



Strengthening Exercises for Agility, Part 2

By Debbie Gross Saunders, MSPT, OCS, CCRP
Photos by Clean Run

Dogs participating in agility need a variety of strengthening exercises not only to keep them at their peak performance, but also to protect them against potential injuries. It is essential to offer your agility dog cross-training activities on at least a weekly basis, and a daily basis if possible. If we examine human athletes, they participate in a variety of activities in addition to their normal sport. For example, an athlete involved in track and field not only trains for her individual event, she participates in strengthening and conditioning activities including weight lifting, plyometrics, swimming, sprinting, and long-distance running.

Agility activities are wonderful for your dog, but to promote his long-term health and wellness as well as to improve performance, cross training is paramount. Part of your cross training should include strengthening. Strengthening exercises should be done with a healthy dog on a regular basis, and absolutely must be done before an injured dog returns to agility.

Last month we looked at exercises for increasing hind-end awareness as well as increasing strength in the gluteal and hamstring regions. This month we'll look at exercises to strengthen the quadriceps region and the forelimbs, and to increase core and back strength.



Controlled sit to stand

- This exercise is equivalent to our performing squats without any weight.
- Back the dog into a corner or up against a wall to avoid excess movement.
- Use treats to encourage the dog to repetitively sit and stand for sets of eight to ten, done to two to three times.
- Also encourage a full stand from a sit.

To Increase Strength in the Quadriceps Region

The quadriceps are located in the front of the thigh and consist of four muscles—the rectus femoris, the vastus medialis, the vastus lateralis, and the vastus intermedius. The four muscles that are responsible for extending the stifle and the rectus femoris also flex the hip. While running, the dog uses these muscles to extend the stifle. Weakness can develop in this muscle group after an injury, specifically with a cruciate injury or a patellar luxation, or after a training hiatus.

Exercises to increase strength in the quadriceps region are appropriate for:

- General hind-limb weakness
- Poor hind-limb coordination
- Patella luxations—both surgical and nonsurgical
- Cruciate injuries

Walking through tunnels or under tables



- The goal is to have the dog squat to go through the tunnel, and to go through the tunnel at a slow to moderate speed. The squatting motion works the quadriceps region.
- If the dog is too short for a tunnel, you can use a makeshift tunnel, such as a short table (utility table).
- Encourage the dog to go through the tunnel or under the table so that he is in a squatting position while moving.
- Perform this exercise in sets of five, as long as a lameness does not appear.



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Hind-limb and forelimb lifts

- Lift the left forelimb and the right hind limb into a slight amount of extension and hold for 5 to 10 seconds.
- Then lift the right forelimb and the left hind limb and hold for 5 to 10 seconds.
- Do this exercise 10 times on each side.



To Increase Core Stability and Back Strength

Back and abdominal strength are commonly referred to as core strength. Core strength is vital and is used in every movement the dog performs in agility. The most obvious place these muscles are used is when a dog goes over a jump. Good core strength produces a more controlled jump because the dog can collect or pull himself in as he jumps. Think of a human diver: when he has good control, the diver pulls his body in to collect himself during the dive.

Exercises to increase core stability and back strength are appropriate for:

- Improving trunk control
- Improving coordination and collection for jumping
- Training young dogs
- Weakness in the back and stomach muscles
- Problems with roaching (convex curving) of the spine

Using a rocker board

- Purchase a rocker board or build your own using a sturdy piece of plywood covered with a non-slip surface and mounted on a semicircular base. A BOSU Balance Trainer (an exercise ball that's been cut in half with a platform on the top), for example, can be used as the base for your rocker board. For large dogs, the rocker board needs to be at least 8" longer than your dog and twice his width. A Buja board may be used for small dogs.



- Place the dog on the board and rock him from side to side, and from front to back, until the dog tires.
- The dog may sit, stand, or lie down on the board.
- Place the dog's forelimbs on the ground while the hind limbs remain on the rocker board as the board is rocked from side to side, and from front to back, until the dog tires.

Using a Theraball



- Place the dog gently on the Theraball so that neither his forelimbs nor hind limbs can reach the ground. Maintain the dog's spine in a flexed or rounded position.
- Initially, bounce the dog *gently* to promote relaxation. Most dogs do very well on the Theraball if they are slowly introduced to the ball.
- Once the dog is comfortable, rock him at a gentle angle from side to side and from front to back. As the comfort level increases, rocking in all four directions can be increased in amount.
- To further challenge the dog, he may be allowed to reach forward or to the side for treats.
- Start Theraball activities with three- to five-minute intervals. You'll be surprised how quickly the dog will fatigue with these short sessions. The sessions can be progressively increased as the dog strengthens.
- The dog may also sit on the Theraball and be encouraged to reach in different directions for a treat. Looking up for a treat encourages the dog to place more weight on the hind limbs, and reaching down for a treat encourages the dog to place more weight on the forelimbs.



Sit-up



Side sit-up

Doggie sit-ups

- Although this is a wonderful exercise to work on abdominals, not every dog will allow himself to be placed on his back, especially on the Theraball. So exercise caution when attempting this exercise. Also, this exercise should not be performed with a dog that has any type of intervertebral disc problem, secondary to the degree of extension of the spine that is involved. The dog will need to extend his spine back and this could potentially stress the area.
- While on his back, encourage the dog to lift his head and perform a degree of thoracic flexion or forward movement to reach a treat.
- Begin with one or two sets of three with sit-ups because they are so strenuous and difficult for the dog to perform.
- Also try to have the dog perform side sit-ups. Some dogs may be more comfortable lying on their side to begin this type of activity. Perform one set of three to five on each side.



With larger dogs, you may find that sit-ups are easier to help with when using an egg-shaped ball or physio-roll.

Walking down hills

- Walking down hills focuses the weight on the forelimbs.
- A zigzagging descent down the hill is the safest route and places less stress on the forelimbs. This caution is especially crucial if a dog is recovering from a shoulder injury.



Walking in sand

- Walking in sand is more difficult than it appears and should be begun slowly.
- The softer the sand, the more difficult it will be for the dog to walk. So start this activity in hard-packed sand, if possible, and begin with two- to three-minute walks with the dog on leash.
- To increase the intensity of the exercise, walk the dog for longer distances, up and down embankments and in zigzags.

To Increase Strength of the Forelimbs

With all the jumping and landing that our dogs do in agility, they need adequate forelimb strength from their carpus up to their shoulder blade. To protect the area and provide the strength needed for agility, our dogs need stability and power.

Exercises to increase strength of the forelimbs are appropriate for:

- General forelimb weakness
- Poor coordination of the forelimb
- Elbow dysplasia
- Arthritis of the forelimb muscle groups
- Recovery from biceps tendonitis
- Recovery from scapular injuries 🐾

Note: The author wishes to thank Pam O'Day and her Sheltie, Quest, for her assistance with pictures and advice.

*Debbie Gross Saunders is a licensed physical therapist and a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner with over 15 years of experience in the field. She practices in Connecticut at the Pieper-Olson Veterinary Clinic. She and her husband also have a rehabilitation and training center on their farm in Connecticut where they specialize in the rehabilitation, nutrition, and conditioning of dogs. Her book *Canine Physical Therapy* is available from www.wizardofpaws.net as is her quarterly newsletter, *Wizard of Paws*, which features the latest in exercise and rehabilitation. Contact Debbie at wizofpaws@aol.com*



Wheelbarrowing

- Pick up the dog's hind limbs above his midline or center of the back and walk him forward for a distance of 15' to 20'.
- Increase intensity by increasing the time and by wheelbarrowing the dog down hills.
- Exercise caution if the dog has a problem with his spine secondary to the extension involved.



Digging in sand or rice

- This activity is great to build up the strength of the wrist and shoulder flexors and the scapular muscles.
- Bury a treat in the sand to encourage digging.



Transferring weight from one forelimb to the other



Transferring weight on and off forelimbs

Using a rocker board

- Place the dog's back feet on the rocker board and his front feet on the floor.
- Rock the rocker board from side to side to transfer weight from one forelimb to the other.
- Reposition the dog on the rocker board as shown and rock back and forth to transfer weight on and off the forelimbs.
- You should visibly see the muscles in the shoulder activate as the weight is shifted on and off.
- Perform this exercise until the dog fatigues.

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Strengthening the Performance Dog By Debbie Gross Saunders

Dogs participating in performance sports such as agility require crosstraining activities, including both a conditioning program and strengthening exercises. Doing a variety of strengthening exercises will improve your dog's agility performance and, even more important, will protect him against injuries. This video demonstrates a variety of strengthening exercises that should be part of your crosstraining program outside of agility. It includes exercises to improve jumping strength and power, improve collection and turning ability, increase forelimb and hind limb strength, improve balance, and increase hind-end awareness.



Stretching the Performance Dog By Debbie Gross Saunders

Dogs doing agility and other performance canine sports need to be treated as athletes. Strength and flexibility are vital. Stretching prepares the body for movement, improving performance on the agility field and aiding in the prevention of common injuries. Learn how to properly stretch your dog. This DVD contains instructions for stretching each part of your dog's body so that you can create a stretching routine to address injuries or weaknesses in your dog. It also contains a complete pre-agility stretching routine that you can use if you want a set routine to follow.

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