



## NAVIGATING OBSTACLES

The purpose of this lecture is to explain the different types of obstacles that you may encounter and how to navigate around them. This lesson will explain:

- Full obstacles
- Partial obstacles
- Overhead obstacles
- Pedestrian obstacles
- Off-curb obstacles
- Addressing obstacle errors

### Full Obstacles

- **Definition:** A full obstacle is anything that completely blocks the path of travel. The most common types of full obstacles are cars and construction barriers blocking the sidewalk.
- **Expected Response from Dog and Handler**
  - The dog is responsible for finding a safe path around the obstacle and returning to the original line of travel when it is safe to do so.
  - You are responsible for maintaining orientation and directing the dog back to the original line of travel.
- **Technique**
  1. When the dog stops and you don't know why, you should first probe with your right foot to see if there is a curb or change in elevation.
  2. Extend your right arm in front of you and sweep side to side, then straight up and over your head.
    - a. If you do not find an obstacle, ask the dog to "Let's go," which in this situation means, "Get closer to the thing that you stopped for."
  3. When you find the obstacle, praise the dog, then direct the dog around the obstacle.

4. Say "Juno, forward," and allow the dog to choose the safest path around the obstacle. You may have to take a step back to create space for the dog to move around the obstacle.
5. The dog will then initiate movement to the left or right. You are responsible for knowing which way the dog has to turn to get back to the straight line and for directing the dog appropriately.
  - Sometimes the dog has to walk onto the grass line or into the street in order to work around the obstacle safely. In that case, the dog should stop at the curb or at changes of elevation, and should not continue moving forward until you give an additional "Forward" command.
  - Many dogs will attempt to sniff when walking across grass, so you should be ready to correct as necessary and make sure that the dog stays focused on guidework.

## **Partial Obstacles**

- **Definition:** A partial obstacle is anything that partially blocks the path of travel, but leaves enough space that you and the dog can stay on the path without contacting the obstacle.
- **Expected Response from Dog and Handler**
  - The dog should anticipate upcoming partial obstacles and adjust his line of travel accordingly. You will feel these adjustments as smooth lateral moves to the left or right.
  - Your job is to move smoothly with the dog and to maintain good alignment while doing so.
- **Technique**
  - Learning what it feels like when the dog is moving around an obstacle and being able to differentiate this movement from movements that the dog might make when he is distracted by something are skills that are acquired with experience. Initially, a distracted dog and a dog moving around partial obstacles may feel very similar.
  - In general, when the dog is moving around a partial obstacle, you will feel a small tug to the right or left followed by a quick return to the initial line of travel.

- When the dog is distracted, he will often leave the initial line of travel and not return to it, changing the line of travel completely.
- There generally will not be a significant change in pace or pull when moving around a partial obstacle, whereas there is often an increase in pace and pull when the dog is interested in a distraction.

## Overhead Obstacles

- **Definition:** An overhead obstacle is anything higher than the dog's head that does not block the dog's path of travel but does block yours. Common overhead obstacles are branches and signs.

- **Expected Response from Dog and Handler**

The dog is trained to respond to overhead obstacles just as he is trained to respond to any other types of full and partial obstacles; however, it is not natural for dogs to look up while walking, and overhead obstacles, especially in unfamiliar areas, are more likely to be missed than other types of obstacles.

- **Technique**

- Techniques for overhead obstacles are similar to techniques used for full obstacles.
- The dog should always stop to indicate the obstacle initially.
- Put your right hand in front of your face, duck, and walk under the obstacle once the dog has acknowledged the overhead, especially in the case of tree branches that overhang long stretches of sidewalk, rather than leaving the sidewalk to go around. This is acceptable as long as the dog continues to indicate the obstacle initially.
- You should be aware that overhead obstacles may change based on weather conditions; branches that are not normally obstacles to you may hang lower than usual when they are wet or snow-covered. You should keep this in mind when correcting the dog for missing an overhead that is not usually an obstacle.

## Pedestrian Obstacles

- **Definition:** A pedestrian obstacle is any person, whether in motion or standing still.

- **Expected Response from Dog and Handler**

- The dog is expected to move you around pedestrians and to adjust his pace as necessary to avoid collisions when working in a crowded area with many pedestrians.
- It is your responsibility to ensure that the dog is moving at a safe speed when working through crowded areas.

- **Technique**

- A dog's response to pedestrian obstacles often erodes over time because many pedestrians move around the dog when they see him, and this can cause the dog to "forget" that moving around pedestrians is his responsibility.
- Another consideration is that some pedestrian obstacle errors are not the dog's fault; people often step out of doorways in front of the dog and collide with you and the dog.
- While the dog should generally move you around pedestrians just as he does around other partial obstacles, pedestrians are more challenging because their movements are often unpredictable.

## **Off-Curb Obstacles**

Whenever there is a "full obstacle" that is completely blocking the path, it is possible that the dog has no other option but to take you into the street.

- **Procedure**

- The dog should come to the side curb and stop.
- You should identify the safety risks of doing an off-curb by:
  - Residual vision
  - Knowledge of the area
  - Do an "off-curb check"
  - Listen to the traffic flow
- If you decide it is not safe to do an off-curb obstacle, please do a back turn and find a new route.
- If you have decided it is safe to do an off-curb obstacle, the procedure is:

**If the road is on the right:**

1. Listen to the traffic - do not step into the road until traffic is clear.
2. Step out into the road while the dog holds at the curb.
3. Turn your body to the left and give the “Forward” command.
4. The dog should step out into the road and your body position should stay turned into the dog and slightly advanced of your hand.
5. Give the dog the “Curb” command and wait for the dog to indicate the curb.

**If the road is on the left:**

1. Turn slightly toward the obstacle.
2. Listen to the traffic - do not give the “Forward” command until traffic is clear.
3. Give the “Forward” command.
4. Remain slightly behind the dog and face away from the dog.
5. Give the “Curb” command, and be ready to stop quickly due to the curb being right at your right side.

**Addressing Obstacle Errors**

Sometimes, especially with a new guide dog, you will make unwanted contact with an obstacle. If this happens, you must be consistent about letting the dog know he has made an error. The level of correction for an obstacle error depends on the magnitude of the error.

- **Possible Causes**

- The dog’s right shoulder work needs reinforcing
- The handler’s speed is too fast
- The handler’s following is poor

- **Possible Remedies**

- When you receive a brush or bump, you must stop and tap the obstacle if possible. Next, correct your dog by saying “Watch” and by a physical correction with the handle, and follow up with the command “Over.” These corrections must be sufficient to make your dog look around and see what happened. If it is safe, go back at least five steps and reapproach the obstacle. When the dog guides you around the obstacle, give generous

verbal praise and food reward if warranted. By using this method, you reinforce the dog's right shoulder work.

- Even if you are in doubt as to whether or not the dog is at fault, it is better to presume that the dog was, and to correct him for his mistake.
- Never hit the dog with your hand or push him over with your knee as a form of correction.
- Keep the volume of your voice as low as possible, even though you need to try to sound cross. It is important to avoid criticism from members of the public.
- Always remember to balance your corrections with plenty of praise.
- When entering areas in which you regularly receive brushes and bumps, slow down, ensure that you are relaxed and walking in the correct position, and do not fall behind the dog.
- Follow the dog as carefully as you can, and do not allow a gap to open up between the two of you. If you find this difficult, you are probably going too fast.
- If you continue to receive bumps, contact Pilot Dogs for advice.

## **Problems with Off-Curb Obstacles**

### **● Possible Causes**

- The obstacle is too difficult for the dog to cope with
- The handler's positioning is wrong
- The handler's use of voice and hand signals are ineffective
- The handler's speed is excessive

### **● Possible Remedies**

- When meeting an off-curb obstacle for the first time, it is advisable to gain sighted assistance in negotiating the obstacle and thereby determine whether or not you and the dog can safely cope when the same obstacle is met again.
  - This is especially important if the obstacle is situated on a busy road where you may be in danger from traffic by leaving the curb.
- Check your positioning when in the road.

- With the road on the right, you should be in front of the normal walking position and facing slightly toward the dog. Voice and hand signals are used to encourage the dog to the left and so back to the curb.
- With the road on the left, you should hang back behind the normal walking position and face slightly away from the dog. Again, voice and hand signals are used to encourage your dog but, this time, to the right and so back to the curb.
- As an added incentive to the dog, take the lead in the right hand when in the road.
- When negotiating off-curb obstacles, keep to a slow or steady speed. This helps you stay in position, ensuring that you are not in the road longer than necessary and minimizing the risk of tripping on the curb as you return to the pavement.
- Consistency in correcting and reworking obstacle errors is critical. Allowing errors to happen without addressing them will cause the dog's obstacle work to get sloppy.