

Beat the Agility Heat

By Christy Gammage,
Practice Makes Pawfect

It is that time of year when going outside to play with your dog is just asking for heat stroke for one of you. Luckily, there are still things you can do inside to further your agility training. Vince Lombardi said "Excellence is achieved by mastery of the fundamentals." Summer in Florida is the perfect time to revisit your foundations of relationship, body awareness, and fitness.

Work on your (human) tugging skills. Yes, how you tug is key to upping your dog's tug game. Do you use a toy long enough they don't worry about you looming over them? Check. Do you hold it at a comfortable angle for their neck? Check. Do you only resist their tugs instead of yanking the toy out of their mouth? Check. Do you let them win the toy 95% of the time? Check. Do you let them 'drag' you around so they feel like they are winning even if you haven't let go of the toy? Check. And when you do take the toy away, I hope you are trading with them for something even better, like a treat, a walk or going somewhere fun. If you are a fun tug partner (meaning they win a lot), they will search you out to play.

Tricks can be directly helpful with



agility. Start with training something like a nose touch to your hand. This is a terrific way to get your dog's focus while waiting your turn to go in the ring. Playing hide and seek with your dog in the house will teach them to focus on finding and coming to you. Spins, bows, rolling over, figure-8 around your legs or even jumping over your leg or arm while low to the ground are all excellent warm-up activities for both focus and muscle prep before you ask your dog for more strenuous exercises.

If you have a small clear area in the house with good traction, you can teach and practice left/right wraps or backsides with just a bar and a wing. Don't have a wing jump? Then use any similarly tall vertical object, like a kitchen garbage can, to send

around. Start from either side of you and increase the distance as the dog understands.

Fitness and body awareness exercises are great things to do indoors with air conditioning. Slightly raise a 12" wide plank of wood on sturdy blocks. Ask your dog to traverse the length and solidify that 2-on-2-off position you want on agility contact equipment. Ask the dog to turn around on and to sit on the board to improve their understanding of where their body parts are (proprioception). Lay a short ladder on the ground (after checking for sharp edges), then ask the dog to walk across and along the length of the ladder, placing their feet between the rungs. To keep the dog in shape when it is too hot to run outside, call the dog up and down a set

of stairs. Search other canine fitness sites on the web for more conditioning exercises.

What about you? Are you as fit as you should be? Maybe you should be doing those stairs with the dog. Summer is also a good time to work on your mental game. Try out some new course memorization techniques. Practice your visualization of running a course that you've seen in a video, course map, or on TV.

When you do go outside, be heat-smart. Train early mornings or just before sunset. Maximize the use of any shade in your training area. If possible, move the obstacles you are working with into the shade or where you can start the dog in the shade. Incorporate water play when you can. Have a baby pool for your dog to cool off in. Get your dog a cooling jacket for before and after agility runs. Fans, or even misting fans, can keep or help cool the dog after exertion.

Also take care of yourself. Bring and drink water or sports drinks. Use a cooling towel or personal fan. Short sessions (5 mins or less) and shade breaks are better for both of you. Even though it is hot outside, Better Practice.



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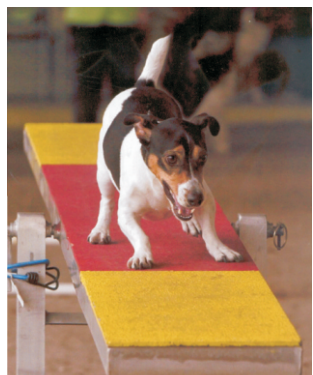
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References: (1) The Veterinary Clinics of North America Vol. 18, #2, Aug. 2002, Pg. 355-369 (2) "No Sweat" Denise Steffanus, EquineAthlete, July/Aug. 1998, pg. 25-28

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Christy Gammage
• agility@gammage.org
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