



Below is the next in a series of Random Tidbits of information (from me) in regards to the AKC Obedience Regulations. Knowledge of the Regulations provides you the power for...

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Today's Random Little Tidbit – The Intricacies in Designing a Heeling Pattern.

Designing a heeling pattern for all sizes of dogs, all handlers (able and physically challenged), plus factoring in good judging positions is no simple accomplishment. There is more to the design than only incorporating the required elements stated in the Obedience Regulations. Let's first review what the Regulations state in regards to the heeling pattern's elements and then consider other aspects which need to be considered.

To Quote Required Heeling Pattern Elements per Chapter 2, Section 1 - Standardized Judging:

1. The minimum heeling requirements for any classes are **normal heeling, a fast, a slow, a left turn, a right turn, an about-turn, a halt, and a sit.**
2. The same pattern should be maintained as far as practicable for each competing dog. **This is a foundation exercise**, and it determines the standards for all exercises in which the dog is heeling.
3. The heeling patterns should not be in the area of the table and/or gate and should have only one element of an exercise on a leg. (For example, there shall not be a halt and a slow on the same leg of an exercise.).
4. A fast **must always be on a long dimension** of the ring; slow may be either on the short or long dimension of the ring. The **fast and slow should be of significant length**, *not just several steps*. No pattern will have more than one fast and one slow.
5. If possible, have one leg of the heeling pattern with no element on it. The "L" pattern is a minimal pattern. Other patterns are acceptable, but excessive complexity should be avoided.
6. The judge will inform the first exhibitor in each class what the heeling pattern will be before that exhibitor enters the ring. This may be done verbally, by posting the pattern ringside or by demonstration. This same procedure will be followed in the event of run-offs.
7. In regards to Standardized Judging, handlers should expect and train for a reasonable amount of movement by the judge while the dog is working. **Judges must not** move quickly toward a dog as it is moving, stand closely behind a dog, or follow a heeling dog too closely. **Judges should always** be in a position to see both the dog and handler at the same time without having to turn their heads.

Other Heeling Pattern Elements to Consider:

1. Quote from the Obedience Guidelines:

Judging Position. Positioning is important for two reasons: first, to establish consistency of judging in the minds of exhibitors and spectators and, second, to properly evaluate the dog and handler the entire time they are in the ring. In determining a position for each exercise choose one that allows you to see both dog and handler without having to turn away to see one or the other. **Being in the right position to observe a dog's performance is essential.** There is no perfect position, but this does not mean that some positions are not better than others. All dogs shall be viewed from the same relative position. When viewing the dog and handler from the side, **try to observe from the dog's side without the handler between you and the dog.** Fronts and finishes are to be judged from a position in front of the handler.

2. Give serious thought to the following:

- a. Once your pattern has been designed, did you factor in the Physically Challenged handler? Will a person in a motorized cart with their Irish Wolfhound be able to maneuver through your heeling pattern(s) without having to readjust obstacles (jumps and/or cones)?
- b. Does your heeling pattern accommodate all sizes of dogs? If you train only a small or medium size breed, consider borrowing a GIANT breed for the sake of trying out your pattern. Does it still flow smoothly and has all choppiness been eliminated? Keep in mind, you will be judging the results of a poorly thought out heeling pattern and some breeds many gain an advantage as a result in scoring!

c. If your heeling pattern has a Halt during the pattern, where is it? Consider this: The "Forward" followed by a few steps and then a "Halt" is another example of unfairness to large breeds, plus it is also becomes choppy. Picture the extremes. A Chihuahua and handler starts to heel and the handler walks forward two or three steps and halts on the judge's order. This small breed has had a chance to get up and walk a fair distance before going into a sit. The next dog in the ring is an Irish Wolfhound. The handler starts to heel and walks two or three steps and halts on the judge's order. The Irish Wolfhound starts to move forward in heel position, and maybe just moved one-half or one body length, and now has to go into a sit. Was this fair and smooth for that dog? Had the judge halted each dog further away from the Forward order, both breeds would have had an equal opportunity for a smooth performance.

d. When planning the area for the Figure Eight think about the ring barriers and also consider the jumps, if in that class. You want to provide ALL dogs the opportunity to go around the outside post and not have to concern themselves with the possibility of running into an object. Figure Eight cones that are in the corners of a ring or too close to a jump jeopardize the performance of the larger breeds. This type of set up is also too restrictive for the physically challenged handlers and their dogs. If you are judging indoors and using mats on slick floors use **three** mats if possible for the Figure Eight. Large breeds should have mats under them at all times during the Figure Eight if that is the case for the smaller breeds.

3. Consider YOUR judging positions during the heeling pattern(s) in relation to the team in the ring.

Are your judging positions **on the side of the dog** (as stated above) most of the time, especially during critical elements such as the Fast and Slow. On these two elements do you step behind the dog at some point (during the Fast or Slow) to observe if the dog is "straight in line" with the handler (Chapter 2, Section 18)? The dog that is not straight in line with the handler is more likely to show up on these two elements as the dog changes its pace. Are you in a position to see this and score if necessary?

4. Think about where and when you will be calling your judge's orders:

a. For the Fast and/or Slow to have significant length, it is key to know when to give the order for the Fast or Slow, especially the Fast. Consider giving the Fast order *immediately following* a change of direction; for example, immediately after the About Turn, Right Turn or Left Turn. Doing so will allow response time from the handler hearing the order to carrying it out. This timeframe may cover as much as 5-feet being traveled before the Fast starts! The team will then have a significant length for the Fast before Normal needs to be ordered. Practice your timing with various size dogs, plus the amount of distance need to get the team back to a normal brisk pace before the next change of direction. Having knowledge of this timing will provide all your teams a smooth transition, plus giving your Fast and Slow elements significant length.

b. On the Figure Eight be aware when to give the Halt order. Once again, allow for response time from the handler so the team can come to a halt near the center of the Figure Eight, if possible. Although not required to stop the team in the center, once again, it is fairer to the larger breeds or physically challenged handlers for a smoother performance, in my opinion.

c. The timing of judge's orders is also critical to keep the teams away from the ring barriers or other obstacles in the ring.

Developing an excellent heeling pattern and the timing of giving orders *requires a lot of thought* and judgment *before the first dog enters the ring* and the first order is given. Take a good look at the pattern(s) you are now using and see if meets:

1. Good judging positions? Are you in the best positions to view the heeling elements taking place and are you on the dog's side as much as possible?
2. Does your pattern allow for smoothness for all breeds of all sizes?
3. Is it a workable pattern for the physically challenged handler (wheelchairs, crutches, etc.)?
4. Have a friend take a video of you running a few dogs (GIANT to small) through your various patterns. Have you considered all that may need to be considered, or are there some tweaks needed in the pattern itself or your judging positions?
5. Heel a dog yourself through your pattern (GIANT to small) and see what you think in regards to having a smooth pattern.
6. Do you have a *backup heeling pattern* (with all the elements considered above) for when there may be a ring entrance you cannot change? In many cases your "original" pattern can be used by merely adding an extra leg. In doing so you then fall back to the pattern you are used to which includes muscle-memory and timing of giving orders.

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