

Increasing Canine Agility Performance:

The Human Element
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Agility contests for dogs are big and growing. Timed obstacle courses require dogs to maneuver through tubes, ladders, and poles. Successful dogs are fit and well trained and have to work-out for many hours to master the sport become conditioned enough to run the course many times during the day. Trainers and owners have written hundreds of articles in books and magazines on developing skills and fitness for dogs involved in this sport. But, the dog is only part of the team.

The human element is the other part of the equation. People spend hours training their dogs for agility and fitness but almost none on themselves. Most trainers are middle age and sedentary and haven't exercised vigorously since high school or college. Agility trials use elimination rounds that can wear down the human part of the team. By the end of the day, humans get so tired that their fatigue limits their dog's performance.

Trainers bend, twist, accelerate, and stop fast during training and competition. Sore feet, legs, and lower backs can sap your strength and wear you down. It's obvious that you rather than your dog are the weak link in the chain. Your fitness relates directly to your ability to get the most from your dog.

You don't have to be a pro athlete but you should be fit if you want your dog to shine in agility races. You have to have good endurance as well as a strong back, abdominal muscles, solid joints, and the physical capacity to perform endless start and stop movements.

You will get the most from your dogs—and improve your own health and wellness—if you follow the thirteen principles of training. These principles are a guide to gradual, long-lasting, injury-free fitness development and will lead to improved performance with the smallest risk of injury for you and your dog.

Principles of Training

1. Train the way you want your body to change.
2. Eat a well-balanced, high performance diet.
3. Establish realistic goals
4. Have a workout Plan
5. Exercise all year round.
6. Get in shape gradually.
7. Don't train when you're ill or seriously injured.
8. Train first for volume (more repetitions) and only later for intensity (more weight or resistance).
9. Listen to your body.
10. Train systematically
11. Warm-up and cool-down
12. Train the mind.
13. Have Fun! Keep the exercise program in its proper perspective.

1. Train the way you want your body to change.

This means stress your body so that it changes the way you want. Agility training for dogs requires general fitness for their trainers, so choose a well-rounded program that concentrates on the major muscle groups. Besides the weight training routine, the program should include endurance and flexibility exercises.

This is the most important training principle. The body adapts to stress in a very specific

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way. For example, swimming will not improve endurance for pacing your dog in agility courses. The best way to improve performance in a sport is to practice that particular sport, but also do support exercises, such as weight training, walking, and running that will help pace your dog. The principle of specificity should be the central consideration in any training program designed to improve skilled performance. Develop fitness for the type of movements you do when working or competing with your dog.

Summarizing this critical principle of specificity — train the way you want your body to adapt. Develop strength, power, endurance, and flexibility slowly. Improving fitness that will aid the performance of your dog in agility courses.

2. Eat a well-balanced, high performance diet.

During the past 20 years, sports scientists have shown that the right diet can improve performance and keep off unwanted pounds of fat. All the training in the world will not give you a great body if you eat too much. You spend a fortune on your dog's diet— don't neglect your own diet. You are a critical part of the team.

Eat a sensible, nutritious diet— one containing a balance of the basic food groups. The diet should supply enough calories to meet energy needs but still allow you to control your weight. If you want to lose weight, do so gradually— lose no more than 2-1/2 pounds per week. Eat a variety of healthy foods that are high in fruits, vegetables, fish, and whole grains. Include foods containing monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil, nuts, and avocados.

3. Establish Realistic Goals

Fitness reflects the nature of the exercise stress (training program). Goals should reflect factors such as your capability, your dog's talent, and your motivation for success.

4. Have a Workout Plan

Write down your goals and your method for achieving them. If you are overweight, come up with a prudent plan for losing weight. For example, if you are a woman who wants to lose 20 pounds, set up a realistic program for achieving your goal. A sensible approach might be to lose 1 pound per week and strive to go to the health club 3 times per week and work your dog 3-5 times per week. You might achieve your goal by cutting down on desserts and fats in your diet in addition to your exercise plan.

5. Exercise all year round.

Dogs and people who take too much time off from their training program will lose the gains they've made. And they'll be more susceptible to injury if they try to get back in shape rapidly. Established a year-round program; have specific goals and procedures for each period of the year and stick to them.

Have alternative training plans for when the weather is bad or when you don't have access to a training field.

People who miss workouts, don't improve fitness and even lose the gains they made. Plan regular times for their exercise programs and stick to them. Don't let things interfere with their workouts. All of us have many responsibilities that compete for our time. Make your workouts a priority if training and competing with your dog is important.

6. Get in shape gradually

Achieving fitness takes time. Try to increase fitness too fast and you will get injured or over-trained. You cannot push the process too fast. High levels of fitness represent many small adaptations. If you introduce the stresses of exercise gradually, you will eventually become more fit with a minimum risk of injury.

Training is a stress the body must overcome, so give your body— and your dog's body— time to adapt to the stress of exercise. Muscles are more susceptible to injury during the early phases of conditioning. Over zealous training, or intense conditioning when you aren't prepared for it, will lead to injury and delay progress.

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Staying in good shape all year long is much easier than trying to achieve fitness in a few months. It's much easier to apply a little pressure instead of trying to go for a crash-conditioning program.

7. Don't train when you're ill or seriously injured.

The body has problems trying to fight more than one stressor simultaneously. Training when you are sick or injured may seriously hinder your progress or even be dangerous.

8. Train first for volume (more repetitions) and only later for intensity (more weight or resistance).

This principle seems to be at odds with the principle of specificity. You might ask, as a dog trainer, why would I want to develop aerobic capacity and muscle endurance if power output and speed are the most important fitness components? The answer is that low-intensity, repetitive exercise prepares your body to withstand more intensive training with less risk of injury.

High intensity training designed to develop power and speed pushes the body to its limit. If you first develop a "fitness base" and increase the intensity of training gradually, you will develop power and speed with less risk of strains, sprains, and muscle cramps.

9. Listen to your body.

Don't stick to the planned program too stubbornly if it doesn't feel right. Sometimes the body needs rest more than it needs exercise. Most studies show that the absolute intensity is the essential factor in improving fitness. Typically, an over-trained person has not recovered enough to train at an optimal intensity; so, a few days rest is sometimes necessary to provide enough recovery to allow for more intense training. Overtraining is accompanied by fatigue, decreased performance, irritability, and sometimes depression.

Exercise training is not an exact science. Sometimes you feel great and can train more intensely than planned. Other times, you feel tired and sluggish. Training hard when tired will actually impede progress.

Don't use this principle as an excuse to skip workouts. If you listen to your body and it always tells you to rest, you will never improve fitness. Follow a systematic program but be flexible enough to change it slightly according to how they feel.

10. Train systematically.

Plan a proper workout schedule for the coming months, but don't be so rigid that you can't change the program to fit unforeseen circumstances. The important thing is that you have a plan, so you can comfortably and consistently improve fitness.

11. Warm-up and cool-down.

Muscles work best when they're slightly warmer than at rest and have plenty of blood. Warming up before exercise increases muscle temperature, muscle and heart blood flow, tissue elasticity, joint lubrication, and gives athletes additional practice before competing or beginning formal practice. Cool-down helps to gradually restore normal resting blood flow levels to the inner organs.

12. Train the mind.

One of the most difficult skills to acquire — but critical for attaining high levels of physical fitness — is mind control. Training the mind is thoroughly interrelated with training the body — you can achieve almost anything if you set your mind to it. To become physically fit or to succeed as a dog trainer, you must believe in yourself and your potential, have goals, and know how to achieve these goals. It requires discipline and is an ongoing process. You must be able to put yourself in the proper frame of mind in

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order to do this.

13. Have Fun! Keep the exercise program in its proper perspective.

An old saying among exercise critics is “Exercise doesn’t make you live any longer; it just seems longer!” The program doesn’t have to be a chore if they chose activities they enjoy. You are in a great sport— don’t let your poor fitness hold your dog back!

Dr. Thomas Fahey is one of the most respected exercise scientists in the world. He has co-authored the “bible” of exercise physiology textbook (*Exercise Physiology: Human Bioenergetics and its Applications*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2000) along with other books ranging from sports injury treatment to women’s strength training. Dr. Fahey has also has published numerous studies in prestigious medical journals and is invited to present his findings throughout the world. He has worked with professional and Olympic athletes—including Bruce Jenner—and is himself is a six time national champion senior discus champion, and the current World Games discus winner, senior division.



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