

## RABBIT AGILITY INSTRUCTORS MANUAL WHITE BAND (First Level)

This is the most boring and most important level. These skills are the basis for everything you and your bunny will learn going forward so a firm foundation is critical.

Consistently your new students will arrive wide-eyed and nervous. They will clutch their rabbits tightly and repeat "My rabbit will never do this." Five weeks later they will have all the confidence in the world and will be improving rapidly on all their skills. The purpose of this level is to build the trust bond between the rabbit and their handler or handlers. They will learn to identify verbal commands and respond correctly. They will learn to socialize with other rabbits and be comfortable in new surroundings. It is fine for them to learn to trust multiple handlers as long as everyone uses the same commands. The command words each person wishes to use is their choice as long as they don't sound like another command word i.e. hop — stop. Go, forward, and hop are all perfectly fine choices but remember to choose one and stay consistent. The more word commands your rabbit learns the easier it will be to teach new skills. Verbal commands should always be given clearly and in a strong voice slightly lower than your speaking voice. Your rabbit needs to identify that you are not just having conversation but are actually telling it to do something.

**Week one** is devoted to harness fitting, socializing, and introduction of the first commands. Expect confused rabbits flat on the floor and handlers who are struggling. This will improve quickly as everyone gets the concepts. The harness should be fitted around the middle of the rabbit first. That way if they bolt and run the harness is not around the neck only. It should be removed neck first for the same reason. It is easiest to harness an upside down tranced bunny if at all possible. There are many harnesses made especially for rabbits and available from pet stores or online supply houses. In the case of a very small rabbit a ferret harness will work. The ferret's body is tubular so a rabbit with a larger girth than its neck will not be able to wear those unless it is the nylon H shaped harnesses that are quite adjustable. In looking at other harnesses be sure they are H shaped and never a figure 8. When your rabbit runs and the leash stops it you want the pressure to be on the shoulder/rib area not ever on the neck. The harness should fit snugly enough to prevent the rabbit from backing out of it. You should be able to stick two fingers comfortably between the rabbit and the harness at both the

girth and the neck. Remember that most rabbits have a significant fat layer and the harness needs to fit snugly to their body and may appear tight even when it's not.

Next, wearing their harnesses, everyone has time to play the explorer game. Some rabbits will be confident and curious and others will cling to their parents. This exercise works well with all the people sitting in a circle with the rabbits in the center and no carriers, chairs, or places to hide available. Let them explore and meet each other. Start working on call back by calling their name with a "come" verbal command. Give them a treat if they will accept it as a reward. Many bunnies are not willing to accept food in a strange environment so don't be discouraged.

Rabbits, like horses, work on pressure-release. They will always move away from the pressure and are always rewarded by the release. From the very beginning use all the words you wish them to learn and address them by name i.e. "Abby — Hop". Eventually your body will not give the commands — only your voice. Saying their name first before the command helps them to understand that you are talking to them. In a room full of chaos "Lenny — right" will be heard and understood.

Now it is time to introduce body language and verbal commands.

Forward - Holding slack in your leash stand with your feet behind your rabbit with your heels touching and your toes spread out behind their butt. Without pushing the bunny slide closer and closer repeating the word "hop" or whatever forward word you choose. This annoys them and will cause them to move away from the pressure. The second they move forward at all step back removing the pressure and tell them how wonderful they are. Then immediately repeat over and over until they are hopping away readily when they feel you get close and say the word. Remember that if your leash is taut it is pressure preventing forward movement.

\*\*\*Some rabbits are not sufficiently annoyed by your close presence to move away so reach down with both hands and tickle or lift them at the groin (where their hind legs attach to their tummy) and make them hop over your hands. Always repeat your forward verbal command so eventually they understand what you are asking and hop forward easily.

Halt - When you wish your rabbit to stop moving tighten your leash and say your chosen word. Many of us use "sit" as that is a valuable command. Do not pull on the leash just stop moving yourself and maintain firm contact until your rabbit stops moving and relaxes the body into a sit position. Then

immediately release the pressure slackening the leash. Praise them again using their name "Sadie — good sit" Think of yourself as a tree that they cannot move. They must submit to the constant pressure and relax. Then they are rewarded by total release. If your rabbit starts to move away before you give them a forward command repeat the "sit" sequence.

The goal is to have your rabbit move only when told and otherwise sit quietly at your side. This will take consistency and hundreds of repetitions.

Right Turn — Again standing directly behind your rabbit and holding a snug short leash to give yourself good leverage and prevent forward motion place your left foot alongside your rabbit's left eye. Just hold it there or wriggle it for more emphasis repeating over and over "Alice - Right" Do not scoop your rabbit to the right with your foot. If they do not respond use your left hand to gently push them to the right all the time repeating the verbal command. Any small turn or even head movement to the right remove the foot, slacken the leash, and ask them to "hop" away. As always praise, praise, praise.

Left Turn - Is exactly the opposite of right.

\*\*\*Think of the turning commands as dance steps. If you are directly behind your rabbit and you step your left foot forward they will move to the right. Then you can easily replace your foot behind to move forward.

\*\*\*If your leash is too long you will be too far away from your rabbit to be effective. Your body needs to stay almost on top of them to easily move from right to forward to left. In the beginning this will be hard on your back but as they advance you will be able to give them more line and less physical direction.

\*\*\*If you position yourself to one side or the other you will be scrambling to turn the other way. If your body gets in front of their eye the "pressure" will have changed and they will stop, turn, or back up to get away from the new pressure that is now in front of them.

\*\*\*If you always hold your leash tightly you are always giving a halt command. Your rabbit must have slack to be able to move.

\*\*\*This is an intricate and softly done give and take, which the rabbits understand and respond to quite quickly.

\*\*\*It is good to practice hopping all the way across the room without stopping as well as the sitting and turning practice.

\*\*\*Constant repetition at the beginning of training will bring understanding and much easier success later. If you feel you are annoying by repeating yourself so often you are doing it correctly.

\*\*\*Most of the rabbits have the stamina to work for about 15-20 minutes at a time and then they need a break.

Targeting - During these break times you may introduce targeting. Some rabbits take to this readily and others have no interest. It will be a valuable skill in the advanced levels so worth your time to learn and practice it. Sit on the floor with your rabbit and whatever treats they are most interested in. Hold the treat in your fingers and ask the rabbit to "come" or "touch". As they learn to reach out to touch your hand and take the treat move further and further away encouraging them to come to you. You may then introduce the "target". These are the round plastic lids from Pringles or nuts. They can be any size or color. The treat is placed on the target and the rabbit is encouraged to go to the target. They may take a food treat from it or just play with it throwing it around. The goal is to get them to go to it when it is presented.

**Week two** of this session you may design a course of small cones for the class to practice turning through.

**Week three** you may make the course out of jump standards for them to hop through. As you are now adding a new dimension you will need to give the verbal 'jump' command as they go through the uprights. They will then identify the white jump standards with the activity of jumping. You may also introduce the A-frame flat on the ground. They must hop onto and directly over the A-frame without hopping off over the side. To promote this the handler can have their hands on either side of the rabbit (behind the eye) encouraging forward and preventing bailing off the side. Two handlers can work together with rabbits that are having a difficult time with this. You now have a new type of obstacle and need a new command word i.e. "Morgan — A Frame" You may call it 'Bridge' if you would like as it is similar to the bridge that will come at a higher level. Again the choice is individual.

**Week four** you may add a ground pole at the jump standards and a slight incline for the A-frame. Again reinforce that the A-frame must be approached and hopped over without stopping or bailing over the side.

At any time you should be able to stop and listen to everyone talking to their rabbits at the same time. This is a wonderful thing and shows that everyone is using their verbal cues which are often difficult for them to remember.

**Week five** is testing and everyone should pass. As this is an introductory level the only time a rabbit has not passed to yellow band is when they

flatten and will not even hop forward or they only turn toward their handler and asks to be comforted. It happens seldom but is an indicator that the rabbit is not enjoying the program and should not be expected to continue.

### **Homework and Activities**

Always harness and leash your rabbit when you are on an adventure away from home out of their carrier. If they panic or danger approaches you can easily scoop them up to safety.

\*\*\* Practice wearing the harness and learning the foot and verbal cues at home. You can set up many kinds of courses around your home for your rabbit to practice their turning skills. We have found that they are most receptive to working in an area of the house where they don't live. The more time they spend wearing their harnesses the more comfortable they will become in them.

\*\*\*If the weather is nice outside they enjoy a hop around the neighborhood impressing the neighbors with their listening skills. What is better than a bunny sitting on command? They are naturally nervous at dusk so it is best to do your hops in daylight.

Always be aware of dogs or other bunny scary or hurtful things. Do not let them eat anything outside unless you are sure it has not been sprayed with chemicals

\*\*\*A trip to the Pet Store is always a treat. Because there will be dogs there it is best if your rabbit is riding safely in the cart. You will want to bring a small blanket or towel so they are comfortable. Go ahead and show them off if it is safe. It is a great promo for rabbits everywhere if people can see them interacting with you. Be prepared to be the center of attention.

\*\*\* Volunteer Opportunities - Once you have a group of rabbits accustomed to being away from home and in unusual situations we have found many opportunities for them in public service. They have been showcased at Pet Expo, MN Renaissance Festival, Animal Humane Society open houses, and demos at pet stores. We have a large group of them who visit seniors at nursing homes. They are amazing in their perception of when to sit quietly for petting by fragile folks. Rabbits that are busy and active at home will spend hours being passed from lap to lap never trying to get down. The Pet Partners (formerly Delta Society) is a national organization which will train and register many types of animal as therapy partners. They provide in depth training to prepare you for hospitals, nursing homes, and schools. Through them you will receive liability insurance and a network of opportunities for you and your rabbit individually and in the group.