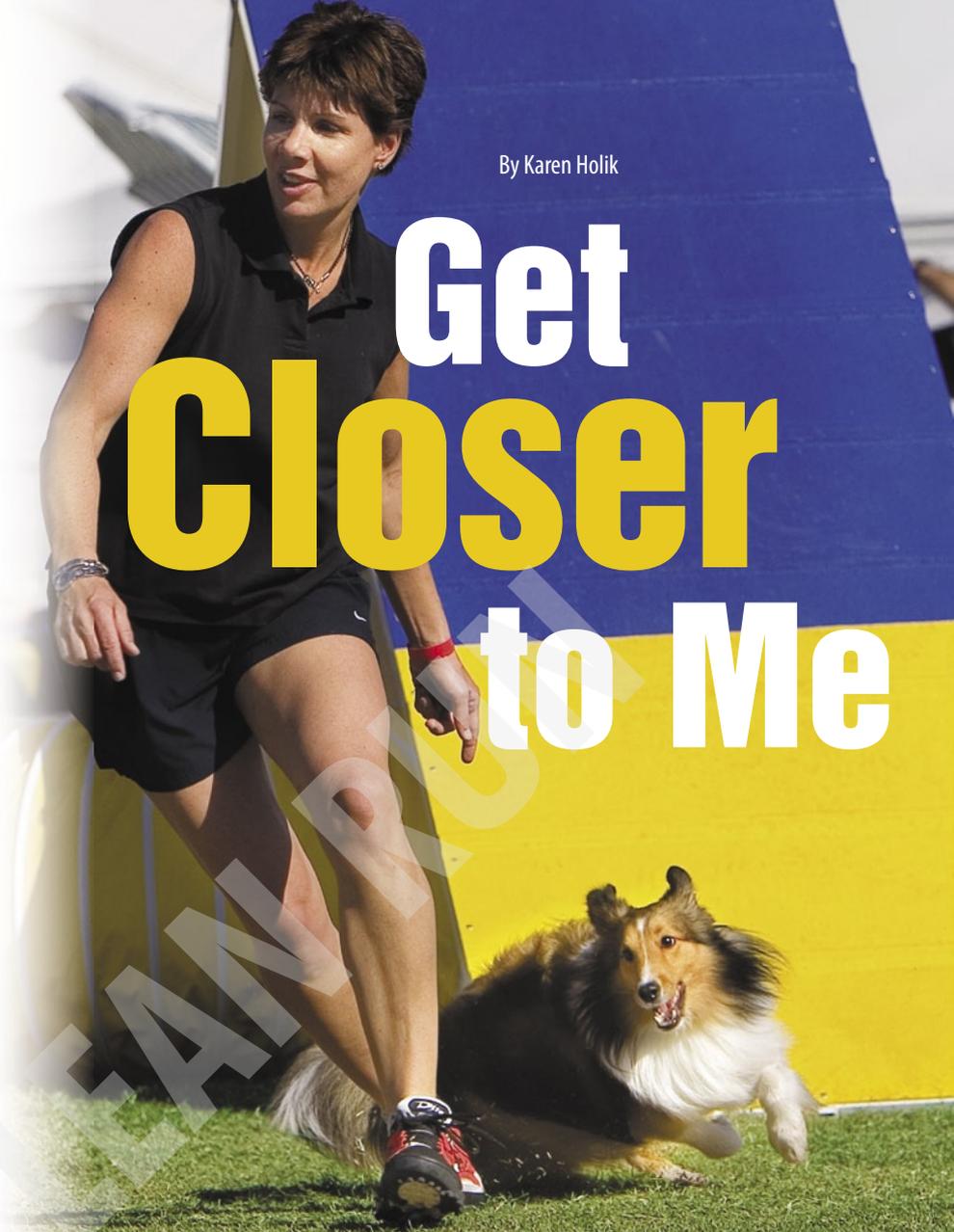


By Karen Holik

Get Closer to Me

I can tell my dog in several ways to come in close to my side (or move farther away). One is my verbal command, which would be *Here* if I want him on my left side and *Side* if I want him on my right. My body cue is to have my hand down at my side with the corresponding shoulder dropped slightly. I should be able to call my dog to work close and stay there until released both when I am stationary and when I am moving.



To Begin, the Parameters

I start my close work when my dogs are very young. I find it is easier to teach a puppy to work close than trying to teach an older dog that is patterned to work further away.

To begin, my dog must have a clear understanding of where I want him to be. When I say *Here* or *Side*, I expect my dog to come in to my left (or right) side with his shoulder at my knee and his body parallel to mine as shown in **Figure 1**. I expect him to stay there until released to an obstacle or to stay in close while we are moving (regardless of which direction we are going). If I want him on my left side

I say *Here*, drop my left shoulder, and keep my left hand at my side. If I want him on my right side I say *Side*, drop my right shoulder, and make sure my right hand is kept to my side.



Coming to Your Left Side

When I am training a puppy, I use a leash to ensure success. I also use my clicker and treats.

Step 1

I start by luring my dog a few times with a treat in my hand. I bring my hand slightly behind me, and while dropping my inside shoulder, lure him into a position at my side as seen in **Figure 2**. When he is in the proper position, I click and treat my dog. Again, the position I am looking for is at my side, his shoulder to my knee and his body parallel to mine. I do this a few times to show my dog what is expected of him.



Step 2

Then I start to lure him into position with my hand (without the food). If he is successful, then I click and treat. Remember, I use the same

body language that I would use on the course or when setting up at the start line. Move your hand slightly behind you to bring him into position. Remember to also treat your dog for staying in this position.

Step 3

Once my dog has mastered that, I start to fade the lure of my hand going all the way behind my body. I just motion with my hand slightly and drop my shoulder. Then I click and treat for proper position.

Step 4

Once on the agility field, you want your dog to wait for a signal to go on ahead or one to tell him that you are turning into him or wrapping him around your leg. You want your dog to learn from the beginning to wait for another command. I always release with a verbal *O.K.* at this point in training.

Step 5

Progress to off-leash work.

Helpful Hints

- I use treats to teach the behavior and toys when I need to give the dog a break. Take frequent breaks to throw a toy or just play a good game of tug. I often drape a leash around my dog's neck (rather than clipping it to his collar) so that he can't get away, but the leash isn't directing him where to go. If the dog is doing well, I will release with my verbal *O.K.* and let him have a good game of tug with the leash.
- I work a lot with my puppies close to the ring at an agility trial when they are still too young to enter. This way, with the dog on leash, I won't get into trouble; my dog is getting great training near the ring and also gets to play with his leash. This activity accustoms your dog to working in close when you walk to the start line or when you are waiting your turn near the ring.

Adding Movement

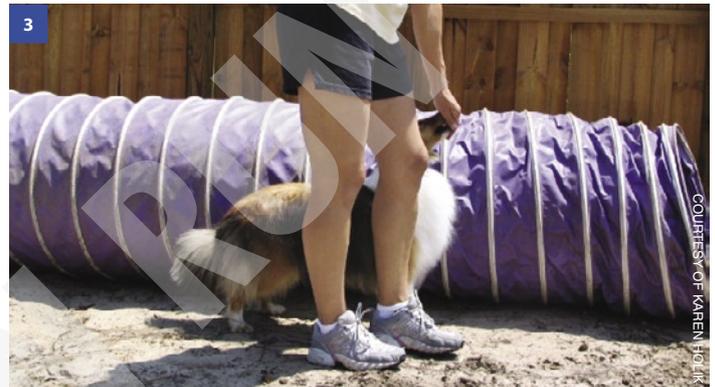
Now that your dog has mastered coming to your side on your *Here* command when he's off leash, you can start to add movement.

I start moving slowly forward and say *Here*. Does your dog stay with you? If so, click and treat. Then move slowly forward again and reward if successful. If your dog does not stay parallel to your body and at your side, you can do this exercise up against a wall (with your dog between you and the wall) or

you can also use an open tunnel that is set in a straight line to ensure that your dog stays next to you as shown in **Figure 3**.

Helpful Hints

- Again, take frequent breaks to throw a toy or just play a good game of tug.
- If your dog is not used to staying at your side, and he forges ahead or turns to look at you, this training could take weeks and even months. Remember to raise the criteria very slowly and also to reward often for success.



Adding Turns

Now, we are ready to add some turns. It is easiest if you put a straight line down on the ground or use some jump bars to have a visual aid so you are not moving in an oval instead of a straight line. Sometimes we tend to compensate for the dog not coming into our side by moving closer to the dog. The visual aids ensure that we will stay on our path and the dog is expected to stay at our side.

Step 1

I ask my dog to come to my left side by saying *Here* and I continue forward for about 10'. I slow down and if my dog stays at my side, I click and treat. I begin to turn away from my dog (to the right) and click and treat if he stays

at my side and also parallel to my body without pulling ahead. I continue my turn and move in a straight line again. When I stop, my dog should stop at my side and I then click and treat. I always begin moving again on a verbal *O.K.* so my dog knows he can move ahead. Remember to keep your inside hand close to your hip at your side. You should not be luring your dog through this exercise. If your dog is not successful, break it down into smaller pieces. Your goal is to walk up and down a straight line with your dog at your side, make your turn to go the other way, and have your dog never leave your side. If you are having trouble, you can place two open tunnels (one on each side of your line) to ensure your dog stays next to you. Remember

to remove these aids as soon as your dog is staying at your side

Step 2

Next, I ask my dog to come to my left side by saying *Here* and continue forward about 10' in a straight line. I slow down and if my dog stays at my side, I click and treat. Then I begin to turn into my dog (to the left) and click and treat if he stays at my side, and also parallel to my body and not pulling ahead. When you turn into your dog, he will have to shift his weight and bring his rear end behind you. This maneuver is much harder for the dog to understand. Be patient, work slowly, and help the dog to understand he needs to stay at your side and parallel to your body. Reinforce with your clicker when successful. After

completing the turn, continue back down the straight line with your dog at your side. Remember, this training is not too exciting for the dog, so keep your dog in the game by playing tug or with toys often and staying upbeat.

Coming to Your Right Side

After completing the turn exercises, repeat everything from the beginning with your dog on your right and give it a different cue to distinguish it from its opposite. I use *Side* to get my dog to come to my right side.

Next month we will discuss more exercises for your dog to continue to work close and how you can apply close work to the agility ring. 🐾

Karen Holik has been involved in agility for over 10 years as a competitor and also a USDAA and AKC judge. She has competed in the finals of the USDAA Grand Prix World Championships seven times with all her dogs: two Shelties, a Border Collie, and an All-American. Her youngest dog, MACH Triune's Feelin Hot Hot Hot (a.k.a. Sizzle) won the USDAA Steeplechase Finals in 2003. Karen and Sizzle were members of the AKC/USA World Team in 2003, 2005, and 2006. Karen offers private lessons and seminars and can be reached at oncourseagility@comcast.net.
