

Condition Your Dog to Compete (Part 2)

Maximize your dog's performance with these conditioning tips.

Terry Long

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'Dancer,' a 5-year-old Jack Russell Terrier, was at the height of her agility career, competing three out of four weekends with her owner, Suzanne Birdsall of Long Beach, Calif. Dancer had her MACH and was competing in AKC Excellent B and USDAA Masters Classes, and Birdsall had her sights set on the nationals. Dancer had always been in perfect health, so when the terrier started showing periodic lameness, Birdsall was puzzled. Dancer occasionally skipped, briefly holding up a hind leg. Then, at class one night, Dancer hit the teeter slightly off center, and didn't want to continue. The next morning, she couldn't get up. "I was shocked. In a matter of hours, she went from a little bit of skipping to not being able to walk," says Birdsall. The next shock was the challenge she was about to face in finding out what was wrong with her dog, how best to rehabilitate her, and how to return to the sport they both loved.

In last month's column, we heard about dogs and handlers who found physical conditioning programs to enhance their agility performance. In cases where there has been no injury and lameness, it can be relatively easy to chart and implement such a program. Not so in cases like Dancer's.

Birdsall remembers the difficult journey just to reach a diagnosis: "I took her to my regular vet, who took X-rays which showed no breaks. They didn't know what else it could be. I took her to an orthopedic specialist who looked at the X-rays, and recommended an MRI. The MRI showed possible compression of the [sixth lumbar] vertebrae. I took her to another orthopedist for a second opinion, and he didn't think the L6 was the problem, so he did a bone scan. The bone scan showed 'hot spots' in the left hock and right knee. He prescribed crate rest and Deramaxx for a month. When we rechecked at a month, there was only slight improvement. He said just keep at it. I really felt that since there wasn't an obvious surgical resolution that the orthopedists washed their hands of me."