

Agility

Warming up your dog

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So how do you warm up your dog? Take it for a toilet walk? Throw a ball? Do a few jumps? How about if I told you that you can have increased performance, and decreased chance of injury from a more deliberate warm up, and excluding some of the activities shown here!

Unfortunately there is little specific research relating to performance dogs and warm ups, but experts in the area such as Dr David Levine (University of Tennessee) are confident that the human research and guidelines are transferrable to performance dogs. The American College of Sports Medicine's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription recommends (for people) that each exercise session should be preceded by an appropriate warm up, and followed by a cool down.

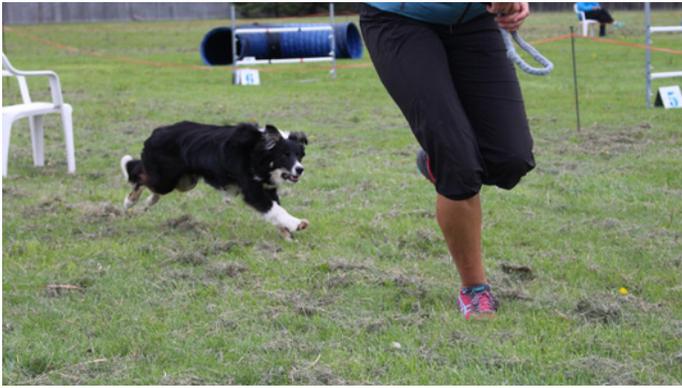
Warm up

The purpose of a warm up is to reduce the chance of injury, and increase performance. This occurs because a sufficient warm up increases blood flow and temperature of muscles, and physically prepare the body for the activities that will be performed.

The benefits of a good warm up may include:

- enhanced muscle contraction time
- faster reaction time
- improvements in force and power
- increase in speed of oxygen release by hemoglobin (due to increased temperature)
- increased blood flow to muscles, and venous return
- increased rate of metabolic reactions.





An appropriate warm up is aiming to move all muscles and joints through a full range of motion, as well as increasing the dog's body temperature. Whilst the warm up may be different according to the specific activity the dog is performing, and the dog's previous history (including injury or areas of muscle tightness) a general warm up may include:

- 5 minutes of gentle on lead walking
- 5–10 minutes of trotting. This may include handler changes of directions (like front crosses), and circles of varying size and direction.
- sit to stands
- down to stand
- moving downs
- reversing / side stepping
- spins and twists, handler leg weaving
- sit, wait, recall sprint
- gentle range of motion stretching and/or massage of problem areas. Stretching should be specific to the dog's problem areas, and the exercises that will be performed. We are aiming to stretch the muscles to the point at which a stretch is felt, but not to the point of pain or past standard range of motion. You are aiming to hold the stretch for a cumulative time of at least 30 seconds. I prefer active stretches that the dog controls, such as:
- stretch forwards and up (tip toe - great for hip flexors/iliopsoas)
- say prayers (great for chest, shoulders and neck)
- cookie stretches (neck and back).

A warm up will only 'last' for around 15 minutes, and is best performed within minutes of the sporting activity. Use of products such as back on track coats may contribute to keeping muscles and body temperature high, therefore helping keep your dog 'warm'.

It is important to avoid concussive ballistic activities such as chasing a ball, or jumping over a series of agility jumps until the dog is sufficiently warmed up as this may cause damage. It is also important to consider that excessive warm up may cause muscles to build up lactic acid (a by-product of muscle activity), which may cause fatigue, potentially contributing to injury. It is also very important to not actively stretch cold muscles. Stretching should only be performed after a sufficient warm up or activity, where the muscles are already warm. Stretching (or over stretching) cold muscles may cause injury.

Cool down

A cool down is required to decrease soreness, and can also decrease muscle recovery time. Cool downs can:

- prevent blood pooling in extremities
- help balance venous return and cardiac output, that can contribute to cardiac related issues such as fainting
- enhance the recovery of energy stores.

If you had sufficient time your cool down could be a reverse of your warm up, from more intense to less intense activities. However, most of us just don't have time for this. An appropriate cool down could include gentle trotting working down to walking, massage, and gentle range of motion activities and stretches.

So what could this look like at a show?

The problem with agility shows is the unpredictable nature of when you will run. This becomes especially difficult if you are running multiple dogs, across multiple classes.

Here's what to consider:

- Can you time your first initial long warm up for each dog competing between course walking, and the dog's first run?
- What can you do to ensure that your dog doesn't get cold while waiting in crates or vehicles?
- Can you plan a series of activities / tricks that you do as a routine from the vehicle, to the check in / marshalling area?
- Do you really need to practice every little difficult part of the sequence in the run, on the practice jumps?
- Can you plan a route to trot, and then walk the dog, when you exit the ring to give them a little cool down. I plan a 'long way back to the vehicle' that forces us both to have some cool down time.
- How many runs is too many for the fitness level of your dog? Injuries are most common when the dog's muscles are fatigued.

References / more information:

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