

Review:

Stretching the Performance Dog

A DVD by Debbie Gross Saunders

By Martha Faulk

If you've ever participated in athletic competitions or aerobics classes, you know the importance of warming up and stretching. To prevent injury, especially to soft tissue, coaches and instructors have always emphasized the benefits of preparing the body for strenuous physical activity. So, have we agility enthusiasts been doing enough to prepare our canine athletes for the rigorous physical demands of agility?

Stretching the Performance Dog is intended for handlers who want to be sure they are doing everything possible to prevent common injuries and to maintain their dog's body in peak physical condition. Debbie Gross Saunders, a frequent contributor to *Clean Run*, prepared this DVD to show us how to precisely and confidently stretch our dog's limbs and spine before and after competition. Saunders is a licensed physical therapist and certified canine rehabilitation practitioner who has written a book titled *Canine Physical Therapy*. She also publishes a newsletter, *Wizard of Paws*, which features the latest information about canine exercise and rehabilitation.

"Movement to the dog is *life*," we are reminded in the introduction as we watch dogs swimming, playing, and of course, doing agility. The slow-motion sequences of dogs navigating through weave poles, jumping, and running down contact equipment to a sudden halt all serve to remind us visually just how much energy is required from the dog. All those changes of direction and sudden stops at speed require a tremendous amount of flexibility and strength. We learn that 60% to 70% of the dog's body weight is placed on the forelimbs when walking and even more when running. If the dog does not have the necessary strength and flexibility, then soft tissue injuries may develop over time.

That's why a carefully designed program for stretching before and after agility activity is so important.

Saunders describes the many benefits associated with stretching activities for your canine athlete. Among other things, stretching

- Relaxes the body
- Promotes circulation
- Helps with coordination, allowing freer and easier movement
- Improves range of motion
- Helps the dog develop body awareness
- Helps you become familiar with your dog's body as you move each joint through its range of motion.

As the sequences demonstrating how to do the stretches begin, the viewer is reminded that there's a right way and a wrong way to stretch the dog. It's important to stretch the dog's limb in a smooth, constant motion, and if possible, to hold the stretch position for 30 seconds. We are cautioned that if the muscles are stretched too far, then tightening will occur, and we should back off. If the dog is continually resistant, then the dog should be thoroughly examined for problems.

With the help of a variety of dogs, Saunders shows what flexion and extension of the joints look like. She also demonstrates *abduction* (movements away from the midline of the dog's body) as well as *adduction* (movement toward the midline of the dog's body). Each section of the DVD presents flexion, extension, abduction, and adduction with a specific limb or body portion. Stretches for the hind limbs include demonstrations of hip and stifle stretches. Forelimb stretches also include shoulder, elbow, and carpal movements.



As Saunders reminds us, "The physical demands of agility should not be taken lightly!" This DVD will help us to prepare our dogs—and ourselves—for those demands.

Another section shows stretches for the spine, including cervical extension, flexion, and rotation. And Saunders shows us how to stretch all the toes, too. Since it's easy to navigate around the DVD, you can go back to the sections which interest you most.

At the end of the DVD, Saunders shows us how to stretch our own bodies before competition and includes a specifically designed stretching routine for our dogs both before and after competing. The importance of warm-up is also emphasized, and we are encouraged to trot or jog with our dogs for 2 to 5 minutes before entering the ring, and then to devote 5 to 10 minutes to a cool-down period, first jogging and then walking. As Saunders reminds us, "The physical demands of agility should not be taken lightly!" This DVD will help us to prepare our dogs—and ourselves—for those demands. 🐾

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