

Condition Your Dog to Compete (Part 1)

Can you imagine the Olympics without the athletes stretching before competing?

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One particular agility trial finally cinched it for Nancy Fenoglio of Whittier, Calif. Actually, it was the day after the trial that did it; both she and her 5-year-old Irish Setter, 'Sarah,' were moving pretty slowly. Nancy's hips hurt, her left knee throbbed, and Sarah moved lethargically around the house. "I realized I couldn't keep doing this to myself, and it wasn't fair to Sarah. We were both paying the price of being weekend warriors. We were sedentary during the week, then we'd get out to a trial, do the best we could, and then pay for it the rest of the following week." Sound familiar? In a 2003 survey of 75 agility handlers nationwide, 68 percent said they were not at "optimum weight" for their sport. Sixty-one percent of respondents reported that they exercised only twice a week, and 69 percent said they would like to participate in an exercise program that would better prepare them for competition. These numbers confirm what media reports tell us: almost two-thirds of adult Americans are overweight. Is it too hard to imagine that our dogs may be out of shape as well?

"Agility is very demanding on the human musculoskeletal system," says Desiree Snelleman of Fido'n Friends... In Motion, in Long Beach, Calif. Snelleman, who conducted the survey, is a certified personal trainer, as well as a member of both the American College of Sports Medicine and the National Academy of Sports Medicine. She also teaches a popular workshop, "Stretching for Both Ends of the Leash," and teaches "Handler Conditioning" classes at Jump Start Dog Sports in Yorba Linda, Calif. "The sport of agility, like any sport, does not come without risk," Snelleman says. "Most injuries occur either from improper use of the body over time, or from an acute event," she adds. "Agility handlers can greatly reduce this risk by doing general conditioning for themselves and their canine teammate. For people this should include cardiovascular, flexibility, and strength training."

'Oakie,' a 6-year-old Pembroke Welsh Corgi, is a good example of how beneficial canine conditioning can be. He was suffering from pain in his hips when owner Mary Lynn Dawson, of Lake Geneva, Wis., brought him to TOPS Veterinary Rehab in Grayslake, Ill. Their first objective was to rehabilitate Oakie; second was to implement a preventive conditioning program. TOPS' medical director Laurie McCauley, DVM, says, "Our preventive conditioning program included strengthening the gluteal and hamstring muscles to keep his hips stable and enhance his ability to jump from the rear, strengthen his trunk muscles to prevent back injuries, stretching to enhance joint nutrition and increase proprioception (knowing where his feet are in space), and massage to decrease lactic acid accumulation in the muscles and find minor injuries before they become apparent." Lucky for Oakie ... who went on to win the NADAC Nationals 8" Elite in 2002 and 2004.