



Improving Strength and Stride with Cavalettis

By Bobbie Lyons, Cert CF. Photos by author

Cavaletti training, or trotting through low-set poles, has been used with horses for decades to improve stride length, limb awareness, and timing. Cavalettis are also used to improve heart and circulatory function and to test the horse's ability to learn. More recent information says that cavaletti training can also improve core strength, power in each limb, and overall movement.

When assessing performance dogs for a canine fitness program, I see many dogs with roached backs and a tight lower back. This can be related to the dog's lack of opportunity to trot. Many dogs do not maintain a trot when walking on leash due to the handler's walking speed. With the added stress of performance jumping, turning, stopping, and pivoting, it is important for these dogs to lengthen through their spine, use their core muscles, and independently rotate their hips. Cavaletti training is a good way to add this type of activity to your dog's exercise program.

Benefits

- Lengthens through the dog's neck and spine
- Flattens a roached back
- Teaches a balanced trot
- Steadies the dogs rear and improves awareness of hind feet
- Improves hip rotation and knee flexion
- Improves proprioception
- Builds strength and endurance
- Improves coordination
- Builds stamina
- Adds variety to training and strength work

Warm-Up: Before starting cavaletti exercises, warm up your dog's major joints as well as feet and toes to properly prepare your dog for exercise (see my article in *CR* March 2015).

Body Position: A trotting gait (diagonal opposing limbs move together), head pointed straight (not turned toward the handler), spine straight, back flat (no arching or roaching).



Equipment/Setup

- Use any *even number* of poles between 6 and 12.
- Start with the spacing between the poles set at your dog's height at the withers; for example, if your dog is 18" tall at the withers, space the cavalettis 18" apart.
- Set the poles at a height that is equal to half your dog's hock height; for example, if your dog's hock measures 6" from the ground, set the poles at 3" high. The height of the poles should *not* be increased, as this exercise is specifically designed to improve gait, stride length, and core strength.

Repetitions: Cavaletti training to improve strength and stride can be done 2 to 3 times a week. In each session, you work until the dog shows signs of fatigue. If your dog starts hitting the poles after you have done several repetitions through, it is a sign of fatigue. Other signs of fatigue might be excessive panting, refusing the exercise, cutting out of the line of poles.

A goal for many dogs would be to gradually work up to 20 to 30 passes (a pass is one direction) through 6 poles (half the number of passes if using 12 poles); this is 1 set. You can do 3 to 5 sets, depending on your dog's current level of fitness, with a rest between sets.

However, start slowly with no more than 10 passes through the poles. Once your dog understands to trot through the poles and is comfortable with the exercise, then increase the number of repetitions slowly.

Because cavaletti training is repetitive, it may be necessary to stop part way through and toss a ball or play tug to keep your dog engaged. Play with your dog for a minute or two and then send him back through the poles 10 more times and repeat until your dog shows signs of fatigue.

Training Tips

- To keep your dog focused forward, and his spine straight, train him to go through the cavalettis to a mat or some other type of target.
- Avoid walking beside the poles because your dog will keep pace with you instead of finding his own pace through the poles.

- Jumping the poles instead of trotting is a training issue, not just because the poles look like jumps. Training an *Easy* command is useful for getting the dog to think about the poles.
- Avoid using a leash because your dog will keep pace with you instead of finding his own pace.
- If your dog is striding nicely through the poles and suddenly starts hitting the poles, this is a sign of fatigue—you should stop the exercise.

Increase the Difficulty

- Set up the cavalettis on a gradual incline—*never* do cavalettis downhill, only going uphill.

The spacing between the poles can be increased 1" at a time until your dog has reached his maximum stride length. If you increase the spacing and your dog immediately goes from striding through the poles to hitting the poles, then you have moved the poles too far apart; decrease the spacing. 🐾

Bobbie Lyons, Cert CF has 12 years of experience training handlers and their performance dogs safe canine fitness practices. She obtained this knowledge by consulting with the leading veterinarians, rehabilitation specialists, and canine physical therapists to ensure proper position and technique to maximize the benefits of each exercise. Bobbie has five dogs and has trained in agility for over 15 years. She teaches students all over the world at classroom.daisypeel.com and travels offering workshops and clinics. Contact Bobbie through her website: www.pawsitive-performance.com.