



ASK THE PRO

maintenance of older dogs

By Ray Voigt

HOW OFTEN DO YOU HEAR the statements “they get old too quickly?” Or, “when they finally understand everything you get a year or two and then they’re retired?” What if there were a few things we could do that would help us maximize the time we have on line with our best friends? No one can stop the aging process, but do we not owe it to them to try and keep them healthy and competitive as long as possible? After all, training and competing is what we both love to do!

As our dogs age, their needs for training, conditioning, and health care change. I believe that the need for a high volume of training declines, while their conditioning and health care needs become even more critical. Let’s look at some different ways we can facilitate this process.

Health care and pain management are huge factors in the maintenance of older dogs.

I think we can all relate to getting a little stiffer and more sore as we get older, so why would they be any different? I would recommend semi-annual physical exams and blood work, versus the typical annual examination.

Due to the types of injuries our athletes endure, it is also important to have a veterinarian who can recognize and treat soft tissue injuries and soreness. I believe many of the problems we see stem from undiagnosed soft tissue injuries. Modalities used to treat soft tissue injury include cold laser therapy and therapeutic ultrasound, while treatments such as joint injections can help those suffering from chronic arthritis and pain. Joint supplements are also an important part of everyday maintenance. Dasquin is a glucosamine based joint supplement that all of our dogs receive on a daily basis. Elements H and R

are products we use for pre exercise hydration and post exercise recovery. It seems logical to me that if we don’t replace our glycogen stores as quickly as we get older, neither do they.

I believe a good conditioning program can help in several ways. While we incorporate both sprint and endurance conditioning with all of our dogs, we have started to focus more on the endurance aspect for the older dogs. Both long and slow on land with a 4-wheeler or bike and kayaking for water conditioning. I think it is important that the dogs maintain a high fitness level in order to compete at the level needed in today’s competitions. Conditioning also provides a nice mental break for the dogs from the everyday grind of normal training. I have found that the dogs love to run and swim and become just as excited, if not more so, than during daily training.

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A good warm up and cool down routine is essential whether you are conditioning or training. These dogs are truly endurance sprinters, running full out for tests up to a few miles in length. You would never see a competitive athlete get out of the car and run at full speed without some sort of warm up routine, so why do we believe this is acceptable for our dogs? They need to get blood flowing to their muscles in order to prevent injury, just as a human athlete does.

Cooling down is just as important, if not more so. You do not want blood pooling in the muscles and creating lactic acid build up, which leads to prolonged stiffness and soreness. When a dog is sore, they have a greater predisposition to compensation, which ultimately places more stress on other joints, in turn creating a much larger problem. A warm up and cool down generally consists of a 5-10 minute walk. The warm up may also consist of a few short sprints, ranging from 20-50 yards.

Now to talk about the actual training of older dogs. While the older dogs need less work on a daily basis, I do feel it is important to train regularly as long as they are physically sound. I believe regular work keeps them mentally sharp, as well as maintaining their level of fitness. However, they definitely complete fewer tests everyday than the younger dogs, and

some days will only get conditioning. We tend to engage them in more meaningful set ups versus a high volume.

For example, I would not do an extra routine long retired gun just because. I would save those miles for something more meaningful. With that said, all dogs are different and some may need more tests than others to maintain that level of sharpness. This is where it is important for you to know your dog as an individual. What kinds of set ups does your dog need to stay sharp and be competitive? Maybe he or she needs an extra test once in a while, or maybe they need more conditioning and an extra day off per week.

It seems to me like water blind attitude is one of the things that gets the hardest to manage as a dog ages. Let's face it, this is the least fun thing for the dogs to do. Some of the things that help with their blind attitude include tune up drills and friendlier multiple blinds. Tune up drills are multiple water blinds, 5-7 blinds usually, set up at shorter distances and repeated over several days. Usually, they have a common theme, angle entries for example. They are complicated enough that the dogs do not remember them per say, but they should get better at them and help with attitude. Multiple water blinds are also a good way to improve attitude. Performing multiple blinds can help

relieve the tension of the entry, if that is what the problem is.

I believe all of these things truly go hand-in-hand with each other when managing our canine athletes. From the warm up, to the conditioning, training, and pain management, all are critical for older dogs to perform.

It's always hard to watch our dogs age. They are truly our best friends and family members and with us for too short of a time. I stress that their well-being and comfort is always the number one priority. No ribbon is ever worth their discomfort. I believe that these steps can be taken to help their quality of life as they get older and maximize our time together on line. ■

Handjem Retrievers Ray Voigt

Ray Voigt has been training dogs professionally for 12 years and has been with Handjem Retrievers for 9 years. He has handled multiple dogs to Field Championships and has had four National Finalists.

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