

Teaching the Perch – Front Feet Up

“Perch” work has a multitude of uses in dog training, and it’s a valuable foundation skill for any dog to have. As well as being a starting point for learning several competition sports, standing on a perch is also a great way to strengthen your dog’s core and all four limbs, which means less likelihood of injury and better mobility in old age. Dogs usually really enjoy working on a perch, can get a good workout when they need to drain some energy, and it can all be done in the tiniest of living rooms!

What is a Perch?

A perch can be anything your dog can put his front feet up on. Your dog needs to feel safe and stable on his perch. It must be solid and stable, slightly wider than your dog’s shoulders, and no higher than about one third the height of his forelegs (too high may strain his back). It should be round or square and not so long that it gets in the way of his back feet. The top must be flat and non-slip, and it must not flex or tip under his weight. A silicon mat or similar is needed underneath if the perch is likely to slide on the floor.

Teaching Your Dog to Stand on the Perch

A dog’s self-preservation instinct usually tells him to avoid touching strange things with his feet, so you may find your dog very deliberately steps around or over the perch to start with. That’s normal and will soon stop.

- 1) Stand facing your dog, with the perch in between you. Hold a big handful of tempting treats up to your dog’s nose to get him *really* engaged.
- 2) Now imagine instead of leading him with that handful of yummy food, you are leading him very gently by a ring through his nose. Lift your hand slightly and slowly to bring the dog’s head up, to shift his weight onto his back legs. He can’t move his front feet if he has his weight on them, so unloading them first is essential.
- 4) Keeping his head lifted, lure him slightly up and forward to pull him a little off balance, so he takes a step with a front foot. Don’t use a cue at this stage - he won’t know what action to link it to yet. If a foot brushes against the perch or touches it at all, immediately mark this with “yes” and reward him (not with the whole handful, just one piece.)
- 5) Keep luring him in this way, using the handful of food to keep his head up and get him off balance in whichever direction is needed for that front foot to move. Don’t move your own feet and use small, slow movements to lure him into the right direction. You are aiming to get that foot onto the perch, but in the meantime mark and reward every contact with the perch he makes, so he learns that the perch is something to interact with rather than just something in his way. Remember that he can only move his foot if he has shifted his weight off it first.
- 6) If your dog actually places one or even two feet on the perch, give him lots of praise and multiple pieces of food - jackpot time! Feed him several times while his foot is on the perch and stop feeding immediately if he steps off. If you want to reset him for another try, throw a piece of food off to the side for him to go after while releasing him with “okay”.
- 7) Once your dog is readily getting one foot on the perch, reward him, then keep luring him to get that second foot on. As soon as that happens, jackpot time again! After a couple of these reps, feed only for two front feet on.
- 8) After a very few repetitions of this, most dogs will quickly start putting both front feet onto the perch without being asked. Once your dog is getting up every time without any help, you can start adding a cue.
- 9) Once your dog is getting up on his perch without hesitation, start sending him a short distance to it.
- 10) Start teaching him to walk around the perch with his back legs while pivoting on his front legs. Most dogs need to build up the muscle to do this, so don’t rush or overdo it. Work both directions equally. With your dog standing front-feet-on, lure his head down to shift his weight off the back legs. Keep his head low and lure his nose around as if to touch under his own stomach, trying to unbalance him and force a steadying shift in the hind end. Mark and reward it. As you progress, watch and reward for hind foot movement. Keep going until you are getting a step, and then eventually your dog can circle all the way around. It can take a long time to get that first step, so be patient.