

Naturally Prepared

Check out these seven holistic ways to ready dogs for performance.

Liz Palika

Noel Cacchio hunts with her American Cocker Spaniels, one of whom is Dungarvan My Special Boy MH, NAP, NJP. She believes in preparing them for the hunting season. Cacchio, who is the Eastern Field Chairperson for The American Spaniel Club, says, "I cook for my dogs and increase the protein in the fall, when most of our hunts take place, with additional organ meats." She adds, "If the temperatures are high, I give the dogs Hydrolyte (An electrolyte, antioxidant and energy replacement formula) the night before our hunting day and after their exercise."

Peak Performance, a website designed for human athletes (www.peakperformance.on.ca), has found that far too many athletes don't pay enough attention to preparation for performance events, sometimes not even eating correctly. But preparation (both long term and short term) can make or break a performance, whether the athletic endeavor is by a human, a canine or an equine. So here are seven proven holistic techniques that can help your dog prepare for performance, no matter what his sport.

#1 Long-Term Training Approach

Take a long-term approach to your dog's training. Ideally, your dog should reach the peak of his training just as competition begins. If you begin training too soon or too late, he won't be ready or will be stale.

Of course, gauging this is tough. You need to know your dog and how he reacts to his training, very well. Does he do better with several short daily training sessions? Or should he train just once a day? My Australian Shepherd, Bashir, is very bright and loves to learn but actually processes what he is being taught better when he trains every other day. By knowing this about him, I can plan out our training sessions so they are less stressful for both of us and so that he can learn at his own speed.

What you are training for must also be taken into consideration. Dogs competing at advanced levels – in obedience, herding or field trials – usually know their sport well. But oftentimes, reaching the upper levels of competition requires training that can be complicated. For example, utility competition is much more difficult than novice. If you need help, ask a trainer who is involved in your sport.

#2 Look at Your Dog's Diet Early

"The biggest key to good nutrition during performance is to begin your dog's [feeding regimen] prior to competition season," says Jocelynn Jacobs, DVM, who breeds, shows and races her AKC Alaskan Malamutes, and who is the author of *Performance Dog Nutrition* (Sno Shire Publications, 2005). Jacobs emphasizes that quality is just as important (or more important) than quantity. "If a poor-quality food is fed during the off season – one that doesn't supply all the needed amino acids, for example – then the dog's body will be forced to take protein from existing muscles to meet its needs."

Jacobs says, "For most obedience, agility and field-trial dogs, a premium, quality commercial diet is more than adequate to meet the dogs' nutritional needs. But if you decide feeding a homemade diet is right for you, then be sure to read as much as you can from reliable sources about ingredients that provide a wide complement of amino acids, digestible fats, proteins, high-quality fiber and balanced vitamins and minerals."

#3 Body Muscle and Development Takes Time

No matter what sport your dog participates in, the dog will need adequate time to strengthen its body for that sport. If rushed into a sport without adequate time to prepare, the dog will be much more prone to hurting itself by damaging muscles, straining tendons, or even breaking bones. In addition, without enough preparation, he could face physical exhaustion and his immune system could suffer, leaving him vulnerable to illnesses.

Your dog's physical makeup, genetic heritage, and normal activity levels, as well as the sport your dog will be participating in, must all be taken into account when deciding when your dog should begin his physical-conditioning routine.

#4 Cross Training is Good for Body and Mind

Cross training is training, working or exercising in a sport or activity different from the one in which your dog will be competing. Jogging, for example, for a dog getting ready for weight training, will use a different set of muscles. Ideally,

cross training should be something your dog likes to do and your goal should be to keep this activity fun.

Many police departments and military canine units use cross training to keep the dog's mind sharp as well as its body. A patrol dog used to find criminals trying to escape might be cross trained in drug detection. Or the patrol dog in his off hours may be encouraged to play fetch with the tennis ball.

The only warning about cross training is that it should do no harm. Mary Fish Arango participates in agility, obedience and therapy-dog work with her three Border Collies, one of whom is PC's Storybook Donderblitzen CD, AX, AXJ, TDI. Arango says, "In the week prior to a competition, I avoid trips to the beach or dog park where people will obsessively throw the ball or frisbee for my dogs. This could easily get the dog's joints and muscles sore before a competition."

#5 Immediately Before Competition

Dogs that have competed previously know the signs of an upcoming competition. Marsha Pugh competes with her Italian Greyhounds in conformation. She says, "I try to keep the night before a competition normal. The dogs get their normal dinner and normal routine although they know a competition is imminent because I am usually preparing my show bag and packing the car." Pugh says one of her dogs tends to get nervous and car sick so she plans on arriving at the show grounds at least an hour early. She can then walk the dog around for a little while. Pugh says, "I also use Tellington Touch to relax, motivate and instill confidence in my dogs."

Caroline Coile, Ph.D., participates in several sports with her Salukis, one of which is Ch. Kiva's Prophet of Baha, CD, FCh, RN, SC, JOR. Coile says, "I try to get to the grounds as early as possible and walk the dog around so he isn't intimidated by everything going on. I don't feed breakfast on these mornings but I will offer a very small, but calorie-dense, treat such as some hamburger."

Coile also stresses the need for the dog to warm up his muscles and stretch. "Before agility, I have my dog jump the low practice jump a few times and run a little. Before lure coursing, I trot him around for a little while and I have him stretch, which consists of having him put his front feet on my shoulders."

#6 During and After Competition

If the dog's performance takes place on a hot day or lasts more than an hour, it's a good idea to offer some fluids with electrolytes and carbohydrates. This can help prevent dehydration and exhaustion. Jacobs says, "There are many supplements available that provide electrolytes and carbohydrate boosts for your dog. The quality can be variable; the more-expensive products are probably going to be the best because they have more digestible or usable nutrients in them."

Exercise increases oxygen usage and this oxygen metabolism generates free radicals. (Free radicals are a chemical unit in your dog's body. These are unstable because they're missing an electron. To try and gain that electron, they attack healthy, stable cells and steal that cell's electron. That attacked cell then becomes a free radical itself.) Antioxidants, though, can balance free radicals and stop the cycle of damage. The antioxidants can be from foods, supplements, or sports drinks containing antioxidants.

Your dog will enjoy a massage after a performance event. Tired or injured muscles can tighten once they cool down and a massage can help them relax.

#7 Water!

"The most important supplement you can give your dog during any competition is plain old water!" Jacobs says, "Many people who compete with their dogs spend so much time and money on supplements and they forget to make sure their dog is drinking. But water is one of the most essential nutrients for the body." She suggests bringing water from home so that it is familiar and smells and tastes right; many dogs will not drink water that is different.

In performance events that really push the dog to its limit, either in exertion or because of the conditions of the event (such as heat), many wise owners will "bait" the water so the dog will drink more than he might normally. The bait in the water could be low- or no-sodium chicken broth, with the fat; or beef broth; or even broth with shredded meat in it. The protein and fat will help him continue, and the water will help prevent dehydration.

All of these techniques can help you prepare your dog for performance, but nothing will turn him into something he isn't. Just as some people can run 26-mile marathons and do well whereas other people prefer to lift weights, and just as some horses can sprint amazingly fast while others do better at long-distance endurance rides, dogs have their own strengths and weaknesses. Rather than try to fit your dog into a mold that doesn't fit it, find out where your dog can succeed and then do that with him. You'll both be happier!



Liz Palika is an award-winning author who has written extensively on holistic issues and pet foods. Her latest book on dogs and what they eat is *The Ultimate Dog Treat Cookbook* (Wiley, 2006). For more on Liz and her work go to www.lizpalika.com.

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