



FIT FOR THE HUNT

Veterinarian Dr Karen Davies on keeping your gun dog in tip top shape.

How do I keep my dog fit during a long hunting season?

It is important to remember that prior to hunting your pet should be fit to reduce the risk of injury. In the same way you would not go “full bore” at the gym with your personal trainer without having done any previous exercise, you should not expect your dog to do the same.

Getting fit for the hunting season will depend on what you use your dog for. Starting several weeks ahead of your first outing will give you and your dog the best opportunity to get the job done. If you are a stalker, long walks and some off-lead play will generally be sufficient. However, if you have a running dog, you should build up to more vigorous exercise to support both fitness and stamina. Swimming, treadmills and hydrotherapy will provide fitness as well as resistance work, allowing your dog to run further and for longer. Fitness is key to preventing muscle soreness after a weekend away. Ensure your dog has had a good quality feed to achieve sufficient blood glucose levels and electrolytes to allow for prolonged exercise.

Pre-made balanced formulations such as Lectade and Vytrate are great to have on hand. Following up with these solutions will also help reduce muscle soreness.

Some of my hunting will be in the coldest months. Do some breeds cope with the cold better than others?

It is very important when hunting in the cold season that you do not allow your dog to cool too quickly after exercise. Warming up beforehand will help reduce muscle soreness and injury in the cold, as, like us, muscle cramps are more common in the cold. After exercise you should ensure the dog is dried off if wet, and for light-coated or short-coated breeds, a jacket is not unreasonable to prevent rapid chilling. Walking prior to putting to the dog back in the crate for the trip home will help reduce muscle soreness, in the same way that athletes will have a cool-down session. No breed is immune to the effects of the cold. While wire-coated breeds will generally dry quicker, their coat provides minimal warmth. Some of the short-coated breeds, such as labs, will develop a double coat during the winter months. They are at less risk of over-cooling but if rugged up too soon, or too much, can readily overheat.



Will a dog coat provide adequate protection?

A coat is a great idea for after the hunt. Working the dog during a hunt in a coat is not a great idea; they get caught up in the bush, and we have seen dogs end up with broken limbs when running flat out and the forelimb has extended through the neck of the jacket tripping the dog up. Once your dog has finished the hunt always wait for the respiration/breathing to come back to normal before “rugging them up”, otherwise you may risk overheating. Any jackets placed on the dog after exercise should be relatively light weight and non-restrictive, just enough to stop a chilly breeze. EzyDog Elements are a great jacket for this purpose.

What can I do to help my dog recover after working in cold water or in freezing conditions in the bush?

It's really important to dry your dog off after exercise in cool weather to avoid hypothermia and muscle cramping. Having a cool-down session to allow the dogs respiration and body temperature to come back to normal before putting them in the car for the trip home will reduce the incidence of muscle soreness, cramps and “tie-up” (the common term for lactic acid build up in the muscles). It is best not to have heat mats or to put the car heater on flat out when you get them back to the car as, if the dog is still hot from the hunt, you can cause them to overheat and this can have catastrophic consequences. Just dry them off, get them out of cool breeze, apply a lightweight coat if necessary and walk them until breathing and body temp are back to normal. An electrolyte mix will

also help at the end of the training/hunting session to reduce muscle soreness and fatigue.

What should I worry about with older dogs?

Older dogs are at greater risk of muscle injury and fatigue, along with lameness due to arthritis and back injuries. Fitness is key, the old saying “you snooze — you lose” has never been truer than when we talk about muscular and cardiovascular fitness.

Keeping older dogs fit during the off-season is essential, and maintain resistance work such as swimming or hydrotherapy.

Keep the dog in a good weight range and with a reasonable level of fitness, then increase the level of fitness prior to the season. If your dog has the beginnings of arthritis you can try glucosamine and chondroitin supplement to improve the health of the joints and omega supplements to reduce inflammation and pain.

As arthritis is an immune-mediated destructive disease, it also makes sense to support your dog with anti-inflammatories (supplied by your vet) if needed. My old girl Bella, a GSP, was retired from stalking at 13 years of age due to advanced arthritis. Around the same time, we started her on some anti-inflammatories to keep her comfortable.

Her improvement was so great she returned to stalking and hunted for another two years. Granted, she modified the way she stalked; she would walk up to the bush, engage the deer and back away bringing the beast out into the open. She loved it and lived it right to the end.

Veterinarian Dr Karen Davies owns and uses hunting dogs and has broadened her expertise to include animal rehabilitation, animal physiotherapy and animal hydrotherapy services. Readers of Field & Game Magazine can draw on her experience and expertise by submitting questions to editor@fieldandgame.com.au

Karen can be consulted at Direct Vet Services, 8/22–30 Wallace Ave, Point Cook, VIC; Email: directvetservices@bigpond.com or Tel: (03) 9369 1822.