

Sporting Dog Nutrition:

Tips to Slip into Your Feeding Program

Britney Starr

As my German shorthaired pointer Wesson patiently endured his end-of-the-upland-season “you really, really stink” bath, his defined muscles, barrel chest and overall sleek build revealed a certain truth: He’s obviously the athlete of the family and is in much better physical shape than I. That’s not surprising, for hunting dogs have been estimated to log two to three times the mileage their human companions do while in the field. And that’s the low end of the spectrum.






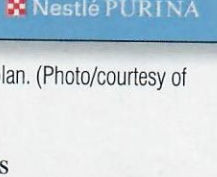
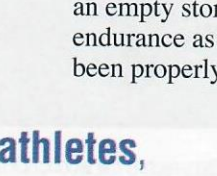
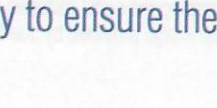
That fact got me to thinking. And my thinking led to this question: If we think of sporting dogs as athletes, are there any secrets to feeding them properly and adequately to ensure they excel in the field?

Of course, every sporting dog is unique and requires a nutrition program specifically tailored to its needs. And certainly, it’s always best to consult your veterinarian or a dog nutritionist when developing your dog’s yearly nutrition plan. But is there a response that applies to most dogs?

Bob West, Director of Purina

Nestlé PURINA

BODY CONDITION SYSTEM

1	Ribs, lumbar vertebrae, pelvic bones and all bony prominences evident from a distance. No discernible body fat. Obvious loss of muscle mass.	
2	Ribs, lumbar vertebrae and pelvic bones easily visible. No palpable fat. Some evidence of other bony prominence. Minimal loss of muscle mass.	
3	Ribs easily palpated and may be visible with no palpable fat. Tops of lumbar vertebrae visible. Pelvic bones becoming prominent. Obvious waist and abdominal tuck.	
4	Ribs easily palpable, with minimal fat covering. Waist easily noted, viewed from above. Abdominal tuck evident.	
5	Ribs palpable without excess fat covering. Waist observed behind ribs when viewed from above. Abdomen tucked up when viewed from side.	
6	Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering. Waist is discernible viewed from above but is not prominent. Abdominal tuck apparent.	
7	Ribs palpable with difficulty; heavy fat cover. Noticeable fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent or barely visible. Abdominal tuck may be present.	
8	Ribs not palpable under very heavy fat cover, or palpable only with significant pressure. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent. No abdominal tuck. Obvious abdominal distention may be present.	
9	Massive fat deposits over thorax, spine and base of tail. Waist and abdominal tuck absent. Fat deposits on neck and limbs. Obvious abdominal distention.	

The BODY CONDITION SYSTEM was developed at the Nestlé Purina Pet Care Center and has been validated as documented in the following publications:
 Nowby D, Bantjes JM, Moyens I, et al. Comparison of body fat estimates by dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry and deuterium oxide dilution in client owned dogs. *Compendium* 2001; 23 (1A): 70
 Lullmann DP. Development and Validation of a Body Condition Score System for Dogs. *Canine Practice* July/August 1997; 22:10-15
 Kealy, et al. Effects of Diet Restriction on Life Span and Age-Related Changes in Dogs. *JAVMA* 2002; 220:1315-1320
 Call 1-800-222-VETS (3387), weekdays, 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. CT

Nestlé PURINA

A body condition chart can assist in determining a sporting dog's nutrition plan. (Photo/courtesy of Nestlé Purina)

Sporting Dog Field Programs, lent his expertise as he broke that question down into several manageable components.

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Feeding Schedule – Once or Twice Daily?

Assuming that we are talking about a healthy, adult dog, I recommend feeding once a day, in the afternoon or early evening, year-round.

Once-daily feedings are particularly important during hunting season when dogs are being worked more. Assuming you are hunting in the morning, you want dogs to be as cleaned out as possible, not carrying the mechanical bulk and weight of dog food while in the field. Feeding in the afternoon after they have adequately rested from any physical activity during the day allows dogs to benefit from the food and digest the available nutrients.

If you load your dog up with food and water in the morning and then run it in the field, it's like handicapping a racehorse. The food swings around like a pendulum and can cause twisted stomach, blood or mucus in the stool and overall trauma to the gut. Studies have shown that when working on an empty stomach, the dog has more endurance as long as the nutrients have been properly digested the day before.

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Afternoon Feeding – How Soon After Hunting?

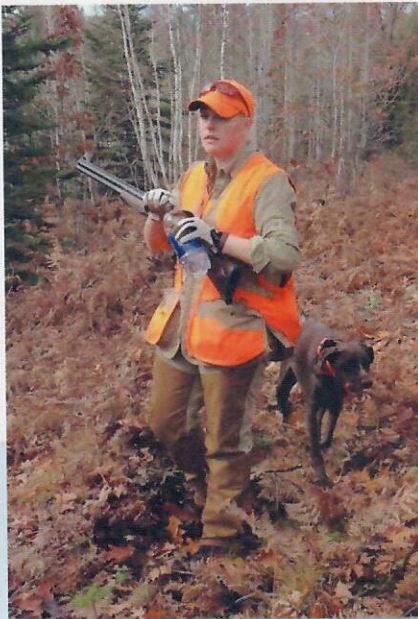
After exercise, you want to wait to feed at least an hour or more for the dog to calm down from the hunt and regain its normal heart rate. Feeding too soon after running a dog can be just as bad as running it on a full stomach. A dog that is hot and excited might gulp its food, taking in atmospheric air, which in extreme cases can contribute to gastric distress or a bloated stomach that can distend and twist, causing potential life threatening situations.

Hydration During the Hunt?

Water is crucial. I use a squirt bottle to wash away the mucous and slime that mixes with the dogs' saliva and coats the back of their throats. Water will clear a dog's tongue and throat, which is essentially its "radiator" and cooling system where a large volume of blood flows near the surface, dissipating the heat and cooling the body.

When the dog is panting, the outside air is sucking the moisture out of the dog, and more water is necessary to rehydrate it. During the hunt, water in small amounts is okay, but you don't want to give too much or allow dogs to gulp water, which causes them to get air in their gut. Give enough water, but don't let them gulp from a pan. Controlling water intake with a squirt bottle during the hunt is the best way to regulate their hydration and allow minimal atmospheric air intake. Also, water is just as important in the winter as it is during warmer climate hunts.

On another note, you don't want to give your dog Gatorade or electrolytes – I've seen hunters doing this, and it's actually counter productive. Dogs don't



Proper hydration for a sporting dog is crucial and best regulated by using a squirt-top bottle. (Photo/courtesy of Brian Koch)



Jodi Stermler and her Brittany Mesa tackle cold weather during South Dakota's pheasant season. In the cold, sporting dogs burn more calories keeping warm and, thus, require more food to maintain their weight and energy levels. (Photo/Britney Starr)



Having a dietary plan for your sporting dog will assure its performance in the field matches its ability – shooting straight is up to you. (Photo/Britney Starr)

sweat like people. When they pant, they lose pure moisture, not electrolytes. In theory, their system actually becomes oversaturated with electrolytes and adding more would only complicate things. They actually just need clear, cool water to stay hydrated.

A Technique to Add Extra Hydration

The afternoon before you are going hunting, float your dog food in water right before feeding. This will help restore muscle and hydration and prepare the dog for the next day of hunting. I only do this on days when I will be hunting or while on hunting trips, not every day. Doing it that way entices dogs to eat well when traveling and makes them think they are getting a special treat.

Food – Switch Types Once Hunting Season Closes?

Fat is the primary source of energy for dogs. Fat is the main driving benefit where calories come from; however, dogs still need adequate protein, carbohydrates and vitamins/minerals to build muscle. You want to make sure your sporting dog is receiving enough nutrients in its diet by feeding it a high-energy, complete and balanced food year-round. The key is to feed more or less, depending on the amount of work the dog is doing and the amount of energy it is expending.

Also, be sure to take the temperature into account. Cold temperatures require the dog to burn more calories to stay warm. So if you're hunting in cold conditions, your dog will require even more food than if you were hunting in warm conditions. 🗡️