

Pushing the Limits and K9 Fitness
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Pushing our dogs beyond their physical capabilities can have devastating consequences. A patrol dog that is not fit, strong and healthy can lead to a career ending injury. Tracking a dog that is not conditioned to tracking in the heat can lead to heatstroke and death. An overweight and unfit detection dog can result in missing hidden narcotics or bombs. When lack of fitness prevents proper performance on the job, the outcome can be catastrophic.

We know that our working canines need to be in top physical condition in order to achieve peak performance. How we help them reach this level of fitness, however, can bring many questions. Some common questions that I've been asked include the following: When it comes to exercise and fitness, how much is too much? How much is not enough? How do we push our dogs to reach their full potential without putting them at greater risk for injury?

Although each dog and each situation may be different, there are some general guidelines that we can use to inform our training programs. Next time you're exercising your dog or putting together a training program, consider the following:

What is "normal"?

Before making changes to your canine training and exercise program, consider what is currently normal for your dog. What does a typical week look like? How many days per week is your dog getting cardiovascular exercise? Strength training? What exercises and training do you normally do with your dog on a daily or weekly basis? What is the amount, intensity and duration of these exercises?

Any time you make a sudden and significant increase to your dog's exercise and workload, you are putting your dog at risk for injury. Changes in the amount of exercise that your dog is getting should be gradual so that your dog's body has time to adapt to the new demands placed on it. When you are ready to increase activity, it's best to change only one variable at a time. For example, if you want to increase your dog's strength and cardio endurance by adding in longer runs and including hill work, focus on increasing distance first then add in the hills later. You can also add some hill work first, and then over time gradually add more distance. Give your dog a few weeks to adjust to the new training routine before increasing or changing the workload. A good rule of thumb is to increase by no more than 10% at one time.

How consistent is your training and exercise?

If you want to increase your dog's level of fitness, exercise needs to be regular and consistent. Before adding to what you are currently doing, be consistent with your weekly routine. To give an example, I always like to relate this to lifting weights at the gym. If I only go to the gym two or three times per month, I'm not going to get any stronger when lifting weights. The next time I'm at the gym, I won't be able to suddenly double the amount of weight that I lift. If I do, I'm greatly increasing the likelihood of injury.

If I want to get stronger and increase how much I'm lifting, I need to get to the gym every week. If I can exercise two or three times per week instead of two or three times per month, I'll see my strength increasing and will be able to safely lift more weight. If you want to improve your dog's strength, cardio or agility, try to get on a regular routine where your dog is getting focused and structured exercise at least three times per week in each. If you are on a consistent training routine but then miss a few weeks, take a

few steps back in your training and gradually build back up to what your routine was like before you and your dog took time off.

How quickly is your dog recovering from exercise?

Recovery time from exercise can be a reflection of your dog's general fitness level. As your dog is getting more fit, you should see faster recovery from exercise. This means your dog's breathing, heart rate and body temperature quickly return to their normal resting state. A dog that is not fit or properly conditioned for the work that you are doing will take a longer time to recover. Track how long it takes for these numbers to return to baseline so that you can note improvements or recognize when you might be pushing your dog too hard and too quickly.

Also be aware that there are other factors that can impact your dog's exercise recovery time. Changes in external factors such as heat, humidity and altitude can slow recovery. Health conditions such as Lyme Disease can also negatively impact your dog's ability to exercise and recover from exercise. Dehydration can make it harder for your dog to cool off after exercise, and this, too, can slow recovery.

How well is your dog working and performing?

Is your dog showing avoidance behaviors or performing in ways that are not consistent with how he or she regularly works? Is your dog normally good at jumping but now getting sloppy? Is your super agile detection dog now slipping and stumbling while searching the rubble pile? If your dog is showing these behaviors and you are seeing a deterioration in performance, this is typically not a good time to start increasing the exercise and workload that your dog is doing.

Deterioration of ability and form can mean your dog is getting fatigued and pushing his or her body to its limit. Continuing to physically push your dog forward when the body is not ready can lead to such things as injury, overheating or even a psychological "shutting down." A sudden decrease in performance and deterioration of form can also be signs of injury, soreness and pain. Examples of this can occur when a hard-hitting patrol dog suddenly starts hesitating before launching for the bite or your confident detection dog hesitates to jump into the back of your SUV. Any avoidance behaviors and sudden changes to your dog's normal working behavior should warrant further investigation to ensure that your dog isn't injured or heading towards injury.

Conclusion

Always remember that there can be multiple factors impacting your dog's performance. Overall fitness (or lack of fitness) can most definitely be reflected in your dog's working performance. As stated above, health issues, climate, overtraining and your dog's mental state can also have a direct impact on performance. Additionally, the greatest fitness plan can be totally undermined by poor nutrition.

To help set our dogs up for success, we need to get them on a regular and consistent weekly exercise routine and increase the challenge gradually. Always pay close attention to any sudden changes in our dog's normal behavior. When sudden and unexplained changes occur, we must be proactive in figuring out why our dog isn't performing up to par. This might mean a change in diet, a change in exercise routine or even a visit to the veterinarian. By taking the above into consideration and being more proactive with our dogs' overall fitness, we will be in a much better position to enhance working performance and avoid injury.

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