

What is Stilt Training and How Does it Work?

When I invented the concept to teach dogs how to hold their feet still, it came with understanding how dogs learn. Dogs (and people for that matter) learn through positive and negative reinforcement, and positive and negative punishment, among others. In the case of operant conditioning, positive and negative refer to **adding** or **subtracting** something. All **reinforcement** (positive or negative) *increases* the likelihood of a behavior and all **punishment** (positive or negative), *decreases* the likelihood of a behavioral response. Consequences, individual foot placements, and exercising core muscles are all methods that were originally incorporated to teach a *proper* stand stay.

This article is meant to specifically address the “stilt method” versus the “bar method” used to teach a stand stay. The bar method is where there are not individual stilts but instead one long wooden, or other material, “bar” that is fixed (does not move), of varying widths, that stretches across a box or a grooming table.

The stilt method, or any method that isolates all four feet, encourages independent learning and a balanced stack while teaching the dog the concept that individual feet DO matter. Teaching a dog to leave three feet still while you quietly manipulate just one foot is “gold” in the show ring. This is something that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve using a platform/bar method when dogs are allowed (even taught) to forge or wiggle with no consequence.

What has been discovered using the “bar method” is that it is actually creating dogs that “push off” that rigid platform. This causes dogs to learn to forge, putting weight over their front and pushing off their

rear. When your objective is to create a balanced stand and stay where the dog is properly balanced front to rear, this method is counterproductive.

The muscle memory created using a training aid is the muscle memory they'll exhibit on the ground in front of the judge. Since we're dealing with muscle memory, this can be difficult to retrain. It's extremely important to get it right the first time!

This is a natural stack on a dog that was taught using the "bar method" from a puppy. You can see how she overloads her front, making her look straight in the front.



In order for a dog to have a *proper* show stack or stand stay, they must be balanced from nose to tail. In the bar/platform method, they cannot learn the placement of each foot, or more importantly, that moving individual feet (fidgeting) is not correct. Teaching a dog any behavior takes clear and concise signals that the dog can understand with little effort from the trainer. The more the trainer has to manipulate the dog, the greater likelihood the desired end behavior will be lost.

When using any method to train a stand stay for the show ring, you should envision what you want the final picture to look like. Is it a handler* that is constantly manipulating the dog's stacked position, holding the dog in position, pushing back on a forging dog, or replacing feet on a fidgeting dog? Or, is it a handler that's barely noticeable with a dog that stacks itself or when stacked, will stay confident and balanced?

When we look at how we train for the latter, we want a dog that is operant. We want one that makes decisions for itself (the right ones) and is comfortable standing for often minutes at a time while moving very little or not at all. Using the stilt method, the dog makes these decisions on its own and is always in control. There are minor consequences for fidgeting or forging (a stilt falls over) and the trainer/owner/handler is there to help the dog figure out what's right and to be the good guy. From the beginning the handler plays a lesser role in showing off that beautiful stack, with less over-handling and developing a more confident presentation.

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*(for this article we'll use the word handler to mean anyone; owner, semi-professional, professional)