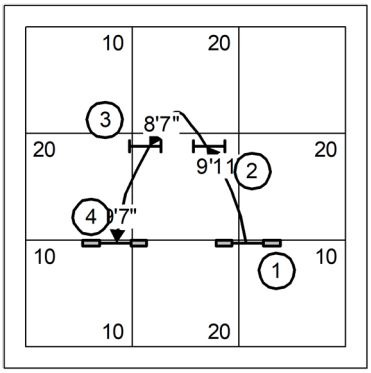
When the dog is required to turn after an obstacle, we should add about 1% in distance for every 2º of turn. If the average distance between obstacles in a straight line is 8', then in a 90º turn the distance should be a minimum of 12′.



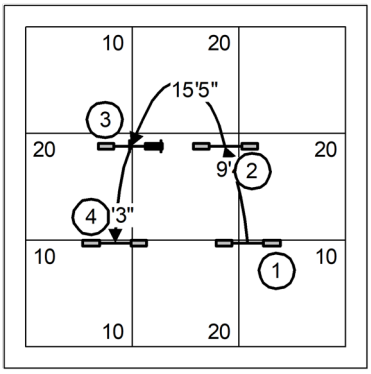
The implications for providing enough room for a dog's turning radius are important. Pinwheels must be spaced to accommodate the size of all the dogs that may run the course.



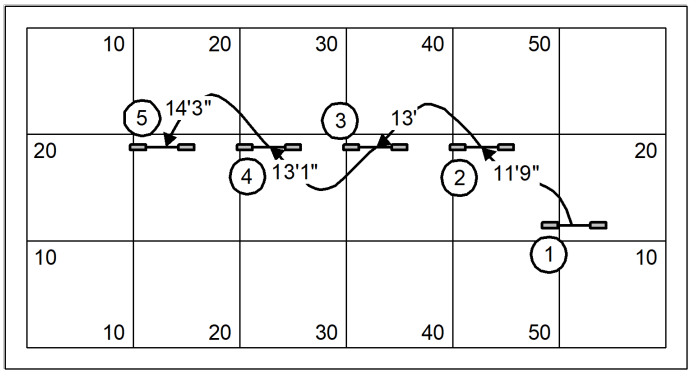
The pinwheel needs to be expanded giving the dog adequate room to turn, and, giving the handler a bit of operating room in and about the jumps.



The simple 180º also requires adequate room for the dog's turning radius. While it looks like the handler has room to step between the jumps, the dog is apt to overrun the jump if moving with any speed.



Adding wings to the jumps provides room for the handler to move between them, and the turning radius for the dog is opened up considerably.



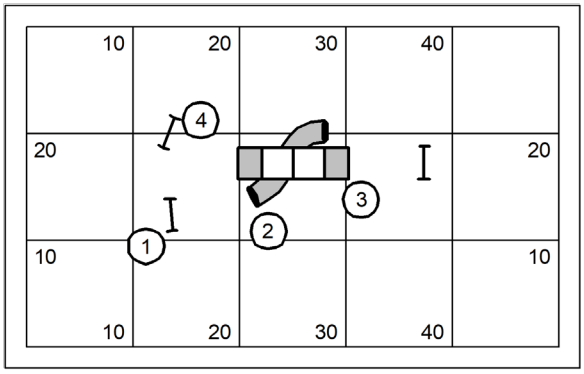
If we apply the same approach to a serpentine of jumps, the course designer should provide about 9′ to 10′ from center of jump to center of jump. Note that with 18″ wings on the jumps this leaves enough room for the handler. But again, where we tend to lose focus on the proper spacing between jumps is when we aren't using winged hurdles. To provide the proper spacing, course designers are to use wing jumps; space is still provided for the handler to move in and out of the jumps.

Wing Jumps

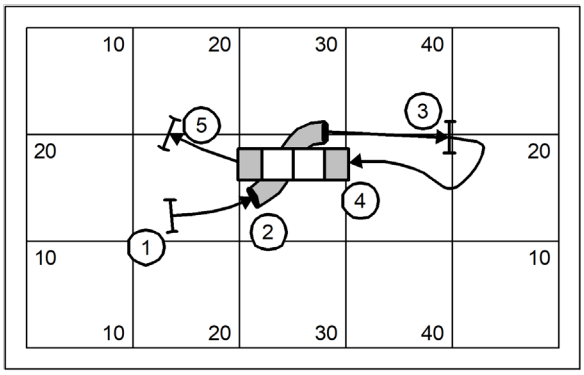
As demonstrated above, when the course design provides a serpentine, pinwheel or backside jump as one of its elements, the TDAA's perspective is that wing jumps provide better visual cues and clearer spacing for the dog, thereby providing better obstacle spacing and enhancing the safety of the course.

Square Approaches

In the standard classes it is the handler's job to square up the approaches to obstacles so that performance is safe and fair to the dog. The course designer should ensure their course provides adequate space and opportunity for the handler to do so. Those obstacles that *require* a square approach include any contact obstacle and the tire.



The sequence above would not be allowed at any level. The flow violates a specific rule of the *option* (discussed previously). The dog should be given a minimum of 12′ for the turn in the presence of an option. Further, the short transition between the pipe tunnel and the A-frame actually encourages the handler to give the dog inadequate room to make the turn.

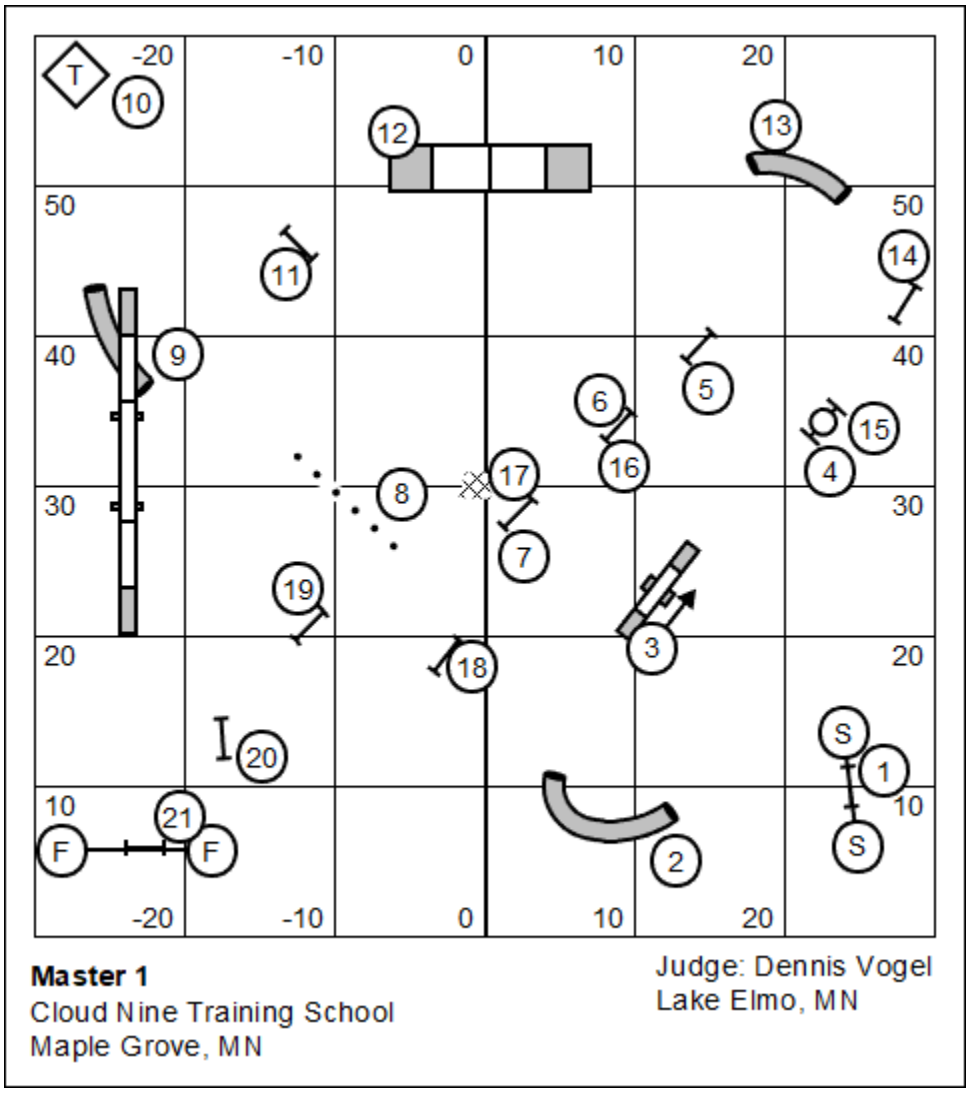


This problem could be solved by pushing the dummy jump back 6′ or so from its location. Or, simply include the jump in the sequence to bring the dog back squarely to the A-frame, as shown above. Note that the jump has been shifted slightly to square up for the exit from the pipe tunnel and still provide about 12′ for the approach to the jump.

While the course designer should create square approaches to obstacles in a standard course, the square approach is problematic in a dog's choice game (in which the dog can be directed to the obstacle of the handler's choosing). It might be worthwhile during any dog's choice games to include in your briefing a warning that the handler is the architect of the dog's path given any approach to a contact obstacle.

A Simple Checklist for Course Design

Presented here is a course that is flawed on many levels. We will look at what happens to the course in the review process using the *simple checklist for course design*.



Required Obstacles

A Superior Standard course allows no more than 20 obstacles so one obstacle needs to be removed. Also, this course is missing the dogwalk, which is required.

While the tire is a required obstacle, it should not be used more than once in a course.

Square/Safe Obstacle Approach and Dismount

There are a number of safety issues on this course that need to be addressed:

- A *minimum* of 10’ is required on the approach to the first obstacle and on the dismount of the last (both are issues on this course).
- A *minimum* of 10’ is required on the landing side of any jump to avoid running into any ring boundary or into the “side” of any obstacle. On this course not enough room is given to the dog after jump #7 (running into the center pole of the venue); on the landing side of jump #14 (running into the ring boundary); the approach for jump #17 (running into the ring boundary); or the landing for jump #17 (the teeter).

- The approach to the A-frame is not square/safe. The #11 jump placement constrains the approach so that the handler cannot shape an approach safely.
- The table should be rotated to present a flat side for the dog's approach. Additionally, it needs to be moved away from the ring barrier.
- The approach to the tire (in either of its uses) is not square/safe. The tire should be moved so the square/safe approach is implicit (in addition to the previous comment that the tire should only be used once as an obstacle in a standard course).

Spacing Between Obstacles

TDAA guidelines specify a distance of 8' to 10' in the straight-away and a *minimum* of 12' approach to a technical challenge or to accommodate a dog's turning radius. On this course not enough room is left in the transition to the weaves after jump #7, or between jumps #20 and #21 for the dog to turn. Further, a *minimum* of 12' should be given to the handler to avoid the wrong course option after tire #15 (jump #5), after jump #17 (the teeter), and after jump #18 (the weaves and the approach to jump #19 as a backside).

As a guideline, the maximum amount of distance between obstacles should be limited to 15'. Longer distances are only acceptable in very specific, limited circumstances. In this course the spacing between the table and jump #11 should be reduced.

Timekeeper's View of Start & Finish

When submitting a course for review, if the Start and Finish obstacles or lines are not clear, lines should be drawn to provide the handlers and Timekeeper with a clear understanding of both.

Judge's Path

While we don't require (or want) the judge's path drawn on review courses the course reviewer will analyze the course to determine if the judge can see all of the contact obstacle performances and have a clear view of the table when counting.

Presentation

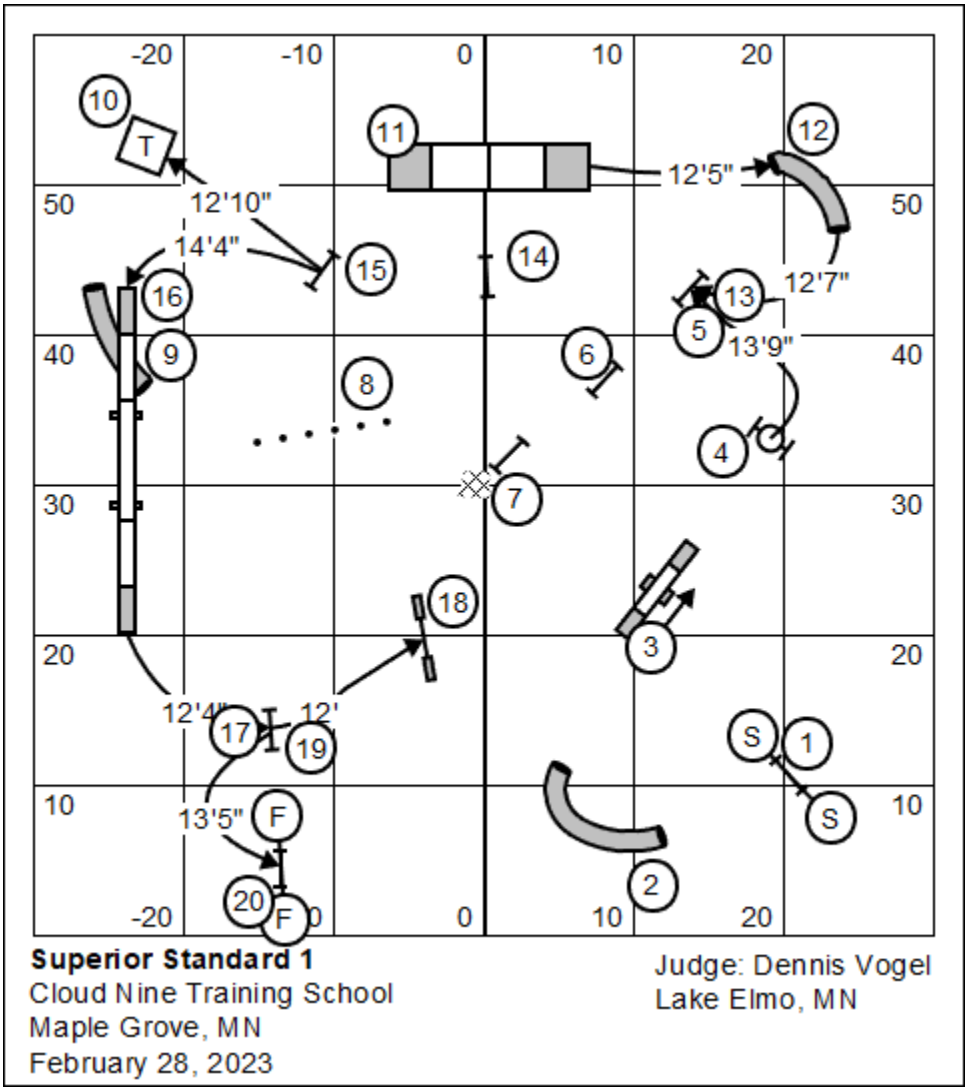
Qualitative factors that should be considered in addition to the more technical aspects of course design include aesthetic and practical design considerations. Some areas of focus to consider:

- Balance the course in the available space ~ the obstacles should utilize the available space effectively.
- Most courses with a table will benefit from having it appear in middle "third" of the course, to allow the dog an opportunity to have a flow at beginning and ending.
- Jumps that do not have a reasonably straight entrance and/or exit should be predominately winged. Wings heighten the visual acuity of a jump and should be used wherever possible to make the jump distinct as an aid to the handler. In particular, if the jump is a backside, part of a serpentine, or a threadle, wings should be used. An exception to this is if a space is too small; then the course designer may forego the use of wings to allocate more real estate for movement.

In the course above, at a minimum, jump #19 requires wings as a backside approach.

- The measurements on the course map should match the host club's numbering whenever possible.
- Provide the name and number, where appropriate that identifies the course in the context of the trial and trial premium. Course ID information should be presented in a border. Please note that this course is incorrectly labeled. It should be *Superior Standard*. The Course ID information should be robust and include the name of the class, the name of the host club, maybe the location/geography, date of the event, the judge's name, and maybe the judge's hometown.
- Orient the course so that entry/exit and start/finish are at the bottom of the course map.
- Number your course neatly. A course map where the numbers are not placed properly can cause substantial confusion, both for the handlers and the course builders.

The Revised Course



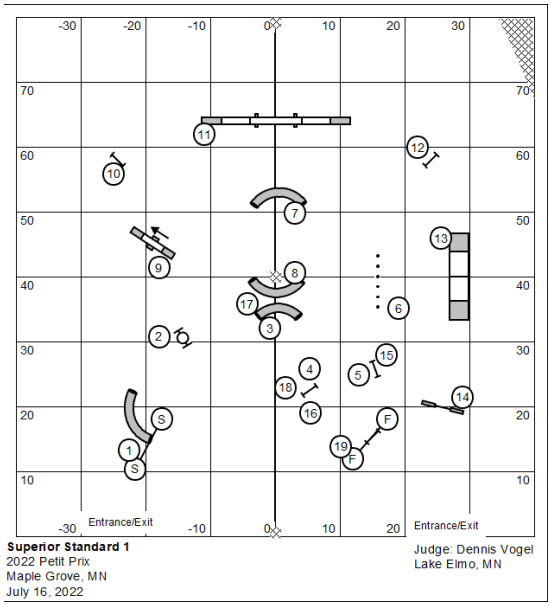
Nesting Courses

TDAA's expansive focus on games makes the nesting of courses even more important. The trial will be more efficient if the course designer nests their courses in such a way that the movement of equipment is kept to a minimum.

The ultimate nesting is where courses for different levels are run on a set-up that is not altered or changed in any way except for placement of the numbering cones.

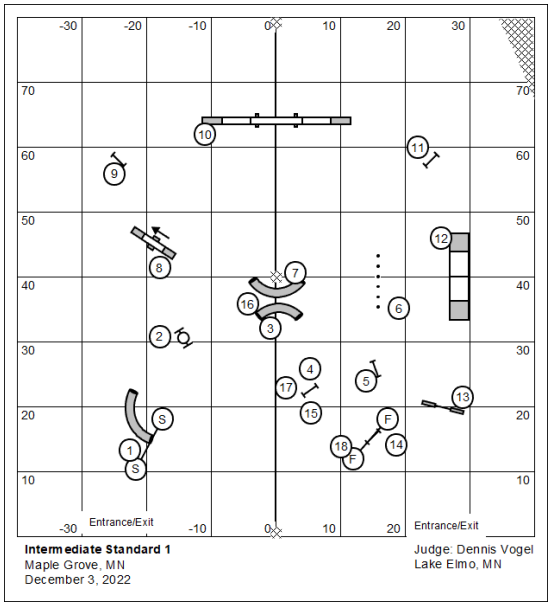
Nesting is helpful for the judge of a small trial where the time spent in setting up the different courses might outweigh the time spent by dogs running the courses if the course has to be rebuilt for every event.

Attached are a suite of courses including a standard course for three levels, and then a gamblers course for three levels.



Superior Standard 1
2022 Petit Prix
Maple Grove, MN
July 16, 2022

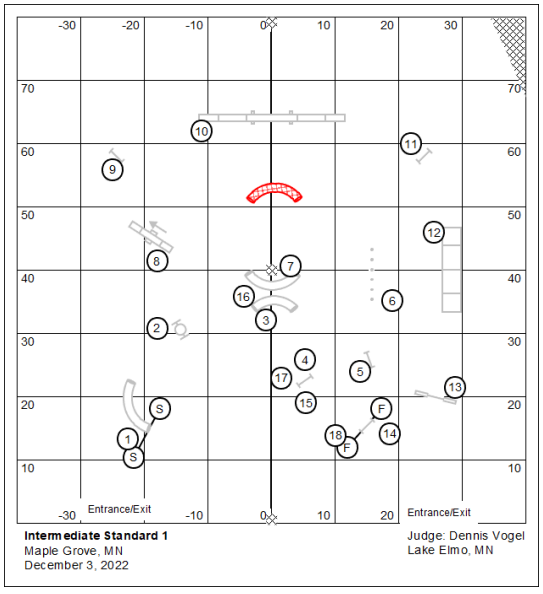
Judge: Dennis Vogel
Lake Elmo, MN



Intermediate Standard 1
Maple Grove, MN
December 3, 2022

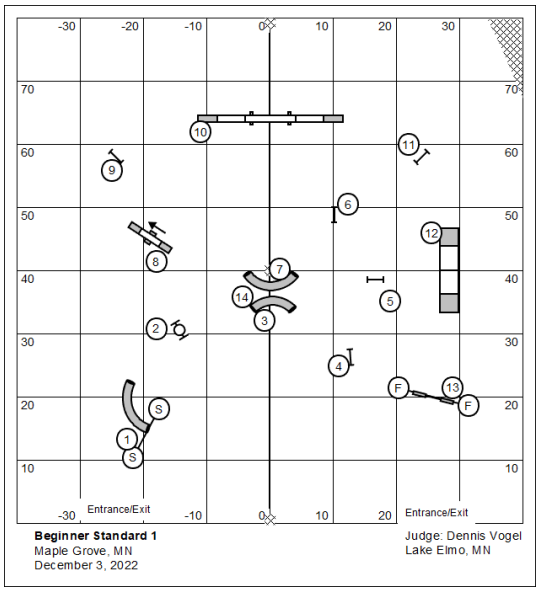
Judge: Dennis Vogel
Lake Elmo, MN

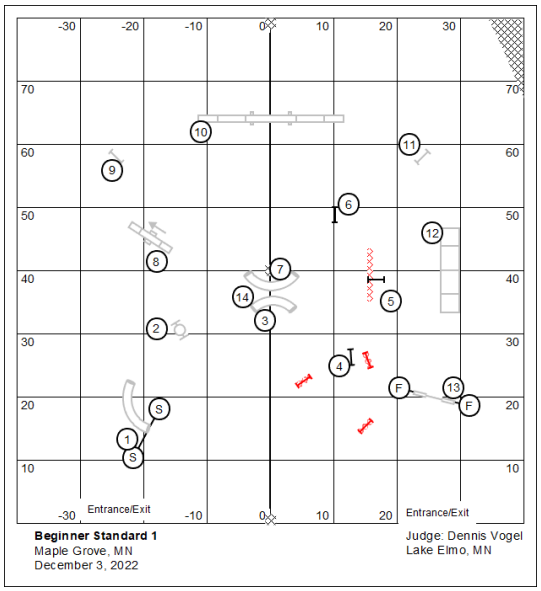
Clean Run's Course Designer software provides functionality that highlights changes between courses, which is beneficial when determining which obstacles need to be moved when changing courses, as shown here and on the next page.



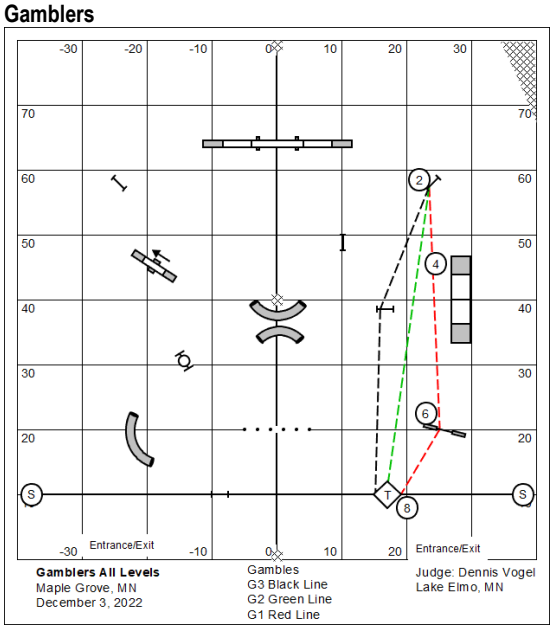
Intermediate Standard 1
Maple Grove, MN
December 3, 2022

Judge: Dennis Vogel
Lake Elmo, MN





Gamblers



Designing Games for the TDAA

Other agility organizations have a specific suite of games that they play. This allows them to understand their games completely and rigidly define the variations of rules that might be allowed. The exhibitor also tends to become comfortable and familiar with the games and will need little in the way of briefing or introduction.

This is one of the differentiating factors for the TDAA, which allows a broad variety of games, in addition to multiple variations of most of them, to be played for titling purposes. This requires that our handlers become skillful at quickly grasping the nature and definition of the game.

The judge must plan the game courses and briefings to comprehensively prepare the game so it works well for a variety of handlers at all experience levels.

Here is a checklist that will help you consider every angle and nuance of your game[1]:

1. What is the objective of the game?
2. What is the scoring basis of the game (Time + Faults, etc.)?
3. What is required to qualify at each level?
4. How does time start?
5. How does time stop?
6. How much time is allowed for the game?
7. Are there any penalties based on one's final time (other than using time for placements)?
8. Can any penalties be incurred when trying to stop time?
9. What are the point values for each obstacle?
10. Are there any bonuses that can be earned? Are they optional or required?
11. How many times can each obstacle be performed?
12. Can the obstacles be performed back-to-back?
13. Are there any obstacles that have a special point value or property? Are there any consequences if they are faulted?
14. What faults can a team incur?
15. Will the *standard* of performance of obstacles be different in this games class than it is on a standard course. (e.g., faults in the weave poles might not be called for GIII players as they are called for Superior players.)
16. Will jump bars be reset?
17. Is the finish line/table live for the entire game?
18. If a table, is there any required table performance?
19. For Games I, how will refusals be addressed? Explain what the handler should do if a dog were to attempt a contact obstacle with all four paws and then leave the obstacle before completing it.
20. For Games II and Games III, how will standard faults (refusals and weave pole faults) be judged?
21. What should be indicated on the course map that is pertinent to the game? This might include:
    a) Any containment lines
    b) Start & finish lines or obstacles
    c) Numbered sequences
22. Where will the time-keeper and scribe be located without being a distraction to the dog?
23. When should a dog and handler enter the ring to set up while a dog and handler are on course?
24. Which ER Code is necessary to score and qualify in the Game, as designed.

---

[1] Thanks go to Becky Dean and Donni Breaden for the development and submission of this list.

Documentation of a TDAA Game

A game should be well documented in advance of the trial event. This shows the course reviewer that you have a good grasp of the game. Or, at the very least, allows the course reviewer to help you get a good grasp of the game.

The handler should be able to understand how the game is played and develop a strategy from the briefing. If a concise written briefing of the game play is provided, they should be able to grasp the strategy well enough to be able to attend an oral briefing and ask pertinent questions, and commence course walking.

Following are the key elements of well-prepared briefings:

Course Map

As much as possible the layout of obstacles on the field should match the layout of obstacles on the course map. If there are bonus obstacles, containment lines, set sequences, start and finish lines or obstacles, these should all be indicated on the course map.

TDAA does not want the course maps to indicate dog's path, handler's path, judge's path, or even the location of the time-keeper and scribe, although these latter two items may be optionally provided.

Exhibitor Briefing

In the exhibitor briefing, exhibitors should hear what it is they have to do as clearly and concisely as possible. The written exhibitor briefing should reflect the oral exhibitor briefing in precise detail. A written briefing should include the following four sections:

1. Objective of the game (for example: score as many points as possible in the time allotted, including ER Code)
2. How the game is played (for example: how to score points)
3. What is required to qualify for each level of play
4. Where the game starts and finishes

At the trial itself, during the oral briefing, you should call for questions and be prepared to answer them. Don't be too hasty in answering if it is something that you haven't considered. Consider how your answer influences the play of the game and whether it limits strategies; or maybe even whether it complicates the life of the scorekeeper.

Avoiding Common Errors in Course Design for Games

It's the little things that get you in games design, to be sure. Here's a short list of pitfalls to be avoided.

Games Variations – Variations of games submitted by judges are subject to the course review process.

The first rule of any variation is that it should add interest or a unique twist to the game. A good example of this is the "cuckoo" variation of Beat the Clock. After finishing the routine business of the four clockface sequences the handler may attempt a double-or-nothing challenge by declaring "cuckoo", prior to performing an obstacle (usually the

tire) and getting the dog across the finish line. If the dog makes it to the finish before time expires, all accumulated points are doubled. If they fail to do so, all accumulated points are lost.

The game designer should understand that many players in the TDAA have played a lot of games and have an understanding of how many of those games are played. So the judge should avoid twisting the rules around "just because." You'll note that in the example above, the variation in no way disrupted the handler's understanding of the basic game but added an interesting challenge that extends from already existing rules.

The judge must be a good student of the game and take the extra effort required to investigate how a game is played, how it is scored, how time starts and ends, and what might be the standards for a qualifying score. TDAA judges understand that they have a certain amount of liberty in creating new games and establishing variations of games. But the variation should add substance to the game, not just arbitrary differences or complexity.

Missed Opportunities for Nested Courses – It is often unnecessary to create a completely new course set up for every level of play (GI, GII, and GIII). For example, a Dare to Double course, a Snooker course, and a Gamblers course might be the same for all levels. To differentiate between levels you might simply adjust the number of points that a dog needs to score, change the distance to containment lines, or adjust the Standard Course Time for different levels. If a games course is perfectly nested for levels you might need only one course map for all exhibitors. Remember to indicate differences between levels on the single course map as much as possible.

Spacing Between Obstacles – TDAA judges tend to have a pretty clear grasp on the spacing between obstacles in a standard course. However, that understanding is often lost in the design of a game as judges are inclined to put *too much* distance between obstacles.

Keeping Flows Safe and Fair – While it's difficult to always predict the path a handler will give his dog in a game (particularly in "dog's choice" games); you should set up possibilities of flows that keep things safe, particularly on the approaches to contact obstacles and the tire. An easy way to work through this is to use your Course Design software to trace through the various possible solutions to a strategy on course. Use this intelligence to create square and safe approaches to problem obstacles wherever possible.

Timekeeper Not Adequately Briefed – It can come as a shock to the judge to find that an entire class has been mistimed or scored incorrectly because the timekeeper didn't have the right information. For example, if you tell the timekeeper that the dog has 60 seconds to score points and to blow a whistle… you might very well find that every dog's time was recorded at 60 seconds; and with time being a tie-breaker, you have something of a conundrum.

On the other hand if you tell the timekeeper to stop the time when the dog (for example) gets to the table or finish line you might find that the timekeeper won't bother to blow the whistle at all. This gives the dog spending 90 seconds on a 60 second course a serious advantage over the dog who spends 62 seconds, on a 60 second course.

Unforeseen Allowances – Sometimes we will allow something in a games class that we

would never allow in a standard class. A very good example of this might be in a dog's choice game and a case of contact with the handler that benefits the dog. Let's say the handler is making the approach to the dogwalk and comes in contact with the dog in such a manner that the performance is enhanced.

If the judge has not established the basis from which to call a fault (there are no faults in Gamblers, for example) an unexpected situation like this is difficult to address in the moment. A proper response might be to disallow any points resulting from the contact, or alternatively to apply the same faults that would be assessed in a standard run. This, however, should be briefed to the exhibitor (see below for "Failure to Brief").

Failure to Brief – Whenever possible, we need to avoid ad hoc scoring and rules decisions during the conduct of a class. Given the old maxim, "whatever can happen, will," the judge is often faced with making a decision as to how to deal with a specific dilemma at the moment the issue arises.

A good example is failing to brief a class about your view of contact refusals. If in a dog's choice game a dog gets on the A-frame and then comes back off the ascent, the handler might very well feel justified in attempting the obstacle again. On the other hand, if you've decided to allow retries on the contact obstacles, and failed to brief that concept, the handler might pass up on the retry.

Providing for Ample Embark and Dismount Options – In any game in which the handler has the option to direct the dog to obstacles of his own choosing (rather than follow the numbers) the design should give the dog at least several choices for embarking on their strategy; and a variety of choices for the dismount.

Options might be limited by: specifying or limiting the beginning or finishing obstacles; declaring obstacles one-directional; or using naturally one-directional obstacles near the start or finish.