

# Obedience Is Conditioning

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(Illustrations by Kati Ball)

Most obedience exhibitors seem to forget the importance of conditioning a dog. There are different types of conditioning: mental, environmental, and physical.

Mental conditioning of your dog is always a plus. Giving your dog plenty of experiences at matches as well as taking him to different, interesting places can help "mentally" prepare him. These socializing experiences usually expose your dog to a variety of distractions and alleviate "blowing his mind" at an obedience trial or all breed show. Do your dog a favor and have the foresight to condition him for what lies ahead in competition. You will not have to say, "Gee, he would have qualified, but ....."

Conditioning your dog to different types of weather should not be overlooked either. I have shown in Open competition in wind so strong that the high jump had to be sand-bagged as it blew over several times. People could not even walk in a straight line! I remember one Arizona show where there was an 8-inch layer of fog on the ground which did not dissipate until 8:30 to 9:00 a.m. (Picture someone with a Dachshund being first in the ring!) At 8:00 a.m. check-in time I can imagine a record was set for the number of "conflicts" reported to the steward. Utilize all the different weather you can find: hot, cold, windy, rainy, etc. Obedience does not mean..... "My dog will mind except when the weather is bad."

Along with the weather, environmental conditioning should include working your dog on different surfaces. Many of the Arizona outdoor shows have not been on the best of grass. (I recall one show on a poor, dirt parking lot.) I had a student of mine show a toy breed who lost considerable points on her heeling because he leaped with every step as they were forced to compete in a ring where the grass had not been mowed recently. I have seen dogs slip on wet grass while jumping or because they were coming in so fast on the recall.

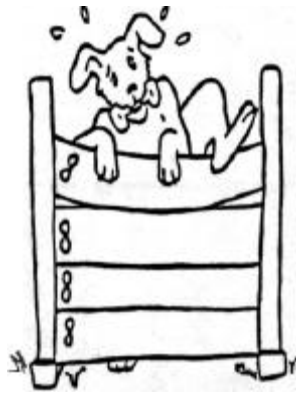
In the southwest we rarely have indoor competition; however, the obedience regionals, where the "creme de la creme" compete, are always indoors. Mats are used in the rings at indoor competition so logic would dictate that your dog should have experience performing his exercises on

mats of different types. The acoustics in many indoor shows are much different and could also be considered "mental" conditioning.

Physical conditioning includes a variety of things. The most obvious would be to bathe or groom your dog, making sure fleas and ticks do not accompany him to the dog show (and prevention when returning home would be wise). If you want a peak performance from your dog, it would be a good idea to give periodic stool checks for internal parasites.

Often times, because physical conditioning is not so necessary in Novice, the exhibitor may tend to assume the same would hold true in Open and Utility. These classes include more difficult exercises that require more time and work to achieve the results necessary to be competitive. If we think of obedience competition as a sport, we should realize that no matter what sport, there is always practice and repetition. Even adult athletes who know their sport inside and out, practice and train to get themselves in condition to compete. However, it is a known fact that some obedience philosophies profess to "beware of boring your dog with too much work." Ask yourself if it is the work that is boring or is it because you are not using your imagination to make your training sessions interesting for your dog. (If a handler is bored, the product may be a bored dog.)

While training for the advanced



classes, the practice and repetition (especially on the jumps) builds good muscle tone, develops timing, and hopefully keeps your dog in good weight. Those exhibitors who work their dogs in obedience and also have some "horse" experience can probably best appreciate timing and muscle tone in relationship to the jumps. Your dog can have a definite advantage with timing if the

distance from the jumps is consistent. In the event you get nervous and throw the dumb-bell short, good muscle tone will help the dog return over the jump even if the usual distance is not available. In addition, the practice and repetition on the jumps enables the dog to learn from his mistakes (hopefully not practice them) and reinforces all the successes. This

has been said to build confidence in a dog and it does not hurt the handler's confidence either ..... another plus for competition.

One aspect frequently overlooked in physical conditioning is trimming the dog's nails. Long nails can cause the dog to walk abnormally because his weight must be shifted to the back of his pads. Imagine if you did not trim your toenails. Could you still walk comfortably in closed shoes, or better yet, new shoes of the same size that are not yet stretched out? Would you like to walk on your heels all the time? Training will not necessarily wear down the nails, so trimming them is a must to enable the dog to be better balanced and able to jump. Imagine an overweight dog whose nails are not trimmed, trying to jump one and one-half times his height.\* For an indoor show, take-off and landing would be considerably more difficult for your dog if he is not in good physical condition.

The next time (in practice or at a show) your dog fails an exercise, especially a jump exercise, do not be so quick to make excuses on the dog's behalf. Ask yourself, "Have I conditioned my dog mentally, environmentally, and physically so that he can compete in this sport of obedience at his best." You might be surprised at the answer. The performance could be a conditioning problem (or possibly a training problem). Instead of making excuses, blaming some one or some thing, or petitioning AKC to change regulations, evaluate how you have conditioned (and trained) your dog!

Happy Heeling and  
Jubilant Jumping!

*\*Note. Sometime after this article was published the AKC changed the regulations so that dogs jump one and one-quarter the dog's height.*