

Canine Stretch and Massage

Regular conditioning can help prevent injuries in your performance dog.

By Maryanne Dell

Conditioning is as essential for disc-dog, flyball or agility competitors as it is for human athletes.

“Too many performance dogs are being thrown into competition and nothing is being done about the conditioning,” says Debbie Gross Saunders of Colchester, Conn., a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner who is board-certified in orthopedic physical therapy for humans and has been working with animals for about 15 years. “Human athletes go through daily exercise programs, but we don’t do this with our dogs.”

Saunders has a doctorate in human physical therapy and an advanced master’s degree in human orthopedic physical therapy. Her DVDs, produced by Clean Run Productions, “Stretching the Performance Dog” (2005), “Strengthening the Performance Dog” (2006) and “Get on the Ball” (2007), demonstrate how to use stretching and conditioning to help canine athletes stay in shape and prevent injuries.

“Because dogs don’t stop until they’re hurt, conditioning can also help prevent or at least mitigate serious injury,” Saunders says.

Massage, stretching and conditioning activities, such as walking your dog up hills, working it on an exercise ball, and having it weave in and out of your legs, are the keys to preventing canine injuries.

“Conditioning, in my opinion, is mandatory for any dog involved in performance events,” Saunders says. “Whether it’s agility, field trials, flyball or freestyle dancing, each dog needs to be conditioned appropriately.”

Why massage?

Terry Senko, owner of Pawsitive Feelings in Corona del Mar, Calif., is a certified equine and canine massage practitioner. Senko provides massage to dogs (and horses), and offers seminars that teach people how to massage their own animals.

“I liken massage to a walk in terms of health benefits,” Senko says. “If you go for a walk once a week, it’ll probably be better than not walking, but you’re not going to notice a big difference in your health. But if you walk 30 to 45 minutes two to three times a week, you have long-term health benefits. It’s the same with a massage. To really make a difference, you need to do it at least two to three times a week for 20 to 30 minutes.”

Massage isn’t something you do during commercials while watching your favorite TV show, Senko says. Therapeutic massage should be performed in a calm setting, perhaps with soothing music and low light. And you, the canine masseuse, should concentrate on your dog’s body and how it feels.

You can learn massage from a certified canine massage therapist, or you can hire someone like Senko to massage your dog for you. Most people can’t afford for their dog to have a professional massage several times a week, though, so Senko advises taking a class and using videos to learn the techniques yourself.

Stretching advantages

Like massage, stretching has huge benefits for dogs and handlers. “Stretching is good because it gets your hands on the dog, and you have a starting point that serves as a reference for changes in your dog’s health,” says Desiree Snelleman of Long Beach, Calif., owner of Fido’n Friends ... in Motion. Snelleman, who has 20 years experience as an athletic trainer, coaches people on how to condition their dogs for competition.

Knowing how your dog’s body feels when it’s healthy helps you determine if there is a change, Snelleman says. If you routinely stretch your dog, you will notice when it suddenly shows an unusual reaction – such as moving its muzzle toward its leg when the leg is stretched – and you will be able to take the dog to the vet to have it examined.

Having an expert, such as your veterinarian or a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner, conduct a physical exam of your dog to determine whether its bones, muscles and structure are sound is essential, she says. “Get the dog examined by a pro because the average person doesn’t know what’s stressed and what effect those stressors have on the body.”

When to condition

Incorporating massage, stretching and conditioning work two to three times a week will contribute to a healthier dog.

“The more owners understand about their dog’s movement, the better,” Saunders says. “Whether the dog is heading to the world agility competition or the park for a hike, owners are the most valuable resources when it comes to keeping their dogs healthy and helping them perform at their best.”

Maryanne Dell is a Southern California dog trainer, writer and editor.