

# Agility

## Canine fitness training: What is it, why should you do it, and how do you get started? by Kelly Daniel

*Canine fitness training is a relatively new thing in New Zealand. Until recently the most common form of fitness for agility dogs was walks and runs, and agility training. But you know what, with the pressure that we put on our agility dogs, that is just not sufficient in this day and age.*

Would you expect a college athlete performing in high jump at a national level, competing in events several weekends a month to only train in high jump? No, we would expect that they cross train, include specific cardiovascular fitness, and strength training in their training schedule, as well as sport specific skill training, under the guidance of a professional.

Our canine athletes are high jumpers, long jumpers, sprinters, triple jumpers, and cross country runners. They perform intensely complex movements at high speed. They need to be strong capable athletes, both to perform at their best, and reduce the chance of injury.

### So why should you include some fitness work into your training schedule?

There are a huge number of reasons, including (but not limited to):

- Increasing the canine – human bond.
- Increasing muscle strength and therefore power and speed.
- Adding muscle can help strengthen areas that are structurally weak.
- Reducing the chance of injury.
- Increasing general body awareness.
- Help with sport specific skills that you are having trouble with for example:
  - Weaves.
  - Weight shift required for contacts.
  - Sloppy sit for obedience.

### What aspects of fitness are there in a balanced fitness schedule?

The fitness requirements of different canine sports can be very different, therefore each dog's workout regime may be different. For example a dog racing in lure coursing needs endurance, while a dog competing in agility needs power and sprint speed.

Aspects of fitness to consider include:

- **Endurance, or aerobic fitness:** this is lower intensity, longer time periods of movement such as a 45 minute hike where your dog alternates between walking and running.
- **General aerobic fitness:** sustained trotting.
- **Anaerobic, or sprint fitness:** for agility a distance of around 200 metres, with turns is ideal.
- **Strength training:** muscle power and endurance.



Stand on two separate perches



Down on two perches

- **Balance:** stability, or the ability to hold positions even in unstable situations.
- **Proprioception:** awareness and control of limbs in space.

### So how do you get started?

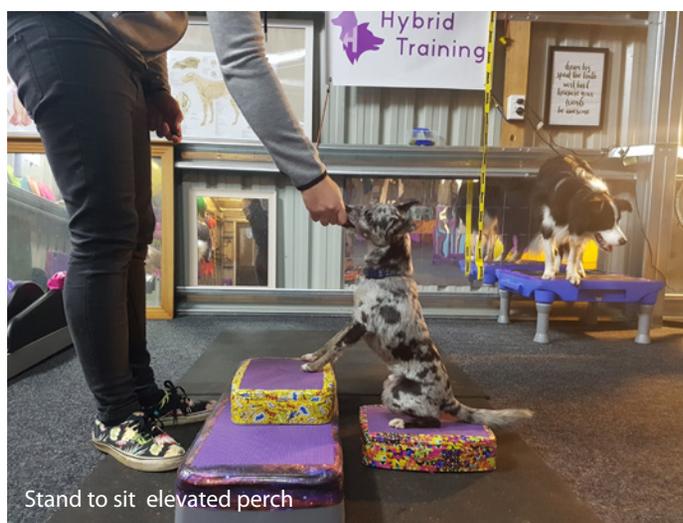
For any dog a great start point is to shape them putting front, and rear feet (separately) onto items. It is best to start with stable perches, as unstable items such as wobble cushions are often to physically challenging at the beginning. All fitness exercises should be perfected on stable items in good form, before progressing to unstable items.

For most dogs a phonebook-sized perch is appropriate. Offcuts of wood, made non-slip by using no more nails to stick yoga matting to the top and then finished off with pretty coloured duct tape round the edges, work well. We want the perches to be stable (not easily tipped over), and non slip.

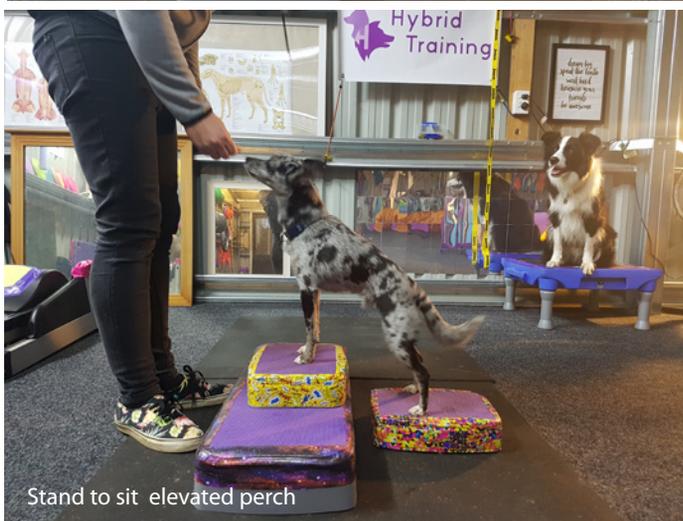
Many dogs have trouble putting their back feet on items, as they lack awareness of the fact that they can move and control their rear feet separately from their front. To help with this you can manipulate the environment, and create a channel with a puppy pen, wing jumps, or chairs. Then pull the dog through the channel, marking and rewarding when their back feet hit the perch.

There are so many great exercises that you can do with just two perches, including:

- **Pivoting.** On a single perch ask the dog to put their two front feet on. Move your body position so that the dog's rear feet move around a little, for some dogs this may work best being directly in front of them, others to the side. Mark, and reward rear foot movement. Be sure to reward with the dog's head in a natural position and not too high. Continue movement, marking and rewarding until your dog can move in a smooth circle, in both directions. We are looking for smooth stepping with the rear feet, no hopping.



Stand to sit elevated perch



Stand to sit elevated perch

- **Pivoting.** Similar to above, except that this pivoting will occur with the front feet making circles around the rear feet up on the small perch. Again take care to reward this with a low natural head position in alignment with the back. This needs to be performed much slower at first than the rear feet pivoting, as the dog has to work very hard to hold the rear feet on the perch and adjust footing at certain points in the circle.

- **Down to stands.** With two even separated platforms, stand the dog so they are standing in a nice 'show stack'. With a treat on the nose, or nose target, move the dog's nose down and back towards the elbows to get a folding down. Reward several times and then lure the dog's nose up and forwards to get a stand. With the two separate platforms, keep foot movement minimal, but once this behaviour is taught we want to move to one long surface such as an aerobic step, because your dog's elbows will sink in between the two separate platforms. The down and stand should be slow, and we are looking for even movement between the front and rear ends, and even weight distribution on all legs.
- **Stand and wave.** Similar set up with the two platforms as in the down to stand exercise. When your dog is standing, ask for a shake with each front paw. By lifting and isolating one paw the dog must activate the core and shift their weight to counterbalance the paw lift. You can also shape an independent rear law lift.
- **Sit to stands.** This is one of the most important exercises for agility dogs, as it replicates the jumping motion. Front feet to start should be ever so slightly elevated, and on a separate perch from the rear feet. Again the separate platform helps reduce foot movement. Start in a stand, and ask for a sit. It is common for the dog to not be able to (as they are not generalising the sit to this equipment set up), or to sit back so their front feet fall off. Slowly shape a sit with feet remaining on each perch, with a pelvis tuck, and even movement on both rear feet. For the stand lure (with a treat or hand target) forwards and up. Make this movement slow, and watch the dog's head position and topline.

With each of these exercises start with spending 15 minutes working through a few repetitions of each, working to increase understanding and fine tune your mechanics, and your dog's form. Be sure to rest your dog the day after the workout, to give muscles time to recover.

Please email Kelly at [hybridogtraining@gmail.com](mailto:hybridogtraining@gmail.com) if you have any ideas or requests for future articles about canine fitness.

## More information

<http://www.pawsitive-performance.com/blog/round-out-your-workout>

<http://martialarfs.com/blog/the-need-for-canine-conditioning/>

<http://totofit.com/why-core-fitness-is-important-to-every-dog/>

<https://www.balanced-canine.com/conditioning>

<https://fitpawsusa.com/conformation/fitpaws-helping-dog-show-best/>

<http://hybridogtraining.blogspot.co.nz/2017/03/starting-out-in-fitness-what-equipment.html>

## Hybrid Training

<http://hybridogtraining.blogspot.com>