

Fitness for Fido

The weather is getting warmer and the days longer, a perfect time for Fido and his owners to lose that winter weight gain. Both people and pets enjoy exercise more and are therefore more likely to continue when it's fun. Here are some ideas to make exercise time enjoyable.

In the Pacific Northwest we are blessed with a variety of walking and hiking trails. Some of them will even allow your dog to run leash free. These are excellent for getting your pup in shape as most will run ahead or slightly off trail to check out the scents. Before you take the leash off your dog however, be sure that your pooch is thoroughly trained to come when called, even when there are added distractions such as other dogs or the excitement of a deer or rabbit. Social etiquette is a must on the trail. Not all hikers will have a dog nor do they want yours doing more than saying a very polite "hello" as they pass on the trail. If your pup doesn't quite have the necessary training yet, you can still make the hike a challenge by equipping your dog with a backpack and allow him to pack the water for the trip.

Playing fetch is a great game for both mental and physical exercise. By adding rules to the game, you will also make your dog think. Ask the dog to wait while you throw the ball. You may have to hold the collar for a bit until your dog catches onto the new rules. Lengthening the time before you send your dog for the retrieve will increase his patience as well as challenging his memory. To add an extra level to the game, you can employ a field training technique. Engage the help of an assistant and give them the object that your dog likes to retrieve and send them out into a field or large grass area. Your assistant will throw the toy while you hold your dog. When the object lands, you can send your pup to pick it up then cheer and whistle him back to you. Increasing the distance between you and your helper will give your dog more exercise and bring an extra challenge to his obedience skills. It will also provide him with the opportunity to use his nose to find the object hidden in the grass.

As the weather warms up, swimming can be fun. Swimming is especially good exercise for older dogs or those that have joint issues. Dogs can be encouraged to swim by playing fetch in the water (you can use the land fetch games to add a different flavor), swimming with their owners, or by following a canoe or kayak. If you are encouraging your dog to follow a small boat, make sure that you have a way to hoist the pup aboard when he becomes fatigued.

Biking is another fun activity. Most dogs enjoy having their owners "run" with them and this is a great way to provide exercise for a young, high energy dog. The safest way to ride with your dog is using a special bike attachment. The bar fits right on the frame of the bike so that you have both hands free. The dog is clipped to the side of the bike and a spring minimizes pulling. Don't expect to take off for a long ride on the first trip as your dog will need to learn

how to match the bike's speed. Start with smaller "training" rides until you and your pooch are feeling comfortable. A good foundation of "heel" training will help immensely.

Before beginning any exercise program, it is important that your pup is in good health. If your dog is seriously overweight, be sure to get a thorough vet check. Older dogs or those with health issues should also get an okay from the doc before beginning. Take it easy on your furry friend at the start. Remember that most have enjoyed a cushy couch life during the winter months. Some dogs won't hold themselves back even if they are worn out. They can push themselves to the point of pulled muscles and heat exhaustion. Dogs die from heat stroke each year. Take regular water breaks and pay close attention to how your dog is behaving. You may need to call it quits even though Fido is still saying he can play.

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