

Conditioning the Canine Athlete

The body of a canine athlete should be physically toned to enable him to perform and excel in whatever sport or task required of him. Though all dogs need daily exercise, ones who regularly work or perform need a more expansive exercise regimen to maintain top physical form. Physical conditioning involves not only exercise, but also stretching, and warm-up and cool-down exercises. Most dogs do not exercise themselves with peak conditioning in mind, so it is important to make exercise part of your dog's daily routine to maintain top body form.

Before beginning any exercise program with your canine athlete, have your veterinarian perform a full health check to detect any physical problems that could be aggravated by the activity. Extra weight means extra stress on bones and joints, so make certain your dog is at his ideal weight before leading into activities that may be too strenuous. Very young dogs must be limited in their activities to ensure that the exercise will not harm still-forming bones. (In general, it is best to wait until the growth plates have fully closed.) Care must also be taken with older dogs to guard against injuries to joints. In choosing your dog's exercise program, consider his body structure and any physical limitations he may have so as not to push him beyond his limits. (Some characteristics include brachycephalic or flat head, long back, or heavy-boned build.) The benefits of an exercise program are many. Physically conditioned dogs perform better in sport and competition with less occurrence and severity of injury. They are also able to maintain a healthy weight much more easily. Exercise is healthy psychologically for dogs as it gives them an appropriate outlet for energy and helps reduce hyperactivity, as well as behavior problems related to boredom or insufficient activity.

Where to Exercise

The environment in which you exercise your canine athlete is equally important for his safety as the exercise routine itself. Choose a securely enclosed area, or keep your dog on leash. The ground in the area you choose is ideally grass covered to provide soft and stable footing. Avoid concrete or asphalt, as these surfaces are not only hard on joints and bones, but can also cause scrapes and abrasions on the foot pads. Also beware of temperature conditions. Take caution in exercising during warm and very cold times

of the year, and avoid physical activity during the hottest parts of the day to help prevent heat exhaustion.

Warm-Up and Cool-Down

A human athlete wouldn't consider running a marathon just after waking up, and you shouldn't expect the same from your dog. Strenuous exercise performed without some kind of warm-up or stretching can lead to pulled muscles and other injuries. While a warm-up prepares your dog's body for physical activity, a cool-down is equally important to prevent muscles from getting tight afterwards. Warm-ups and cool-downs don't have to be long—usually only 2-3 minutes will suffice. Begin with a rub down over the entire length of your dog's body, focusing on the areas along the spine. Next, have your dog turn one complete spin to each side.

When stretching your dog, use gentle motions without forcing a movement that may be uncomfortable or even harmful. With one hand just in front of your dog's back leg for support, guide his front end to one side and hold the position for about three seconds before switching sides. You may hold a piece of food slightly in front of your dog's nose to help lure him to face the proper direction. Next, stand behind your dog and have him sit facing away from you. With one hand supporting the back of his head and the other lightly holding his muzzle, gently lift his head to look upward, downward, and side to side, holding each position about three seconds. Next, with your dog standing sideways in front of you, pick up one leg and gently extend it straight out and then bend it at the joints while supporting the knee and hock joints with your hand. Continue this motion with each leg. Once you have completed stretching, trot your dog about fifty paces for a short aerobic warm-up.

The Canine Conditioning Program

There are four basic components to a canine conditioning program: nutrition, strength training, endurance training, and event training. With any physical program, your dog will need a high quality of food to help him sustain energy and a toned physique. In each area of conditioning, it is important to start slow and gradually

progress at intervals as your dog shows he is able to progress. Never push your dog beyond his physical limits, as this can cause injury.

Strength training should be conducted on nonconsecutive days three times a week for about fifteen minutes per session. Some strength training exercises include short, intense retrieving sprints on land or in water for a full body workout and uphill running for hind leg conditioning. Endurance training is any aerobic activity several times a week for about thirty minutes per session. Exercises can include distance running, as on a treadmill or even accompanying you on a jog, or distance swimming. (These exercises are aside from retrieving for strength.) Again, take care not to run or swim your dog for longer than he can physically handle to avoid injury or exhaustion.

Your dog will greatly benefit in his performance in any sport through strength and endurance training, but event training is specific to the particular sport in which your dog competes. While all sports require an agile body and general soundness, you will need to determine where your dog needs the most work in his particular sport and practice in those areas.

All dogs can benefit from a physical conditioning program, but it is most apparent in the canine athlete. Through physical training you will not only see better results in competition, but the overall health of your dog will also improve by bounds.

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