



# CANINE SPORTS MEDICINE: ON YOUR MARK... GET SET... GO!

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There has been a significant increase in the number of people participating in athletic events with their dogs and the types of different sporting events will continue to grow as people become more creative. Certain sports are restricted to specific breeds, while other events are open to any breed of dog that wants to play. The level of competition, training, and conditioning is variable among our canine athletes. Whether your dog is a weekend warrior or a committed competitor, being active can have a positive influence on their mental health and physical well-being.

The ability to perform in an athletic event is a unique mixture of conformation, drive, skill, and conditioning. With the increase in competing and the inconsistent level of preparation amongst these athletes, there is an increase in the number of sports related injuries. A rise in muscle injury is being noted as more veterinarians are fine tuning their diagnostic skills. With time and repetitive over use, small muscle injuries that never get a chance to heal properly can manifest into a chronic injury that starts to impact both performance and comfort. We are now acknowledging that certain activities can result in specific injuries and that injury prevention will become an important focus with sporting dogs.

Injury prevention is a crucial component to long term healthy competing. Dogs that are in ideal body condition and not overweight are better able to perform and are less susceptible to injury. Having a regimented exercise program for dogs involved in sports is invaluable for any level of competition. There are 3 important components to a well-balanced exercise program. The first component is conditioning. Conditioning contributes to the overall physical fitness and should be a mixture of strength and endurance training. The amount of strength versus endurance training varies depending on the sport. Agility dogs, for example, require more strength training while a sledding dog would require more endurance training. The second component is consistent skill training. The skills that are taught to a dog depends upon the specific requirements of the sport they are involved in. The third important component of a well-balanced program is proprioceptive training. Improving a dog's spatial awareness can be very important for injury prevention.

If you are interested in becoming involved in canine sports or currently already competing, open the lines of communication with your veterinarian and talk to them on a regular basis. It is important that these dogs get a clean bill of health prior to an athletic event. It is valuable for you to learn what is normal for your dog and evaluate their joints and muscles before and after each event to identify if there is a new area of concern. Just as with human athletes, it is extremely important for dogs to warm-up and cool-down before and after an event. Warming-up allows the cardiovascular system to get ready and it improves the ability of muscles to function and resist injury. Cooling down is equally important as it helps to reduce muscle soreness and encourages the dogs to mentally wind-down from the potential stress associated with competing.

The American Veterinary Medical Association has acknowledged this trend in dog sports and a unique specialty within the veterinary field now exists. To find a veterinarian in your area that is a Diplomate of the American College of Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation, please visit [www.vsmr.org](http://www.vsmr.org). The American Kennel Club has started a Canine Athlete Initiative and their goal is to improve the health and well-being of canine athletes by improving awareness and advancing education in the field of sports medicine. For more information regarding this public awareness campaign, please visit [www.akcchf.org](http://www.akcchf.org).

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