



Ta Daa!

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Ta Daa! This is my verbal cue for the bow behavior, sign #32. Since this sign will be on every Rally-FrEe course, training to meet all of the sign's criteria is a sure way to boost your score every time you compete. The bow should be performed in a clear and straight position on either side of you and held long enough for the judge to view all criteria.

At first glance, the bow appears to be a fairly simply behavior to train. In reality, it's quite a feat to help a dog understand all of the criteria included in this behavior. In Rally-Free, the dog needs to be able to perform the bow on both the left and right side of the handler. This may not seem difficult at first, but considering that most handlers have taught their dog to bow in front of them, transitioning the physical cue and the dog to the handler's side can create problems.

If the dog learned to bow in front of its handler, several issues now need to be overcome. The first issue is that the dog wants to face the handler to be in a more familiar position and will shift his rear out away from the handler. Second, the cue the handler had been using, usually a physical cue of bending toward the dog while pushing a hand toward his chest, no longer looks the same to the dog. Third, if the handler gives a physical cue using the hand from the opposite side the dog is on, this causes the body to twist, which changes the dog's context for the heel position and may cause the dog to swing its rear out away from the handler.

So, how *do* we get that nice, straight, in-line-with-the-handler bow on both sides?

Training Tools

Depending on the dog, I may use several tools to teach the bow: a set of training gates or a standing platform and a target stick.

Training gates are like mini ex-pens, but are only 14 inches high. I make mine from [wire cube organizers](#). You can see examples of the training gates in the video link at the end of this article. Ex-pens (18-inch pens are available) or some other barrier may be used as well. I advise against using a wall as a barrier because it is difficult to fade.

The "standing platform," often used to [train precise heel positions](#), is usually just long enough for the dog to stand on it with all fours. If you've been using a standing platform in your training, that length may not be long enough for the dog to be able to keep himself on the platform while in the bow. For teaching the bow, a standing platform needs to be long enough to fit your dog while he is lying down.

To use a platform for training the bow, you will need to have already trained your dog through a process of shaping and a high rate of reward to work hard to remain on it. The platform will work well as long as the dog is already “magnetized” to it. For this reason, I generally have my students use the training gates to teach the bow as no previous training is necessary.

Getting Started

Whether using the training gates or the platform, start by lining up one or the other (or both) in a straight line across the front of you so that the gates or platform will have one end to your left and the other to your right. The gates and/or platform will keep your dog perpendicular to you while training the bow. I suggest starting the dog in this position instead of the left or right heel position so it is easy for you to see the dog’s rear end without twisting your body. Twisting your body will cause the dog’s context for “heel” to become unclear.

With your right hand, lure the dog using a food lure or target stick to stand between you and the gate (and onto the platform if you are using one) so that he is straight and perpendicular to the front of your hips and knees. Push the food lure or target stick from your dog’s nose down between his front legs to a point on the floor just below his chest. This should cause your dog to rock back onto his elbows and leave his bum in the air. Ta Daa!

Use your clicker to mark the correct response, reward and repeat.

Don’t be tempted to give a verbal cue just yet! You’ll want to have eliminated the food lure from your hand and have a sense of certainty that your dog will actually go into the bow position when you give the hand signal (which should look as if you are luring without food) before prefacing the behavior with the verbal cue. If using a target stick as your lure, you may begin the process of naming the behavior as soon as you are certain the dog will follow the target stick into the bow position.

When choosing a name or verbal cue for this behavior, I would recommend not using “Bow.” “Bow” sounds too much like “Down,” and the two behaviors are somewhat similar. Some cues I have heard other than “Ta Daa!” are “Curtsy,” “Bravo,” “Duck!” and even “Who’s the boss?” However, that last one is a bit long and may suggest some relationship issues!

Once your dog is consistently following a hand signal, turn to your right so that the dog (who is still between you and the gates and/or on the platform) is now in left heel position. Using your left hand (the hand closest to the dog) provide your hand signal. Click and reward the dog for rocking back with elbows down and bum up!

By providing two or three treats in a row (I always place rewards for “down” and “ta daa” on the ground, between the front paws), you will provide your dog a reason to want to remain in this position a little longer. You can also start to change the timing of your click for duration, adding small increments of time gradually to help the dog understand to maintain the position.

Troubleshooting:

If your dog lies down instead of holding the bow, toss the treat in front of him or release him out of the down. This rarely happens once you transition to your left or right side as long as you

address it during the first step in training where your dog is perpendicular across the front of you.

If your dog is lying down when you provide the lure, check to make sure your hand isn't moving in a way that suggests the "down" cue. Make sure you are really pushing in between his front legs at about a 45-degree angle. If you taught your dog a "fold-back down" using this method, you'll need to provide some additional information for the bow. One technique is to place your left hand just under your dog. Your hand is not to hold him up, nor should it be touching him, but rather only to cause him to feel your hand so that he brings his rear back up to avoid it.

You can also do the same with a leash looped under your dog near his flank. Again, you do not want to pull up or put pressure on the dog. Just have it a few inches below the dog so that if he starts to lie down, he'll feel the leash and come back up. If you need to use this method to prevent your dog from lying down, it generally only takes a couple of repetitions for your dog to start to understand to keep his rear up, especially if your click is well timed.

If your dog remains standing and does not follow the lure into the bow position, try a higher value lure. Whether or not a dog follows a lure always depends on how badly he wants it!

If your dog tends to back up, you can place a barrier behind him by creating a corner with the training gates. Alternatively, try drawing the dog forward with the lure and then pushing the lure back toward the dog. The initial forward momentum will make it harder for him to switch to backward momentum and he will simply rock back rather than back up. For a dog that understands platform work, the platform can also prevent the dog from backing up.

If you have a very small dog that lies down, you can place him up onto a table and use one of the above methods. This eliminates your having to bend over the dog. Small dogs often perceive a handler bending toward them as a physical cue to down.

Take a Bow!

The key to having your dog perform the bow in proper left heel or right heel position for Rally-FrEe is all about how you train it. In training all of the various behaviors for Rally-FrEe, you'll want to include the positions in which you'll be performing the behavior. If you have already trained the bow in front of you, it won't take long using the above methods for your dog to understand the new criteria of bowing parallel to you. If you have yet to train the bow, then let's get started!

Click here to view the [Taa Daa! video](#)