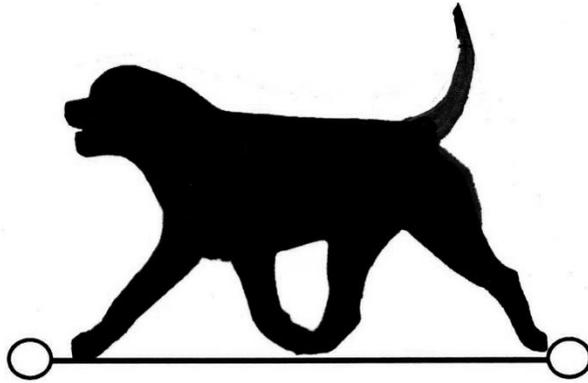


How to Condition Your Dog for Sport or Conformation



BY STEVE WOLFSON

Our club invites anyone that wants to watch or participate in our obedience clinics. Unfortunately, we see repeatedly, overweight and under-conditioned dogs in these workshops. Many exhibitors and owners believe that a plump Rottweiler is healthy and looks more "correct" than the lean, muscled working dog. Unfortunately, these so-called correct dogs cannot finish a simple obedience routine without showing signs of obvious distress. A hefty dog might look impressive to the novice, but he cannot give a quality effort on the training field if he is gasping for air and tongue lolling.

A Rottweiler, or any competition/show dog, should have a trim waistline, obvious muscle tone, and endurance. There are two elements to maintaining your dog in peak condition, good food, and proper exercise. A proper diet, one that feeds your dog's muscle and mind, comprises good quality ingredients used in appropriate amounts, accompanied by fresh, clean water. Much of today's dog foods can deliver satisfactory results. I endorse low protein (22% to 26%), high fat (16% to 20%) combined with fresh meats such as beef, tripe, and chicken but no canned food. It has the highest water content and often contains large quantities of poor quality sugars. While it is useful as an enticement to get finicky dogs to eat, it lacks quality for the dollar and gives your dog empty calories.

Amounts to feed should depend on your dog's age and activity level. Allowing free feeding is unwise. Carefully monitor the food your dog eats. It enables you to adjust for exercise levels and weight loss or gain. The most efficient way to build muscle tone, muscle size, endurance and a healthy heart is through resistance. The vehicle to achieve this is by working the dog on a treadmill.

Many people enjoy road working their dogs, and the extra workout is good for both. However, to achieve serious results, the muscles must be challenged with sustained resistance. The dog must fight gravity to increase muscle size. The incline feature of a treadmill allows you to regulate the resistance and permits you to administer it consistently, without guesswork. The higher the incline, the greater the challenge. The higher the resistance, the more muscle mass.

While roadwork can offer endurance and muscle tone - two critical components of good health - it cannot provide a sustained source of resistance. It creates a plateau effect, eliminating the possibility to increase muscle mass. Because the treadmill can adjust to varying levels of incline, it is an ideal tool to use in a conditioning program; provided it is used wisely.

Before every conformation show, I start my dogs on a weekly program of treadmill conditioning. There are safety precautions I use before I begin. Young dogs - 4-10 months - can be put on a treadmill with a flat incline, and just made to walk 5 minutes per session. It gets your pup acclimated to a routine without heavy pounding on the bones. Since the joints are still growing, I do not advocate hard exercise with a young puppy less than 12 months. With a dog that young, a workout once a week is sufficient. Heavy activity, especially with substantial dogs like the Rottweiler or German shepherd, can cause changes in the bone tissue. In the young dog, the bones are still growing, so take care not to do too much too fast.

Good preventive medicine is to have your dog's hips x-rayed – preliminaries - before beginning the workout. The best age to do it is about 6-7 months. It lets you know early, whether the dog shows signs of any potential hip problems and will allow you to adjust conditioning accordingly. After you do preliminaries, you know the hips are healthy, and it's okay to begin the conditioning. As the dog matures, and the growth plates of the joints calcify, I increase both the duration and frequency of the exercises. Eventually, your dog can finish an intense workout without distress. You can see the positive changes in your dog as the work progresses.

Rear Assembly Muscles that show immediate improvement are:

1. Biceps Femoris
2. Tensor Fasciae
3. Gluteus Medius
4. All the flexor muscles of the hock joint

Front Assembly Muscles

1. Triceps
2. Pectoral
3. Deltoids
4. All the flexor and extensor muscles of the radius and ulna.

When it's time to get down to the serious training, start your dog on the treadmill with a slow speed, moderate incline and a working duration of 15 minutes every other day for one to two weeks. After the first weeks of conditioning, gradually - over two weeks - increase the incline up to 15 degrees and the duration up to 15 to 20 minutes, at a speed of three to five miles per hour. Remember, once these levels are achieved, calorie consumption must also increase, or the dog will decrease in weight. You will need to increase the food intake.

It is also essential to mention four points of caution for treadmill conditioning.

1. **Know at what point to stop the workout.** When your dog's tongue is curling flat and wide, and foam appears on the flews (side of mouth), slow down the machine to a slow walk for a three to five-minute cooldown.
2. **Never feed your dog before the workout.** Wait at least 3 hours after the dog cools down.
3. **Never give water to a dog after it spends time on the treadmill.** Let it cool down for 1 hour. If you must give water, it should be in ice cubes and a little water. Also, provide only a handful. Water can cause a dog to bloat!
4. **A rest period of every other day should be used.** One day on the mill, one day off. Since they grow during the rest period, muscle building cannot be achieved without rest. You could easily waste a dog to death without it!

Treadmill conditioning is an excellent way to bring your Rottweiler to the peak of good health. Having a healthy heart, mind, and body is critical to the longevity of your dog. Don't let him become overweight, flabby couch potato who can't trot around the backyard without an accelerated heart rate. Keep that Rottweiler looking toned and muscular. You will see the improvement in everything he does!

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