

DANCES WITH DOGS AND TRICK DOGS

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First published in <https://auscattledogstitled.com>

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Introduction

Dances with Dogs or DWD (as we call it in Australia) grew out of a Crufts pre-best-in-show demonstration by Mary Ray in about 1990. Mary had just won the Crufts Dog Obedience Championships and was invited to the BBC television studios for an interview and heelwork display. After the interview, as Mary was heading out onto the studio floor, the suggestion was made that they play music in the background and “Eye of the Tiger” was played as Mary and her dog performed a heelwork runout. As she finished, one of the producers commented that “it looked like she was doing heelwork to music” and this new sport was born.

It was so well received that over time it became recognised as an official discipline by the UK Kennel Club, with Rugby Dog Club (of which Mary was a member) holding the first show in 1996¹. Subsequently the sport spread to other European countries, the USA and ultimately worldwide, where it has a variety of names, including Heelwork to Music (which includes Freestyle) and Canine Freestyle (which includes HTM). Mary continued to perform a pre-best-in-show demonstration at Crufts through to 2018.

In Australia, Dances with Dogs was recognised by the ANKC as a titling dog sport from January 2009. Since then there have been 5-yearly rule reviews, and in the rule review cycle which commenced in 2017, Dogs West put forward a proposal for introduction of Trick Dog as an ANKC discipline. This concept was adopted and Trick Dog became a titling sport from January 2020. It had a somewhat bumpy inauguration, with only a few competitions being held in 2020 due to most dog sports being cancelled as a result of Covid-19 restrictions.

In both DWD and Trick Dog, dogs work off lead, so a level of engagement and connection between the dog and handler are essential prerequisites for competing in both these sports; on the other hand, training our dog in a fun and positive manner helps develop a strong bond and relationship between the dog and handler which benefits both parties in everyday life as well as in competition .

Dances with Dogs

There are two separate divisions in DWD: (a) Freestyle and (b) Heelwork to Music. In both divisions, the handler and their dog work as a team, presenting choreographed movements executed to music. DWD allows freedom for the handler to choose their music, the moves they include and the associated costume and props used in their routine. The moves, costume and props should all relate to and/or be compatible with the selected music and its theme.

A key principle of the sport is that the dog should be treated with respect and not be put in harm's way, so we do not dress our dog in costumes (they can wear a decorative collar only) or include moves which could put the dog at risk of injury.

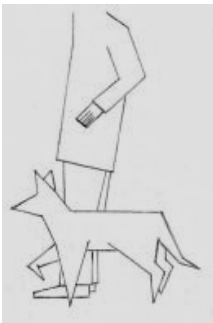


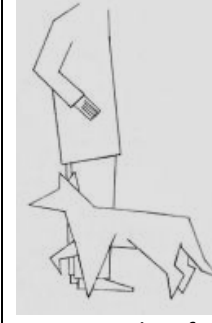
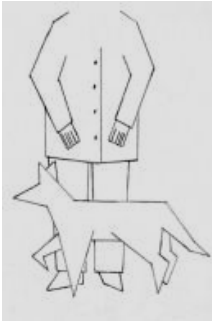

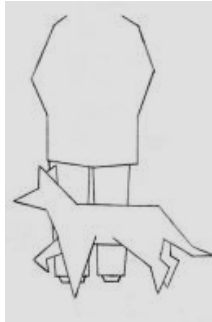

There are 4 class levels in each division of DWD – Starter, Novice, Intermediate and Advanced. The level of difficulty of moves should increase with each higher level, as does the duration of the routine. At Starter level, the routine must be at least 1 minute long while at Advanced level it can be a maximum of 4 minutes long. Championship titles are gained subsequent to the Advanced title, and require a very high level of performance – 7 qualifying scores of at least 160 (out of 180) after completion of the Advanced title for the relevant division.

Heelwork to Music requires that, for at least 70% of the routine, the dog must be close to the handler's leg and

- (a) move parallel to the handler in one of the 8 nominated heelwork positions;
- (b) keep the same distance in relation to the handler in all positions;
- (c) move in the same direction as the handler;
- (d) move at the same pace as the handler.

'Heelwork' position in HTM, goes far beyond the left heel position with which we are familiar in Obedience and Rally. There are 8 HTM positions available and in each of these 8 positions there are 4 potential directions of movement by the dog – forwards, backwards, laterally to the left and laterally to the right; that means 32 positions/directions of movement are available, though of course Starter routines are quite simple with about 3 positions and just 1 or 2 directions of movement normally being included.

The following diagram from the UK Kennel Club rules illustrates the 8 positions (see also <http://www.caninefreestylegb.com/articles/heelworkpositions.html> {Canine Freestyle Great Britain – heelwork positions}).

PICTORIAL DEFINITION OF HEELWORK POSITIONS			
			
1	2	3	4
			
5	6	7	8

Freestyle

As the name suggests, Freestyle is less structured and can include any safe moves that the team can perform and that reflect the theme of the music. Many of the behaviours found in Trick Dog training and competition also appear in Freestyle routines, but Freestyle goes even further and can include many other moves not represented within the Trick Dog discipline. Behaviours that are often used in Freestyle routines include: circling a prop, circling the handler, leg weaves (and their many variations), targeting a hand-held prop, paw work (from paw lifts to leg wraps, to cross-paws, to sustained paw lifts moving in time with the handler), walk back, reversing around the handler or a prop, roll over, and crawl; and poses such as a bow, sit pretty, paws up on handler's arm, paw over

face, head/chin resting on a prop; and many more. This short list itself illustrates the level of cross-over between Freestyle and Trick Dog behaviours.

Choreography

A DWD routine is not simply an unrelated series of tricks performed one after the other. It can build on behaviours from the Trick Dog sport, or indeed other sports including Agility as well as Obedience and Rally. The difference is that DWD also requires you to select a piece of music and develop a sequence which flows and interprets that music – ie to choreograph the routine. You have the freedom, challenge and enjoyment of selecting music that best suits you and your dog, of creating a theme to your music and selecting a costume which complements the theme and your dog.

Although the handler's actions (and attire) add to the routine, it is the **dog who is the star**, and it is important that the handler (no matter how skilful they may be at dance or how super their costume is) not overshadow the dog's performance.

Do you need to be a 'dancer' to participate in DWD?

No, dance skills are not required. It is great if you can hear the beat of a piece of music and have a sense of rhythm, but even those skills can be developed.

Trick Dog

The Trick Dog rules list a number of tricks for each level of competition – Starter, Novice, Intermediate and Advanced.

One innovative feature of Trick Dog, designed to assist newcomers and their dogs to become comfortable in a competition ring environment, is that in the Starter and Novice classes handlers can not only praise but also reward their dog after each completed trick.

Although not the same level of flexibility and creativity that DWD offers, there is nevertheless the opportunity to select tricks which best suit your dog and to choose the order in which they are performed. The requirements of each class are –

Class	Number of tricks to be selected	Number of available options
Starter	6	15
Novice	8	20
Intermediate	8	20
Advanced	10	25

Some of the behaviours are included in multiple levels, increasing in difficulty/duration at each higher level. For example, Go Round an object at Starter level is once around from at least 0.5 m distance. At Novice level it is 1 ½ circles from 2 metres, and at Intermediate it is 2 ½ circles from 3 metres. This is a logical and sequential development of the dog's skills in a foundation behaviour, and one which is also used in many DWD routines.

Balance and flexibility

While Obedience and Rally require the dog to work on the handler's left side (with minor exceptions in Advanced Rally stations), in DWD and Trick Dog, when beside the handler, the dog can be on the handler's left or right side. This has the benefit of enabling us to have regard to the effect of the dog's position on the dog's skeletal and muscular development. In canine conditioning, we

deliberately work in both directions, to even out the dog's movement and flexibility. DWD and Trick Dog enable us to take those same issues into consideration in selecting how we perform various moves and tricks.

Conclusion

Training our dog in any dog sport provides both mental stimulation and physical activity for the dog, and enables us to improve communication between the dog and handler and to channel the dog's energy into activities which are mutually enjoyable and beneficial, regardless of breed.

Both DWD and Trick Dog allow flexibility and provide the opportunity to draw on and develop the skills and loves of both the dog and handler and most of all to have fun together. DWD in particular allows freedom and creativity to an extent unique to this sport. The flexibility and creativity that these two sports offer makes them suitable for all dogs and all breeds – large or small, fast or slow – and indeed for handlers with varying physical abilities. Many dogs who have been retired from other sports because of age or injury are now enjoying doing tricks, and hopefully some of them will venture into the world of Dances with Dogs as well.

*Gay Westmore
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12 January 2022*