



EXERCISE OF THE MONTH:

Get on the Ball Basics

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

Any dog competing in canine sports should possess good core muscle strength; that is, good strength of both back and abdominal muscles. Core work is a part of every human athlete's workout and should also be part of every canine workout. Without adequate core control, the dog is at risk for injuries to his body, specifically the back muscles. Yet, injuries could occur at any part of the body secondary to poor core strength. For example, if a dog has a weak core, he may compensate with his rear and begin to have problems with "tight" muscles, muscle strains, or other issues. Many dogs with weak core muscles have difficulty with collection work, a necessity on agility courses. In addition, working the core muscles offers an excellent method of cross training for the performance dog. Strengthening the core muscles should be a part of every performance dog's conditioning program.

An easy and effective method of core strengthening involves a large vinyl ball, also sometimes referred to as an exercise ball, theraball, balance ball, fitness ball, gymnastics ball, or Swiss ball. Theraballs challenge the dog's body because they are an unstable surface. The dog's legs and abs immediately contract to keep him from falling off the ball. (Try sitting on the ball yourself; it's hard work!) Add an exercise to that (like reaching to the side for a treat), and you've just increased the intensity of the movement. Work on the ball also provides a method of strengthening the core muscles without altering the dog's standing biomechanics.

There are many brands of theraballs available such as FitBALL, Dura-Ball, Thera-Band, Gymnic, and Pezzi. There are also different shapes

of balls available such as the Gymnic Physio-Roll (a double ball with a peanut shape) or the Pezzi EGG. For core work, I personally prefer the Physio-Rolls or EGGs to the round balls because they are longer in design, making them more comfortable for the dogs, and they are easier for the human member of the team to manage. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to all of these as "balls" in this article.

For core strengthening work, you need a large ball. The ball should be a minimum of 4" higher than the dog's withers, but higher is fine. The goal is to have all four of the dog's limbs on the ball. If owners have different sized dogs at home, I recommend one large ball so that the ball may be easily used for all of their dogs.

The two most common questions I receive about the ball are:

1. How do I get my dog on the ball?
2. Will he pop it?

I'll answer the first question shortly. The answer to the second question is to train the ball as a working activity. At no time do you want the dog to chase or bite the ball in the working environment. In addition, store the ball in a location that the dog cannot access; it is not a toy. Unless the dog's nails are very long and sharp, the nails should not pop a good-quality ball. Inexpensive balls from discount stores are usually made from a thin layer of vinyl and tend not to hold up for very long for canine work. It is money well spent to invest in a good quality ball. To help preserve its life, don't leave your ball outside in the weather for long periods of time.



Use treats to encourage the dog to put his front legs on the ball and then lift the dog's back legs onto the ball.

Get the dog on the ball

I always suggest using lots of positive reinforcement as soon as the dog approaches the ball whether that reinforcement is clicker training or treats and verbal encouragement. I have worked with some dogs that immediately adapt to the ball, and others that take two or three sessions to feel comfortable with the new situation. Food incentives, such as peanut butter, work well to encourage the dog to move toward the



You can also smear peanut butter or Kong Stuffn' Paste on the ball to entice your dog to approach it.

ball. Spread some peanut butter on the ball and encourage the dog to approach the ball and lick it off.

Stabilize the ball

Once the dog is near the ball, stabilize the ball to prevent it from moving either by placing it up against a wall or a piece of furniture (ottomans work well) or by wedging it up against a telephone book or other large book. You can also sit in a chair and wedge the ball between your legs to hold it in position. Encourage the dog to place his front legs on the ball (use treats!) and then lift the dog's back legs onto the ball.

Let your dog choose the position

Work with whatever position the dog assumes once you get him on the ball. For example, if the dog gets up on the ball and sits, work with him in that position. Use peanut butter or treats to encourage the dog to stay on the ball and to help maintain the position. Of course, be careful the dog does not fall off the ball at any time.



A large book wedged under the ball can help you stabilize the ball.



The dog may choose to lie down, sit, or stand on the ball while you do these exercises. Work the exercises with the dog in whatever position he chooses.



Use treats to get the dog to reach from one side of his body to the other side. Watch the dog's hips and shoulders as these movements occur. In this series

Bounce the dog

Gently bounce the dog on the ball—the bounces should be soft and slow. The main purpose of the bouncing is to calm the dog and provide relaxation, which may take anywhere from 2 to 5 minutes. While you're relaxing him, however, the dog is also using his core muscles to stabilize himself on the ball. You may notice the shoulders and hips working—they are working with the core muscles to stabilize the dog's position.

Weight-shifting exercises

- When the dog feels comfortable begin some gentle weight shifting. Encourage the dog to reach forward with a treat, and then back again. Do this between 5 and 10 times, or until the dog tires.



Encourage weight shifting by having the dog reach forward for a treat and then back again. As your dog becomes comfortable with the exercise, you can ask him to reach farther and farther.

- Next encourage the dog to reach from his left side to his right. Watch the dog's hips and shoulders as these movements occur. Start with alternating turns from side to side, five times on each side. As the dog progresses, encourage him to reach farther and farther. Progressions also include increasing the number of repetitions.
- Gently push the dog's hips back and forth. The goal is not to push the dog off balance but to encourage him to shift his weight.
- End the session with a minute or two of gentle bouncing.

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of photos Bonus starts with his head and neck turned to his right side. Using the treat as a lure, Debbie gets him to turn all the way to his left side.



Encourage the dog to shift his weight by gently pushing the dog's hips back and forth. Again, work with whatever position the dog is comfortable in.

How often?

Initial sessions should last between 5 and 10 minutes. I recommend performing the exercises once a day, at least five times a week. It does not appear that the dog is doing a significant amount of exercise, but the core muscles are in a constant state of contraction or activity while the dog is on the ball. Typically you can see results within 10 days.

Next month, we'll discuss advanced exercises on the ball. 🐾

Debbie Gross Saunders is a licensed physical therapist and a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner with over 13 years of experience in the field. She and her husband 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.







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EXERCISE OF THE MONTH:

Increasing Challenges on the Ball

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

As mentioned in the previous article, core strengthening is essential for dogs involved in any performance events. In fact, any dog can benefit from core strengthening exercises. When performed properly, the theraball offers a wonderful method of strengthening the core muscles of the dog and is a great crosstraining activity. It is also useful for improving balance and proprioception. These are two critical skills in agility both for obvious reasons, like the dog being able to negotiate the teeter and dogwalk, as well as for less obvious ones, such as the dog being prepared for and in control of jump takeoffs and landings.

Balance is affected by head position, head movement, weight shifting, vision, and surface. Standing and balancing on one leg may be fairly easy for some of us, but try maintaining your balance while you close your eyes and move your head from side to side or up and down; all of these activities will further challenge your balance. By incorporating similar challenges into the work we do with our dogs on the ball, we can improve balance and proprioception at the same time that we are strengthening our dogs.

The exercises in this article can be started once your dog is comfortable doing 10-minute sessions on the ball and happily performing the weight-shifting exercises from last month's article while in a down position on the ball.



Once the dog is comfortable sitting on the ball, encourage him to lower his head to reach for a treat.



Up and Down Head

Get the dog on the ball as discussed in last month's article and then encourage the dog to sit up on the ball. Once the dog is sitting, gently bounce him for relaxation. Spend a few minutes with the dog in this position to insure his comfort. Offer praise, clicks, and/or treats for sitting. Then begin to encourage the dog to lower his head to reach for a treat. The goal is to have the dog lower his head without going into a down position. He will be using his abdominal muscles during this activity. Once the dog is happily lowering his head, use

Use a treat to encourage the dog to reach from side to side while sitting.

Side-to-side Head Movements While Sitting

Another activity to attempt while the dog is sitting on the ball is to encourage him to reach from side to side. Alternate directions and begin with three to five repetitions to each side and gradually build up to more.

Again, start with small distances and then gradually increase the distance that you ask the dog to reach for the treat.





Gradually increase the distance you ask him to lower or raise his head.

Next use a treat to get him to raise his head.

Movements While Sitting

a treat to get the dog to raise his head. Start with small distances and then gradually increase the distance. Initially do five alternating ups and downs.

If the dog prefers to lie down or is shaking secondary to muscle weakness, decrease the number of repetitions and return to working the dog in a down position. In addition, if reaching down or up for a treat is difficult, ask the dog to lean forward for a treat instead. This may be a little easier for him, with regard to balance, and it is still working the core muscles.



If reaching up or down for a treat is difficult, have the dog lean forward for a treat instead.

Puppy “Push-ups” on the Ball

Once the dog has mastered sitting on the ball and moving his head up and down, and reaching from side to side, try this exercise: ask the dog to lie down and then immediately ask for a sit. You can do this with a verbal command or use a treat to lure the dog down and then back into a sit. Begin with sets of three to five and gradually work up to sets of 10. Remember to keep the ball secured and provide assistance to the dog as needed so that he does not fall off the ball.



Get the dog to move from a sit to a down and then back to a sit again.

Standing on the Ball



Challenge the dog's balance by gently pushing his hips from side to side, and also by gently pushing him forward and then releasing pressure.

The next step is to encourage the dog to stand on the ball. Some dogs immediately assume a standing position when placed on the ball. If that is the case with your dog, you may begin with the standing exercises rather than doing the sitting exercises.

Encourage the dog to stand still and work on balance. Using your hands, provide only as much contact with the dog as he needs to help him feel comfortable and to keep him from falling off the ball. The more he stands on his own without support or leaning on you, the harder he is working. As the dogs become more advanced in their balancing skills, they may need no physical support from you at all; however, you still always need to keep your hands in a "spotting position" so that you are ready to help the dog if he loses his balance.

Once the dog is comfortable standing on the ball, begin to challenge his balance by adding pressure that he needs to resist. Gently push his hips from side to side, and also gently push him forward and then release pressure. The goal is *not* to push the dog off the ball, but to challenge his standing posture. Do this for two to five minutes, depending upon the fatigue and tolerance level of the dog.

Forward, Up, and Down Head Movements While Standing

Use treats to encourage the dog to reach his head forward while standing and then back again. Now ask the dog to bend his head down to reach a treat and then look up for the treat. Start with a few repetitions and gradually build up. Again, start with small distances and then gradually increase the distance that you ask the dog to reach for the treat.



Use a treat to encourage the dog to reach his head forward and then back again.



Ask the dog to bend his head down to reach for a treat and then to look up for a treat without sitting.



Gradually increase the distance that you ask the dog to reach.



Use a treat to encourage the dog to move his head from side to side.

Side-to-side Head Movements While Standing

While the dog is still standing, encourage him to move his head from side to side. As with the sitting side-to-side head movement, begin with three to five repetitions and gradually increase the number. Start with small distances and then gradually increase the distance that you ask the dog to reach for the treat. Always exert caution so that the dog does not lose his balance or slip.

Debbie Gross Saunders is a licensed physical therapist and a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner with over 13 years of experience in the field. She and her husband 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.

Progression

It is important to remember to gradually progress the dog's exercises on the theraball and employ good body mechanics for both you and the dog. Each dog will progress differently. Typically, with performance dogs, a session ranging from 10 to 15 minutes, three to seven times a week is sufficient for core strengthening.

A Note about Older and Retired Dogs

Ball activities are also wonderful for retired agility dogs or older dogs in the household. Keep in mind, the older dog may need to start out more slowly with the exercises and may not progress as fast as the younger dog. The goals for the older or retired dogs will vary as well. It is reasonable to assume a retired competition dog can build up to 10 minutes on the ball over a course of two to four weeks, but each dog's tolerance for exercise activity will vary. Maintenance of that session time is the goal. 🐾

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