Agility

The 'Bounce' Effect

Why your dog may struggle after a huge competition weekend and what Agility can learn from horse racing

After watching the Kentucky Derby over the past few years, I have noticed that most of the trainers such as Cherie DeVaux, the current trainer of Golden Tempo, and Eric Reed the trainer for Rich Strike (2022 Kentucky Derby winner) often decide not to race their horses in back to back events. The trainer of Golden Tempo had recently said that they would wait and see whether to run in the second leg of the Triple Crown, and ultimately they decided to pull Golden Tempo from the upcoming Preakness event. That got me thinking about what I have been seeing and feeling with our dogs in Agility across the years. So, of course, I went searching for information.

I then came across an interview with Cherie DeVaux that really resonated with me: "When horses make this 'big jump forward' (we say in speed figures), so I judge on how fast he went compared to his other races by the metrics. There are different speed figures, different metrics, and when a horse takes a big step forward, what happens is if you run him back too soon, we call it 'a bounce'. So they will take a regression back. Golden Tempo made such a big jump forward in all of his metrics, that for sure he is going to bounce, and even though he is happy, I just don't feel like it's the right thing to do for him. We have a duty to listen to the horse and do what is best for him."

What a horse undergoes in theses events is quite substantial:

- Full body sprint at biomechanical limits
- Producing extreme muscle damage + metabolic stress (lactic acid, micro-tears) among many other things, and all with very high injury risk if repeated too soon!

Even one race can create muscle fibre damage, joint and tendon strain, nervous system fatigue which is not often talked about. That's why not every horse can even complete all three Triple Crown races,



let alone be at peak performance for them.

Before people misunderstand what I'm saying… no, dogs are *not* horses and Agility is *not* the same as horse racing. There are major differences in these animals, for sure. But there are equally some glaring similarities.

Dogs can absolutely 'bounce' after a major performance effort. We just don't use that term nearly as often in dog sports as the horse racing world does. What Cherie DeVaux is describing is essentially a performance regression after a peak output effort. The horse reaches a new level physiologically, neurologically, emotionally, and mechanically, and then cannot sustain it immediately again without **recovery**.

In Agility dogs, we may not track 'speed figures' like horse racing but we *do* see changes in performance metrics. One of the biggest is a decrease in YPS (Yards Per Second). Dogs coming off a huge physical or emotional effort will often show subtle regression in speed, acceleration, efficiency, or execution, even before obvious injury appears.

The difference between horses and dogs is:

- Horses often show it more dramatically because of the extreme cardiovascular and musculoskeletal demands of racing
- While dogs tend to show it in more subtle ways at first

With Agility dogs, a 'bounce' might look like:

- Dropped bars after a huge weekend
- Loss of focus or connection
- Slower acceleration
- Inability to collect normally
- Wider turns
- Hesitation at contacts
- Increased stress signals
- Sniffing/disengagement
- More mistakes than usual
- Lack of 'spark'
- Slower decision-making and reaction.
- Emotional flatness
- Frantic over-arousal
- Soreness or 'off' movement
- Unusual barking/reactivity
- Inability to regulate arousal

And sometimes the dog still qualifies and looks 'fine' to everyone else. What's fascinating is that the bounce is not just muscular fatigue. It is often nervous system fatigue, emotional fatigue, cognitive fatigue, accumulated stress load, micro soreness/inflammation, recovery deficit.

In Agility, we ask dogs to sprint, collect, extend, decelerate, accelerate, process handling cues, regulate arousal, navigate slippery/poor footing, recover between runs, handle environmental stress all while often doing multiple runs per day, multiple days in a row, often times back-to-back trial weekends or Nationals/World Team Tryouts/Open events all within weeks. That is a *lot*!

And here is where the comparison to horses becomes very important. Horse racing culture has become much more willing to say: "This horse gave us everything. We need to protect the horse."

Dog sports often still reward: "Push through", "Enter another trial", "Get more reps", "Just train through it". But physiologically, the body doesn't care whether it's a horse or a dog. All elite athletes have recovery thresholds, and it's important to start developing an eye for the subtle signs that recovery is needed.

The other important point: A huge 'jump forward' in performance (think multiple pressure-filled runs over several days) is often *more* stressful on the body than an average performance because peak performances usually require higher adrenaline output, more explosive biomechanics, deeper nervous system activation and so on.



That breakthrough performance — you know that performance where the dog is just 'on') may actually *cost* something physically, which is exactly what Cherie is talking about. I think Agility people are often behind the horse world in recognising this.

Horse people are becoming far more aware of:

- Cumulative wear
- Nervous system stress
- Recovery windows
- Workload management
- Emotional state
- Preserving longevity

Meanwhile in dog Agility, it's still common to see:

- Trial every weekend or close to it
- Seminars during the week
- Constant drilling
- Little true decompression
- And the *big one*: dogs showing subtle stress signals ignored until injury appears

A really important concept is this: A bounce does not necessarily mean injury. It often means that the body and nervous system have not fully absorbed the previous effort yet and if that state is ignored repeatedly, *then* injury risk rises.

This is why some dogs have amazing Nationals/Open/Tryout performances and then completely flat performances the next weekend. Not because they're 'being bad' but because they are still recovering from the peak effort.

That recovery can require:

- Physical recovery
- Emotional decompression
- Nervous system downshifting
- Reduced cognitive demand
- Lighter training
- Sleep/rest
- Lower arousal environments
- Easier movement days

The best handlers in the future are probably not going to be the ones who train the hardest. They'll be the ones who understand that recovery, stress load, workload cycling and timing peak performance which is very similar to elite horse training.

And I think Cherie's quote is powerful because of this line:

"We have a duty to listen to the horse."

That absolutely applies to dogs too.

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Off Course with Chris

This month, with permission from the author, we are republishing this piece by American Agility & Performance Coach Suzanne Wesley.

In the article, she draws a fascinating comparison between the world of Kentucky Derby horse racing and our own Agility dogs — specifically focusing on the concept of the "bounce". Boing boing.

We might like to think our dogs are a different breed of tough — built on fresh air, farm running, and pure unadulterated grit. But physiological fatigue doesn't care about our "she'll be right" attitude. A peak effort is a peak effort, whether it happens at Churchill Downs or in a muddy paddock in Palmerston North.

Gone are the days when a proper warm-up meant letting your dog out of the crate thirty seconds before your run to have a quick sniff and a stretch. We are seeing real investment in fitness, conditioning, dynamic warm-ups, and structured downtime.

Speaking of doing better for our dogs, we're also putting our money where our mouth is this month. We are hosting the upcoming Agility Judges Conference alongside the Judges Subcommittee — because if we're going to ask our dogs to be elite athletes, the people designing their playgrounds need to keep pace too. And what better place to hold it than the only place you can pat huskies and see penguins at the same time?

So, grab a drink or three, give Suzanne's article a read, and maybe give your dog an extra hour on the couch — because today is National Spoil Your Dog Day (well, it was on the day I wrote this).

Chris Richardson

AC Chair & EC Agility Representative

