

 PURINA  
PRO PLAN

# DOG Update

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# PRESEASON TRAINING OF SPORTING DOGS

STARTS LONG BEFORE FALL



*Tom Ness of Oahe Kennels in Menoken, North Dakota, customizes training based on whether a dog will hunt or work as a field trial competitor.*

Long before fall arrives, serious sporting dog enthusiasts have been working to get their dogs ready. In reality, they never let up from conditioning/training mode, though the intensity of their day-to-day routine may relent a bit in the off-season.

Preseason training varies by age, experience and individual dog, yet experts agree success results when a program focuses on optimal training, conditioning and nutrition.

Regardless of the sport, these components are essential when it comes to developing a dog for hunting or field trials.

Purina Senior Manager of the Sporting Group Karl Gunzer says, "Dogs need to be in good physical condition going into the season, which means owners and trainers should focus on getting a dog into top condition weeks ahead of opening day. Those who build a performance platform that balances

training, conditioning and nutrition are enabling a dog to be its best.”

A pro trainer of retrievers for 20 years, Gunzer understands the rigorous requirements on the front end that produce the desired results in the field. “Training is a process that takes time. A dog must mature physically and mentally to the challenges being taught,” he says. “Nutrition supports the hard work. Feeding a nutrient-dense, high-protein/high-fat performance food helps to increase a dog’s endurance.”

Here is a peek behind the fall training curtain of three pro trainers. Sharing their training tips, they provide a glimpse of what it takes to build a successful program.

## KEEPING DOGS SHARP

Tom Ness of Oahe Kennels in Menoken, North Dakota, develops all-around gundogs, with a focus on spaniels, by keeping them sharp year-round. “I never let my dogs get out of shape,” Ness says. “When I say ‘I don’t let them get out of shape,’ I mean not only in the physical sense but in the mental sense as well.”

Ness’ training laid the groundwork that shaped the 2010 National Cocker Field Trial Champion, NFC/FC/CFC/CAFC Ballymena’s Irish Rose MH (“Nellie”). The standout Cocker Spaniel was raised on a program infused with tactical exercises designed to give her the perseverance to win when it counts.

Throwing bumpers on land and water is one of Ness’ methods for conditioning dogs. “Some dogs will wear your arm out before they do,” he says. “Then, you get a dog like Nellie, my National Champion. She’d retrieve a dummy once, twice at the most, and then she’d give me a look that said, ‘Are you kidding me?’ Put her in a field trial though, and she’d retrieve like she’d been shot out of a cannon.”

On the other hand, the daily “pack” run, blended with one-on-one heeling, is something Nellie always enjoyed. “I take my dogs for a run almost every day,” says Ness. “Usually, there are four dogs in a group. I heel

three dogs and send one out to hunt. After 200 to 300 yards, I’ll release another dog to hunt and call back the other one to heel. This way, I am constantly platooning the dogs being kept at heel.”

Among the virtues of the pack run, besides instilling obedience, it helps Ness maintain a proper mindset in his dogs. “It keeps them on their toes mentally, and a dog that is fit both mentally and physically is a dog that is likely to be successful whether your goal is winning field trials or having an enjoyable day of hunting,” he says.

An important aspect of the Oahe program is Ness’ custom approach to conditioning based on a dog’s purpose. Field trial dogs are worked so they can eventually run hard for up to 15 minutes. “That’s longer than they’ll ever have to run in a single series, but if they have to run two or even three series on the same day, they’ll have enough ‘gas in the tank’ to do it,” he says. “With this in mind, I purposely keep their preseason sessions short in order to condition them not to pace themselves.”

Likewise, hunting dogs are prepared for longer runs from 3 to 4 miles, with Ness riding alongside them on a mountain bike. Swimming is an activity he uses to help build strength and endurance.

“I like to mix it up,” he says.

Preseason fall training begins with Ness evaluating dogs to identify any training holes. “This is usually more of an issue with younger dogs, as older dogs have a number of seasons of field trialing and/or hunting experience, thus they may only need a review of skills they already know,” Ness says.

Around midsummer, Ness starts evaluating each dog’s training status. “We start at the beginning and go through the whole process from basic obedience to whistle commands to game-finding ability in the field,” he says. “The idea is to sharpen their responses and get them back into the groove. No dog is perfect, and every dog can be better.”

## TRAINING WITH A NUTRITIONAL STRATEGY

Experts agree that the best conditioning, the best training and the best intentions are nothing if a dog does not have a solid nutritional foundation.

The ideal food for sporting and hunting dogs should be high in fat and protein, such as [Purina Pro Plan SPORT Performance 30/20 Formula](#), a performance dog food containing 30 percent protein and 20 percent fat.



“Feeding a high-protein, high-fat diet primes a dog’s metabolic engine to efficiently convert nutrients into energy,” says Purina Senior Research Scientist Brian Zanghi, PhD. “Keeping a dog on a performance diet year-round is essentially giving a dog a two-month conditioning edge over dogs fed a maintenance diet that is lower in fat and protein.”

In addition, “Feeding a nutrient-dense food allows you not to have to feed an excessive amount to keep weight on dogs,” says Purina Senior Manager for the Sporting Group Karl Gunzer. “When dogs eat less food, and thus have less volume in their stomach, they are more comfortable.”

The goal of nutrition is to optimize performance. “This means feeding a food containing key nutrients in an optimal balance to provide optimal benefits, enabling a dog to hunt longer and find more game,” says Dr. Zanghi. “Food can metabolically prime our dogs to promote optimal endurance.”



## GO SLOWLY IN PRESEASON

Preseason training at Chris Scott's L&D Retrieving in Henderson, Tennessee, starts with assessing each dog's age, weight and body condition, as well as fitness and skill levels. Preparing retrievers for hunting tests involves a multifaceted approach, one that Scott has mastered in titling hundreds of dogs.

"The situation you want to avoid is allowing a dog to push himself past his limit," Scott says. "Young dogs, in particular, don't know when to quit so you have to be smart about their management. A lot involves paying attention to the dog. He'll tell you when he's ready to take the next step. You never want to ask dogs to do more than they are capable of doing."

Starting slowly with older dogs is crucial. "An older dog that's a little overweight may need several months to get into condition compared to a young, fit dog that may only need 30 to 45 days of conditioning to be in tip-top shape."

Nutrition is a fundamental part of the program. "It all starts with proper diet," says Scott. "You can have the best conditioning and training program in the world, but



*Chris Scott of L&D Retrieving in Henderson, Tennessee, develops a young Labrador Retriever for hunting tests.*

it also is important to feed a high-quality food to help improve a dog's ability to perform at a high level. It's all interconnected."

Integrating conditioning and training exercises, Scott says it is key to start with short distances and gradually increase the distance. "Older, experienced dogs that are healthy and fit may start running pattern blinds involving as many as nine bumpers and up to half a mile of combined swimming and running," he says. "Younger dogs that have not graduated to complicated retrieves may start on multiple marks while also working on obedience and improving their delivery-to-hand skills.

"For the rookies, it's about learning and building confidence. For the veterans, it's about knocking off the rust and getting enough repetitions to let their memory take over. They learn or relearn to stay focused and on task, to sit straight, look straight, and go straight. The idea is to sharpen skills that have become dull."

Giving dogs regular days off is important, too, Scott says. "Dogs need time to rest, recover and take a mental break. I work my dogs Monday to Friday and give them the weekend off unless we're at a hunting test. Then, I give them Monday off."

## BUILDING ENDURANCE

Nolan Huffman of Beeline Brittanys in Lewiston, Montana, advises his clients to beware of putting extra weight on their dogs during the off-season. Dogs that are overweight start out behind, he says.

"If you want a dog to be in the right 'place' when hunting season opens, you'll have to start conditioning an overweight dog several weeks before you would if the dog was in reasonably good shape to begin with," Huffman says. "To keep the weight off, you shouldn't change what you feed, but you should adjust the amount fed to reflect the exercise level of the dog. Active sporting dogs should be fed a high-fat, high-protein diet."



*Nolan Huffman of Beeline Brittanys in Lewiston, Montana, says keeping dogs in ideal body condition year-round is important.*

Huffman's training program focuses on developing bird dogs for walking and upland field trials and hunting. His Brittanys are high achievers on the National Shoot to Retrieve Association trial circuit. Speed and endurance blended with bird-finding smarts and powerful drive are important virtues in these sports.

Building endurance starts with free running and roading exercises involving dogs pulling against resistance. "We start slowly and gradually increase the time and distance until dogs are running easy and not panting excessively," Huffman says. "A dog breathing hard through his mouth simply can't smell birds the way a dog breathing easily through his nose can."

Older dogs with experience typically only need a conditioning tuneup to be ready to go. "These dogs don't need as much actual training, but as they age, it takes them longer to get into shape," Huffman says.

"On the other hand, younger dogs need continued training. The most common problem I see is failure to back, or honor another dog's point. I use the 'whoa' com-

mand to correct this, as it is the most basic and important command in the pointing dog's vocabulary. You have to be able to enforce it though. If you spend five minutes every day working on whoa and you focus on making it stick, this should produce a dog that can properly back another dog in the field."

Since summer is when fall preparation begins, Huffman prefers to work dogs in the early morning or evening when it is cool. He also says the more access to water they have, the better. "You never want to risk having a dog overheat," he says.

Rest days are just as important as exertion days, says Huffman. "Typically, I exercise dogs every other day, though if I see a dog struggling, he may rest for two or three days," he says.

"You need to be able to read a dog. Some dogs are born sprinters, others are born distance runners, and some are a little of both," says Huffman. "You have to take that into account, and if you notice any lameness, you need to immediately stop what you're doing."

Warming dogs up before work and cooling them down after work are part of the program. "You want to give joints and muscles time to limber up and get loose before you kick things into high gear," Huffman says. "Similarly, when I'm about a quarter mile from the kennel, I like to slow things down to a leisurely pace, and when we arrive, I let the dogs mill around in the yard for about 10 minutes before I put them up. I found it significantly reduces soreness and injuries." ■

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Have comments about the *Dog Update*? Send them to [Barbara Fawver](#), Editor, Nestlé Purina PetCare.

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## NUTRITIONAL DO'S & DON'TS FOR SPORTING DOGS

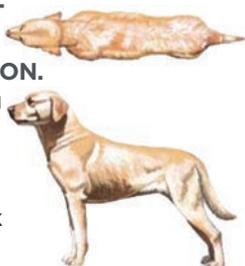
**DON'T FEED A HARDWORKING DOG BEFORE EXERCISE.** Since complete digestion takes from 20 to 24 hours, you should feed a performance dog the night before a trial or hunting outing. Dogs fed six hours or sooner before exercise results in the body's fat-burning enzymes not being optimized, which contributes to reduced endurance and energy generation.



**DO PROVIDE PLENTY OF WATER TO WORKING DOGS.** These dogs should be well-hydrated, as exercise is a heat-producing activity and water is required to dissipate heat. Water also is needed to remove the byproducts of energy metabolism, which is essential to endurance and performance.

### DON'T FORGET ABOUT IDEAL BODY CONDITION.

This means you should be able to feel the ribs and see an abdominal tuck from the side.



### DON'T ALWAYS FEED A WORKING DOG THE SAME AMOUNT OF FOOD.

During the first four to six weeks of conditioning, food quantity should increase, but then level off and decline slightly. Each dog is an individual, and you should adjust the amount of food fed to maintain ideal body condition.

### DO FEED A PERFORMANCE DOG FOOD YEAR-ROUND.

It is best to feed a hardworking dog a performance food year-round, though you should reduce the amount fed if the activity level declines during the off-season. This helps to maximize training and conditioning.



**DO FEED ONCE A DAY.** This allows a hardworking dog time to completely digest the food. Young dogs or high-maintenance dogs requiring a larger portion of food can be fed twice a day with a slightly smaller portion in the morning.

