

Get On the Ball !!!

Performance Dogs are fit and lean dogs in the best of health; but in the winter in Michigan, it is very hard to keep them – or us - in condition. I was fortunate enough to learn about this exercise program for our dogs that is fast and fun for both of us.

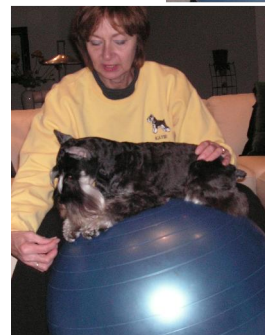
To tell you the truth, I didn't quite "get it" at first. I thought that these exercises would be too simple and do nothing for their physical condition. I was lucky to see a demonstration with a Springer Spaniel, and I was thoroughly convinced after watching this dog "workout" on the ball.

These exercises target the dog's core – his stomach muscles, back muscles and of course his "twitch" muscles. In a sense, this is a per-

fect example of "cross training". The dog is working his muscles but in a different way than running for agility, or jumping for obedience. We performance people tend to focus too much on our chosen sport and tend to train and exercise the dog in that sport only. That puts just that much more wear and tear on the same muscles the dog uses in his sport. Swimming is a perfect example of a great cardio workout – you are using muscles and getting your heart rate up, but you are not putting any strain on those muscles as you would if you were running.

The exercises that I do are easy for my dogs as they've been trained on wobble boards and do agility; so they are comfortable on moving objects. They just jumped on and got a treat. I brace the exercise ball (mine is a human "resist a ball" brand) between my legs as shown in the photos and my feet keep it from rolling away. I have treats in my hand and ask them to lay down as I feed them. Then I gently bounce the ball up and down. I mix up the maneuvers – I keep them moving around and on the ball. They stand, lay down, sit, stretch, bow, etc. I also turn their head to each side as far as it will go to stretch their shoulder muscles. I then gently roll the ball from side to side asking them to stay on the top, or gently roll it away and back, having them again keep their balance on the top of the ball. What is amazing is how quickly their exertion rate goes up. Their four feet are constantly moving and "balancing" on the ball. This is where their "twitch" muscles come in to play. If you feel their tummies and back you can easily tell how much effort they are putting in to these exercises – their little bodies heat right up. I generally stop after 3 to 5 minutes – perfect during those long commercials if watching TV!

To start a new dog, you must go slowly, as not every dog is eager to jump right up and start moving. They may only want to put their front paws on the ball at first. That is fine – give them a treat and see if you can stretch those forelimbs a little bit. If you decide to pick your dog up and place him on the ball, make sure the ball is steady. Treat and take off, then repeat if the dog is willing. Go slowly and only treat on the ball. It is also important to keep a hand on the dog to help prevent them from falling off the ball. Some other hints are putting a book on the floor to keep the ball from rolling too far, or keeping it close to a wall to allow only minimal roll. My article's purpose is to introduce you to this wonderful form of exercise but not to give complete instructions. For that, a perfect place to learn about Ball exercises is to visit the web site of Debbie Gross Saunders, MSPT, OSC, CCRP – a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner with a facility in Colchester, Ct. There she runs *Wizard of Paws Physical Rehabilitation for Animals, LLC*. She is also the author of several DVD's, "*Get on the Ball*", "*Strengthening the*



Performance Dog”, and “*Stretching The Performance Dog*”. Please visit her web site at www.wizardofpaws.net.

Another DVD that is very educational and easy to follow is called “*Pilates for Pooches*”, by Sarah Johnson, MA Exercise Physiology and Andrew Sams, DVM, MS, Diplomate ACVS. This DVD works on strengthening the dogs’ core by using stretching and strengthening exercises on various boxes, wobble boards and flatter disc like balls. Sarah’s 12 year old Border Collie won the 2006 USDAA Agility Veteran All Around Class at the National Competition, surely proving that these exercises work! You can visit www.cleanrun.com also to purchase any of these DVD’s.

It wouldn’t seem right if I ended this article without addressing the human part of the performance dog team. A quick workout we humans can do with the ball is called the “Alphabet Drill”. I saw this on “Regis and Kelly”, and thought it looked like fun. You simply take the ball between your two hands, and hold it out in front of you at shoulder height. Stand with feet apart about shoulder width. Now, “air write” the letters of the alphabet with your ball - from A to Z – in big, capital letters. You will be out of breath after this for sure!

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