

# TOOLS FOR TEACHING THE FOUR RALLY-FRÉE HEELWORK POSITIONS

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While Rally-FrEe offers you opportunities to show off your dog's favorite tricks and perform a variety of fun behaviors in the ring, it also presents new training challenges. One of these challenges is training multiple "positions." In Rally-FrEe, "position" refers to the dog's physical relationship to his handler. You're no doubt familiar with the left-side heel position for traditional obedience and rally-obedience. You may even think of "front" as a position in which your dog is facing directly in front of you (usually in a sit after a recall). What may be new for you are additional *heel* positions on your right side and centered in front of and behind you in Rally-FrEe.

You will be expanding your dog's repertoire of behaviors just by teaching all four "heel" positions: left, right, center (front) and behind. Creating and maintaining strong heelwork positions is a priority in Rally-FrEe to achieve precision and to prepare for more complex behaviors. Because of the increased number of positions you need to train for Rally-FrEe, it makes sense to train them efficiently. I use a combination of shaping techniques with "standing platforms" and "pivot platforms" to communicate correct proximity, position and eye contact during heelwork. In this article, I will describe the two types of platforms and how to teach the left heel position using shaping and a pivot platform.

## PLATFORMS — EFFICIENT TRAINING TOOLS

### STANDING PLATFORMS

A "standing platform" helps a dog understand how to get into and remain in a certain position relative to his handler. Platform construction can vary from a single half-inch-thick foam rubber mat to a two-to-four-inch-high sturdy box, board or specially constructed platform. Its length and width should be configured so the dog can stand comfortably on it with all four feet. The platform should be only wide enough to allow the dog to stand squarely on it; if it is too wide, he may stand on it at an angle and develop an angled position relative to his handler. Depending on which position is being trained, the standing platform is located on the left or right side of the handler, in front of or in back of the handler. When the dog is standing squarely on the platform, he will be in exactly the correct position as long as the platform is lined up correctly with the handler.

Top freestyle trainer Michele Pouliot developed an efficient training method using standing platforms to define the desired area for the dog, thereby enabling the handler to communicate more effectively exactly where the dog needs to be in order to earn a reward. By combining shaping techniques with platforms, Michele demonstrated that a dog will quickly become quite keen to get on a standing platform in the correct position. Once the dog repeatedly shows a desire to be on the platform, the handler then names the position, putting it on a verbal cue.

For more information about using standing platforms, I highly recommend [Michele's training videos](#) or online training through [Karen Pryor Academy](#). To see Michele demonstrate where to place the platform to teach the four positions watch this [her YouTube video](#).

### PIVOT PLATFORMS

Using shaping techniques with a "pivot platform" also speeds up teaching positions. When I train positions, I add the pivot platform for several reasons. It aids my dog's understanding that even when we're moving he should maintain a consistent position. It increases my dog's rear-end awareness for learning more complex behaviors moving backwards and sideways later on. I have also found that by using a pivot platform, my dog's understanding for all four positions is increased

and our training time is spent more efficiently. The added benefit to shaping positions with a platform is I don't need to fade hand signals or food lures because I don't use them in the initial training steps. I am able to fade the platform quite easily once the behavior is on a verbal cue.

The pivot platform can be any raised object with a solid base that is weighted so it won't tip or move when the dog puts his front feet on it. It should be large enough for both front feet to fit comfortably but not so large that the dog can do a lot of sideways movement with his front feet. I really like the [Petco water crocks](#). These crocks have rubber on the bottom. When turned upside-down, they have a broad base and non-slip surface. I'm using one of these crocks in the video of my young dog Kashi's third session of behind position work, which is listed at the end of this article. Objects you might already have around the house also work well. In the ["Getting Started on the Pivot Platform"](#) video I am using an empty DVD case with a rubber mat secured to the top with duct tape.

### **Initial Step: Shape Your Dog to the Platform**

Before using either a standing or a pivot platform to teach the four positions, you will need to "shape" your dog to the platform, just as you would shape him to any target. I use a clicker, an invaluable tool for shaping behaviors, in my training. Once your dog is eager to place both front feet on the pivot platform or stand with all four feet on the standing platform, then add criteria for duration with eye contact. This shouldn't take more than a couple of sessions. If you have not shaped targeting behaviors before, you will find information about shaping and targeting in the ["Shaping and Targeting"](#) section of [clickertraining.com](#).

### **Using a Pivot Platform for Training Left Heel Position**

Once your dog wants to keep his front feet on the pivot platform, position yourself so that he is in a "center" position (standing directly in front of you). Take a step to your right. Mark and reward any shift toward your left that your dog makes with his rear end. If your dog is not experienced with shaping, you may need to use a lure to turn his head slightly toward his left shoulder to get him to make the first shift with his rear end toward your left (dog's rear should move to his right). Remove the lure as an aid within just a few repetitions. Your marker will tell him how to earn the reward.

In the next step, minimize your movement initiating the dog's movement. Take smaller steps to the right or simply lean and see if your dog will shift with his rear. Mark and reward these efforts. Initially, you may need to line up centered with your dog after each shift he takes. Once your dog is offering a small shift with his rear toward your left as soon as you line up in front of him, stop taking steps to your right and maintain a stationary position or lean slightly to your right until your dog is moving on his own to within a 45-degree angle to your left side. Be patient. If your dog is having a difficult time making the transition from waiting for your physical prompt before shifting to offering a rear end shift on his own, take a break and start again at another session. It's not unusual for a dog to have a "break-through" during the next session.

At this point, you will likely have to move left toward your dog a bit so that he is actually in precise heel position. I usually take this step toward my dog while he is eating the reward from the last repetition so I don't cause him to move away from me. Once your dog has finished eating and looks up, take another 90-degree step to your right around the platform. Mark and reward *any* rear end movement your dog makes in your direction. Gradually build your criteria to where the dog is moving (pivoting) with you as you take a step to your right around the platform. Mark and reward each step he takes toward you.

When your dog is consistently maintaining a correct position at your left side, you can insert your verbal cue for the position. Say your cue just *before* taking a step to your right. The cue gives your dog the ability to predict your movement and be ready to move with you.

[Removing the platform](#) is one of the final steps. After several successful cued repetitions, bend down and pick up the platform as you are rewarding your dog. Then give your verbal cue and take a 90-degree step to your right. Mark and reward any movement in your direction. After a few repetitions, start to raise your criteria so that only moving in tight next to you earns your mark and reward.

Your dog's understanding of where he should be when you give the verbal cue for a position will carry over when you begin taking steps forward, backward or sideways. When transitioning to using your position cue while moving, go slowly, taking just one step at a time, to get the greatest rate of reward for correct responses.

### **Training Additional Positions**

You can use this same process, marking and rewarding for moving in the desired direction, for training right side, center and behind heelwork positions. Using shaping techniques and platforms, you'll teach your dog all four heel positions for Rally-FrEe quickly and prepare him for learning new complex behaviors.

### **SEE TRAINING WITH PLATFORMS IN ACTION**

Below are videos to help you along in the process. Keep in mind that Kashi is practiced at shaping and understands the clicker. Each of these videos was taken within the first three to four training sessions. It may take a little longer for your dog if you have not tried shaping other behaviors with him. But once your dog understands the process, training goes fairly quickly for the other positions.

[Getting Started on the Pivot Platform](#)

[Removing the Pivot Platform](#)

[Center Position](#)

[Behind Position](#)