



SIMBA'S CORNER

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EASING YOUR DOG (and yourself) BACK INTO AN EXERCISE ROUTINE

Ah March Break is over and the promise of spring and better weather is inevitable. We'll be getting out of the house more, having longer days of sunlight and hopefully getting more exercise with our pets.

The excuse of winter hibernation is over folks. That extra weight has got to come off and our muscles need to be toned. The same holds true for our dogs.

Like any athlete, a dog's conditioning has to be gradual with much attention to warming muscles up to be ready for exercise; to watch the calorie input versus the calorie output (put away those cookies that Rover has been getting for being such a good boy in the house all winter); and proper rest for building that muscle.

If you've been an avid reader of my past articles you know that I take the health and safety of my pets very seriously. We are in charge of their everyday needs. Owning a pet also gives us added responsibilities on a daily basis, not just on weekends.

Knowing that our days will be longer but blessed with warmer temperatures, we know that we will be spending additional time with our pets and quite possibly scheduling outings for them.

What you don't want to do is suddenly decide one Saturday morning to pack everyone into the truck with water and snacks and head out for a 3 hour excursion with no preparation. That is a recipe for pulled muscles, laboured breathing, dizziness, or worse – broken bones from lack of conditioning (I'm referring to the dog here).

Now if you are a student of mine or have been in the past you know that I advocate a 30 minute walk/training routine for you and your dog each and every day of your pet's life. This gives you one-on-one time that is special between your dog and you; it reinforces the training routines that you were taught in class; it gives you an opportunity to praise your pet when he makes the right choice and actually uses his brain to think through what you're asking him to do; and the all important task of training with distractions so that your dog learns to listen only to you and not be distracted by other noises or activities around him. If you have been following this advice during the cold and dark winter months, you're well on your way to increase that activity for the warm summer months. If you haven't been doing this on a regular basis, start now. This is for your pet's benefit and yours to begin a regular exercise regime that will carry both of you for the entire year.

Start by doing a regular walking pace of 30 minutes per day. If you have a toy breed cut this time into 1/3's and only do 10

minutes at a time. You are conditioning the lap dog in this case but you're still training him/her to listen and be polite. We tend to be more forgiving of the behaviours of a toy dog versus a 75 lb dog that is not being polite. Don't fall into this trap. All dogs need to be trained no matter what their size.

Once both of you are comfortable with this pace and are committed to the routine every day, increase the distance, not the pace/speed. The pace and speed will come later. Work slowly over the course of several weeks to increase that distance and then pick up the pace. As the weather gets warmer make sure you carry water for both of you to combat any dehydration both of you will experience. Remember, as pet owners we are responsible for everything to do with our pet and drinking water from a puddle is not adequate. We don't know what's in that water so carry your own.

Once you have both mastered a good comfortable, heart pumping pace you might want to add a different form of exercise for your pet. When we are getting our dogs ready for a show, we make use of our bicycles. This gives us a chance to hone our skills at riding a bike (I hadn't ridden a bike since I was 10 so this took some practice let me tell you!) and it teaches the dog not only to keep a steady pace (not running) but also teaches him to pace straight (so that he doesn't run into me or the bike). Keep in mind though that you have to teach a dog to pace beside you on leash while you're riding a bike. This takes patience, practice and short distances to start.

Can you see the master plan I'm developing for you? By starting the conditioning of your athlete now, your kids will be able to continue for you or in addition to you once school lets out and they have the whole summer with you! I know they'll want to run the dog on leash, or take him for a bike ride to the park, or deliver their papers with the dog beside them. They'll want to do this because they've seen you do this a month or two before when you were teaching the dog. Children like to copy what their parents do. What to do with all that excess energy that kids have – problem solved, bike with the dog!!

Remember, just as with humans, make sure you check with your veterinarian first before you start any exercise routine with your pet. His health comes first and you want to make sure that he doesn't have any pre-existing conditions that will prevent him from getting more exercise. You're the Alpha and you're in charge of his well-being. While you're at the vet's office also check to make sure that all his vaccinations are up to date and tell the veterinarian if you're planning on being anywhere this summer that may expose your pet to insects that are harmful to him.

Always begin a new exercise program slowly with the result being that it becomes your daily routine with your furry friend. He'll love the time spent exclusively with you and you'll both benefit from the exercise.

Pre-registration is now taking place for the next class session beginning Tuesday April 17 and Wednesday April 25 at 7:15 p.m. See classes at work now at Port Weller Community Centre. We encourage spectators and future clients to view our classes.



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