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## Combinations within a Masters Challenge Class

By Mike Wagner, USDAA Judge

One of the challenges judges may offer to handlers in the Masters Challenge Standard and Jumpers class is a combination. Many of us are familiar with the use of combinations in Snooker and Gamblers, where judges have latitude in deciding how these combinations will be judged. This is not the case with judging combinations in standard and jumping classes. Combinations in standard agility and jumpers must follow strict rules. This article will clarify what a combination is and what faults may occur while a dog and handler team is working through the performance of the combination in the Masters Challenge classes.

- The following list defines the characteristics of a combination with a few examples being shown: A combination is a sequence of two or more obstacles that are to be performed and scored as a single obstacle.
- Each element (obstacle) in the combination shall be judged individually.
- Performance of the combination shall not be considered complete until the sequence has been performed in the direction prescribed by the judge in a single fluid motion without refusals or runout faults being incurred.

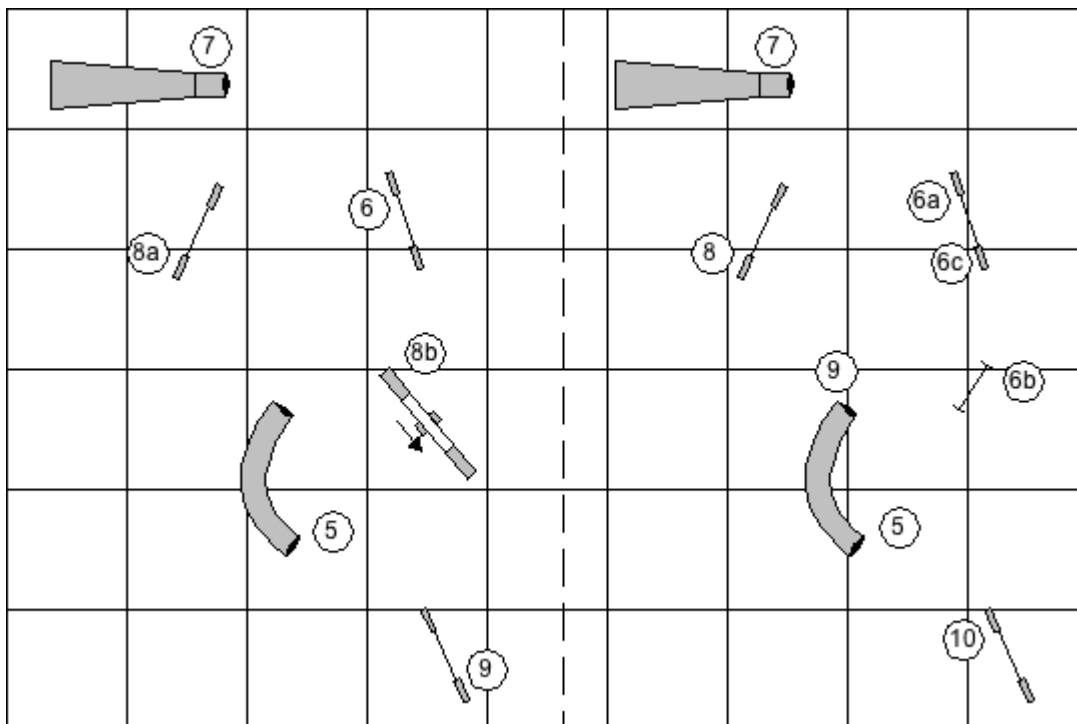


Figure 1

Figure 2

The two diagrams above show actual combinations indicative of what may be designed and offered on a standard agility or jumpers course. In these diagrams we can see how the addition of flow entering and exiting the combination may affect the performance as well as possibly present more risk for a wrong course when trying to return to the beginning of the combination. The first diagram (Figure 1) shows the jump and see-saw combination while the second diagram (Figure 2) has a three jump combination. They must be completed in one fluid motion.

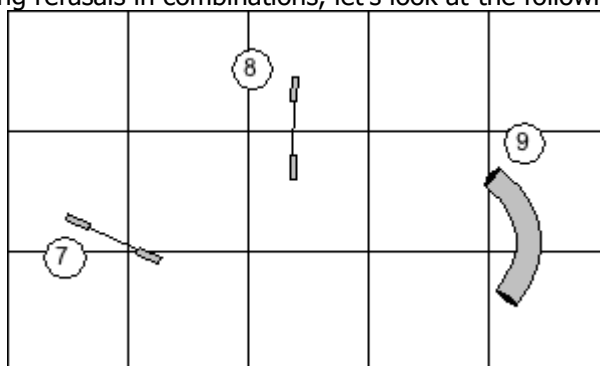
Now that the combination has been defined, how are the faults assessed if the dog and handler team happen to make a mistake while completing the combination? The same standard faults that may occur in a Masters titling class may occur within the performance of the combination; knocked bars, missed contact zones, refusals, runouts, fly-off on see-saw, and missed weave pole faults. Each instance of one of these faults will incur the same penalty as we have always assessed.

The confusion on judging combinations typically surfaces because of the last bullet item of what defines a combination.

- Performance of the combination shall not be considered complete until each element has been performed in the direction prescribed by the judge in a single fluid motion without refusals or runout faults being incurred.

In short, what this means is if the team earns a refusal or runout on the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th element of a combination, they must return to the start of the combination and begin again. The combination is not considered complete until all elements have been taken in flow as defined by the judge in one fluid motion without earning a refusal or runout fault during that attempt. The combination cannot be repeated for any other reason ie: knocked bar, missed weave pole, or missed contact.

Before we look at judging refusals in combinations, let's look at the following sequence:

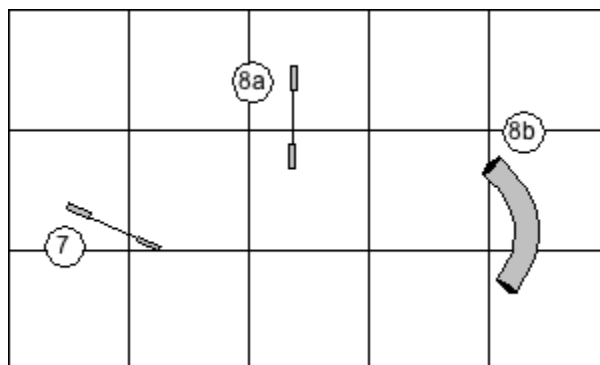


**Figure 3**

In a traditional Masters titling class, if the dog refuses or runs by jump #8, before the team can continue to tunnel #9 they must return to jump #8 and complete the jump in the direction specified, otherwise the team would earn an elimination for going off-course. This is the same performance criteria we have used for judging refusals and runouts since the inception of our sport in the United States. This is also the same performance criteria we are to use while judging combinations. To clarify:

- If the dog refuses jump #8, they get a second attempt at the jump.
- If the dog runs by jump #8, they must return to the jump for another attempt.
- If the dog knocks the bar of jump #8, they do not get to try it again.

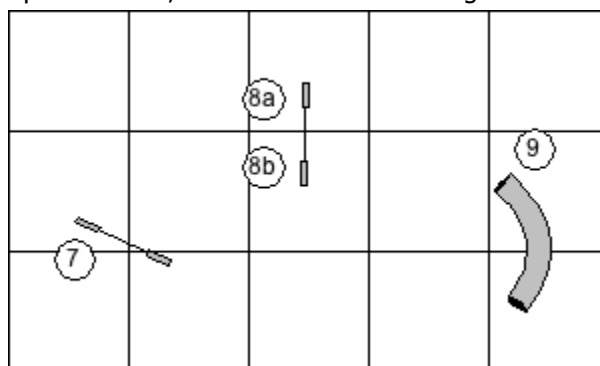
Let's change the course a little bit so the jump and tunnel are actually a combination:



**Figure 4**

In this case, if the dog performs jump #7 and #8a successfully and along the way to the tunnel the dog runs by the entrance, the team would incur the typical runout fault. As described earlier, the dog must return to the beginning of the obstacle and complete the performance before being allowed to continue. However, the difference is that, this time, the beginning of the obstacle is the jump #8a since it is a combination and just fixing the tunnel entrance would not be acceptable.

Changing the sequence up a bit more, let's look at the following combination:

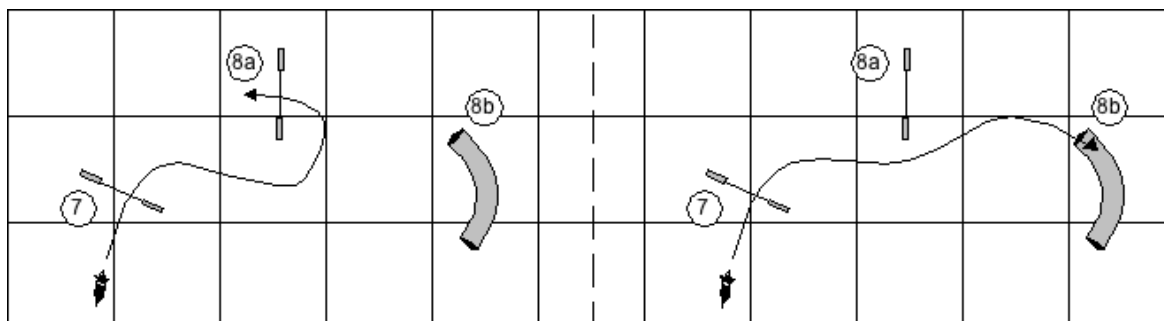


**Figure 5**

In this case, if the dog performs jumps #7 and #8a successfully and then runs by or refuses jump #8b, just as in the last combination, the team is required to return to the beginning of the obstacle and start with jump #8a. That would mean performing the jump twice in succession (and a total of three times) to complete #8a and #8b as defined by the combination.

What about off-courses? In Masters Standard, Jumpers and Relay classes, taking any obstacle out of sequence or in the wrong direction constitutes a wrong course and will earn the team an elimination. By contrast, in the Masters game classes, specifically Snooker, judges have some leeway in how they will be judging the wrong course in combinations, and as long as the judge clearly defines in the class briefing how the combinations are to be performed, pretty much anything is allowed. The Masters Challenge classes shall be scored the same as Masters Standard and if any obstacle is taken out of sequence or in the wrong direction, whether it is part of a combination or not, it will result in a wrong course fault, which will be assessed with an elimination.

Let's take a look at a few sample dog paths:



**Figure 6**

**Figure 7**

In the first example (Figure 6), the dog has run by jump #8a and when the handler is redirecting the dog back to the beginning of the obstacle, the dog back jumps the hurdle. This is jumping the obstacle in the wrong direction and will earn the team an elimination. In the second example (Figure 7) the dog has run by jump #8a and before the handler gets control of the dog, the dog runs into the tunnel #8b. In both of these examples, even though the team is working the combination obstacle, it is not within the flow designed by the judge, and therefore the result is a wrong course fault (i.e., elimination) for both.

Combinations are a fun and exciting new challenge that we judges can offer our competitors. Not only does it allow for some interesting and creative course layouts, it also allows us to go slightly over the limit of 20 obstacles to be performed on a single course.

So how many combinations can be used in one course? USDAA regulations specify-

*"A course shall contain eighteen (18) to twenty (20) obstacle elements, with combinations<sup>12.01</sup> permitted, and each combination considered as one element. A course shall be limited to a total of twenty-five (25) total obstacles when combinations are used (i.e., when counting each obstacle on course, including the individual components of any combinations)".*

It is recommended that no more than two combinations be used.

To summarize:

- If a refusal or runout happens within a combination, the team must return to the beginning of that combination and start over.
- If there is a knocked bar, missed contact, or weave pole, there is no going back and fixing it. It is faulted.
- Any obstacle taken out of sequence or in the wrong direction at any time is faulted as a wrong course resulting in elimination.

With this new challenge, it is important that judges score combinations consistently at every trial, in every state, and in any country.■