

CADILLAC TREATMENT FOR THE CANINE ATHLETE

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Today many owners are interested in keeping their dog fit both physically and mentally by participating in athletic endeavors with their dogs. These athletic events can include such things as: racing, agility, fly ball, obedience as well as accompanying the owner on a run or long walk.

Canine athletes, like their human counterparts, flourish when consideration is given to the basics of good husbandry, specifically husbandry related to exercise and performance.

The following advice is an accumulation of experience with athletes both as a dog owner and a veterinarian and an animal chiropractor/acupuncturist. There are many roads to Rome, and I welcome response to this article from those who have had experience in this field.

1. Conditioning

This is not rocket science. Dogs need to be on a training program that sequentially increases their level of fitness and allows them to succeed at an increasing demand of performance.

E.g.- “weekend warriors”. experience a rest-exercise/trauma-rest cycle that can contribute to long term injury (small traumas accumulate).

Dogs need to be mentally, as well as physically prepared for work and competition. This involves maintaining a routine, using positive reinforcement and keeping sessions short and varied enough that they do not suffer repetitive stress injuries or mental exhaustion/boredom. When training in a confined area mix up the exercises so the dog is balanced in the way s/he moves and uses both sides of their body equally.

E.g.- dogs that always hit the flyball dispenser with the same foot and turn the same way to return can suffer upper thoracic and neck problems.

E.g.- dogs that race and train in one direction load the inside leg more and experience 'breakdowns' in that inside (usually fore limb).

E.g.-dogs that always heel on the left, are always corrected on the left have cervical subluxations (abnormal joint motion in the neck) from the lack of balanced activity.



Train on good footing. While athletes may compensate for lack of good footing, be aware it will increase the likelihood of injury. Hard surfaces also accelerate wear and tear. Slippery surfaces can cause falls or overstretched limbs. If you run with your dog do both of you a favour and choose soft giving ground, not pavement. If cycling with your dog try to keep him/her on the grassy verge to spare his limbs and joints the trauma of impact on pavement.

Dogs pick up a lot of cues from the owner. If you are angry, impatient, anxious or disappointed this will impact on the dog's performance and enjoyment of his/her work. If you are focused, calm and relaxed your canine companion will gain confidence from you and perform at their best.

Down time and time off leash (in a safe suitable environment) are also essential to staying fresh, motivated and fit. Rest is the time the animal repairs the micro traumas he/she experiences. Rest within a regular training program is as essential as the training itself.

2. Warm up and Warm down

There are many ways to physically stimulate your dog's muscles, and warm up his/ her cardiovascular (heart and lungs) system. Warming up the athlete enhances peak performance and reduces the likelihood of injury. Begin the work period with slower, less demanding exercise and work up to the most physically demanding work, then cool down with lighter exercise. Before work, massage the dog's major muscle groups over the hindquarters, forelimbs and along each side of the spine. Use heat (warm towels from the dryer), hot water bottles or a heat lamp to stimulate blood flow and warm up muscles (especially in cool weather).

After exercise warm down with lighter work. In cool weather cover the dog after exercise, follow the warm down with a light massage to help disperse the lactic acid built up in the muscles. Offer short drinks of fresh but tepid water.

If cooling the dog with water after exercise, use tepid water, not cold water. A sudden drop in the temperature of muscles can cause spasm and pain.

3. Diet

This is a huge topic that cannot be fully addressed in this article. Research the diet you feed your dog. Pay attention to his/her natural need to chew. Think about the fact that the dog in nature expends a lot of energy seeking and securing a meal. Do not let your dog (even the miniature breeds) become a couch potato. Obesity is one of the biggest health issues in the young, otherwise healthy, animal.



4. Chiropractic Care

Virtually every athlete, and every couch potato, will have areas in their spine where adjacent vertebrae (bones that make up the spine) are not moving with a full, normal range of motion. A lack of normal joint motion (in the spine or pelvis) is called, in chiropractic terms, a subluxation. As a dog engages in activities that place demands on their bones, muscles and ligaments subluxations may become worse. Subluxations may interfere with a dog's ability to perform certain functions, or create pain when they try to do the exercise.

Subluxations can range from very subtle- ones that only a chiropractor may appreciate, to quite obvious.

Subluxations may be associated with areas of the spine or pelvis that:

- arch upward or dip downwards
- feel asymmetrical or uneven
- show unusual stiffness or increased motion
- have a different temperature (hot or cold)
- have muscle spasm present

Animals with subluxations may do things such as:

- fail to sit square, show an altered gait, stand with weight shifted to one side
- be unable to jump on things that never previously posed a problem
- give poor performance, stop before finishing an event, trip, lack power in their hindquarters
- show fatigue, stiffness or lameness after exercise
- lose interest in performing tasks they used to enjoy
- sleep poorly, circle a lot before lying down
- hesitate before going up or down stairs

An animal chiropractor finds these subluxations and 'adjusts' the area. An adjustment is a physical manipulation that restores normal joint motion to the area.

Keeping your dog's spine 'well adjusted' will help achieve maximal comfort and performance. It will help to avoid injury and to recover more rapidly from injury.

Your Veterinary Chiropractor should be certified by the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association. You can find a certified veterinary chiropractor by visiting <http://www.animalchiropractic.org/>

5. Acupuncture and Chinese Herbs

Acupuncture is a part of Traditional Chinese Medicine, as are Chinese herbal formulas. They are part of a complete health system. Acupuncture can help to balance an animal's system to achieve maximal health and performance. Chinese herbs can reinforce the acupuncture treatments on an ongoing, daily basis.

Stimulation of acupuncture points (with pressure, needles, laser, herbs, electricity or injections) can increase blood flow to an area, stimulate nerve function, enhance healing, relax spasmed muscles, relieve pain and restore the energetic balance to an area. The correct combination of points can help restore balance to the whole dog.

Chinese herbal formulas use the synergy of the herb properties in combination to help correct imbalances in an animal's system. When a system comes into balance it is able to deliver a peak performance, avoid injury and maintain health.

Your veterinary acupuncturist should be certified by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Association (IVAS) (www.ivas.org). Used in combination with chiropractic care, or on its own, acupuncture can enhance animal comfort and performance. Acupuncture can also facilitate healing.

Treating your dog like an athlete will strengthen the bond between you. Creating a routine, paying attention to warming up and warming down the canine athlete and seeking chiropractic, acupuncture and herbal therapy when appropriate will keep you dog moving comfortably and feeling energetic for many enjoyable years. Dogs do their best for us and we should reward them with proper care, love and affection. We certainly get paid back in kind many times over!