

Trainers Corner

Keeping an Eye on the Target: Maintaining a Mission Ready K9

Erica Boling, PhD

We all love our high drive working dogs. There is nothing better than directing all that intensity, drive and energy into the work that they do. Whether it's staying focused on the job while searching for drugs under high distractions or not letting go of the suspect when engaged in a fight, the highly focused and driven canine is one that every handler desires. There are a number of downsides, however, when working a dog that has so much drive.

We all know one or more high drive dogs that have little to no fear and no sense of self-preservation. If we don't watch out for them, they can easily hurt or even kill themselves. I know of one Malinois that jumped off a third story balcony. He survived but severely injured his spine. I know of another that jumped into a deep excavation pit to retrieve his tug. Amazingly this dog survived uninjured. There are others that have worked themselves until exhaustion and died from heat stroke.

These types of dogs keep us constantly on our toes, and their recklessness can put them at a higher risk of injury. Their high drive can also make it challenging to detect injuries. I frequently hear handlers claim that their dogs have such high drive that they don't show pain. I argue, however, that they *do* show pain. The problem is that we are not typically trained or skilled in identifying early signs of soreness.

Recognizing Subtle Signs of Pain

Having a "critical eye" for detecting subtle signs of soreness and pain is not a skill that most people naturally have. It is, however, a skill that we can develop. It's an essential skill that all handlers should strive to develop because catching early signs of soreness and pain can prevent injuries from becoming chronic and severe.

An example of how all of this can go wrong with an "uneducated eye" comes from my own personal experience. Years ago my protection trained dog suffered a pulled muscle in the groin area. This occurred before I started studying to become certified in canine fitness and massage. Although I felt something was "off" with my dog, my veterinarian and I didn't notice any limping. As long as he wasn't limping, my veterinarian told me I could continue to work my dog. That's what I did, until month after month passed, and my gut still told me that something wasn't quite right. I just couldn't pinpoint what the problem was. Eventually I found a canine physical therapist who finally gave a proper diagnosis.

My dog had a pulled iliopsoas muscle. I learned this was a common injury for many sport and working dogs. In addition, the more that I learned about the injury, I discovered that my dog had been showing me subtle signs of soreness and pain for a very long time. I went back to look at photos and videos from our training sessions and now saw the evidence right in front of me. Now with a better-trained eye, I finally saw the obvious imbalance and weakness in his left hind leg compared to the right. My dog had been giving me obvious signs for many months that he was sore by the way he positioned his body in the sit and down. Unfortunately, I had missed these signs due to my untrained eyes.

Although we might not be trained veterinarians and aren't in a position to diagnose injuries, all handlers can benefit from developing critical observation skills. We are the ones that know our dogs best, see them every day and are the most likely to notice changes in behavior that could indicate soreness or pain. Instead of simply going with our gut and stating that something "just isn't right" with our dogs, we can share valuable information with our veterinarians if we learn how to observe our dogs more closely.

Developing a "Critical Eye"

I've listed below some tips and suggestions to help develop your own critical observation skills. These are skills that can help you recognize potential early signs of soreness and pain in your high drive dog.

- 1) Start closely observing your dog today. Be proactive and recognize your dog's normal gait and other movements before an injury occurs. Normally we don't pay attention to these things until our dog is already injured. By paying close attention now to what is healthy and normal, you will be much more likely to pick up on subtle changes in behavior and movement if an injury does occur.
- 2) Observe your dog during basic stationary positions like the sit, down and stand. You want to see balance throughout your dog's body. Legs should be parallel. Hips should be even and level. Weight should be equally distributed across all four feet. If your dog repeatedly shows an imbalance, this could be a potential sign of weakness, soreness or pain. For example, when my dog had his iliopsoas injury, he consistently sat with his left leg sticking out to the left side of his body. When he was in a down position, his left hip was always lower than his right hip, and the left leg and toes were almost always turned out to the side.
- 3) Observe your dog moving at the walk and trot. A healthy dog will look well balanced with an equal stride length. A short or unequal stride can be a sign of stiffness, soreness or pain. I find one of the best ways to observe a dog's movement is by video taping it and watching the video at regular speed and then in slow motion. You'll notice a lot of things watching in slow motion that the naked eye will miss when observing at a regular pace. Also observe your dog from all angles, such as from the front, back and side. Sometimes we can see an imbalance from one angle but not from another.
- 4) Look for patterns in your dog's movements and behavior. For example, my dog Bacci might sit in a very sloppy manner 1 out of every 5 times with a hunched back and left hind leg toeing out wide to the side. This could simply be a matter of my dog not paying attention and getting away with always being sloppy in his sit. If I see him consistently sitting in this manner 80% of the time, however, it might be a sign that something is wrong. My dog might have tight or sore muscles, or he might even be experiencing back pain. And even if my dog isn't in pain, he's definitely showing an imbalance and potential weaknesses on one side of the body. This, in the end, puts him at a greater risk for injury.
- 5) Notice any unusual changes or avoidance of behaviors in your dog. For example, a strong, confident patrol dog that suddenly doesn't want to stay on the bite might be indicating that he's in pain. When a dog that is normally quiet on the bite suddenly becomes very vocal, the change in behavior could also indicate soreness or pain. When a dog has a strained iliopsoas muscle, you might not see limping. Instead, you might find that your agile dog is suddenly hitting and knocking over jumps.
- 6) Pay close attention to your dog's topline, especially the lower back. When a dog is hurting and in pain, it's not unusual to see an arched or roached back, or even a slight arch in just the lower part

of their back. This arching of the back can be a sign of fatigue and tight muscles, but it can also be a sign that your dog is experiencing pain.

Final Thoughts

We can't expect a canine handler to diagnose an injury when he or she doesn't have veterinary training. Being aware of possible signs of soreness and pain, however, can alert us to potential problems. By developing a more "critical eye," we become more in tune with our canine partners. We start to notice the subtlest changes. When there is a problem, we will be more likely to notice it. With these close observations, we will be able to provide more detailed information for our veterinarians if needed. The great thing about developing a "critical eye" is that we can get better with practice. Don't wait until an injury occurs. Get out there today and start observing your dog more closely.

Erica C. Boling, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Education at Rutgers University and the owner and founder of Northeast K9 Conditioning, LLC and Northeast K9 Conditioning Academy. Erica helps sport and working dog handlers create peak performance, canine athletes by teaching them how to integrate canine fitness into their training programs. Erica is a Certified Canine Fitness Trainer (CCFT), Certified Canine Massage Provider, member of the United States Federation of Sleddog Sports (USFSS) and a member of their USA National Team. She is also one of the founding members of North Pocono Search, Rescue and Recovery. Currently, Erica teaches canine fitness to officers at the Atlantic County John "Sonny" Burke K-9 Academy. She also does narcotics detection with her Belgian Malinois and trains and competes in French Ring.

Email: info@northeastk9conditioning.com

Website: <https://www.northeastk9conditioning.com/>

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