

# Rehabilitation

## For performance sports dogs

by Kelly Daniel

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Performance dog sports are becoming something that handlers are increasing their skills, knowledge, and training for substantially in recent times. Not only have training methods and handling techniques changed, but also the ability and willingness of owners to look outside of their sports to support their canine partner have thankfully changed. Also, we as dog owners have increasingly become knowledgeable and aware of the health and medical care of our furry family members.

### Recognising an issue

Before we talk about indicators of an issue, it's important to consider that you need to really have a good understanding of your dog's 'normal'. This becomes especially important if something changes. Having regular records of weight, muscle measurements and baseline blood values, along with videos of gait and photos of stance, can be very useful.

Sometimes in performance dogs the first recognised sign of an injury or medical problem is a change in performance. Perhaps their speed changes, maybe they are more reluctant to come off the startline, there might be a change in jumping form, or the number of rails taken. Maybe the dog pops out of weaves when they don't normally. Did you know that you can look up your dog's rate of travel on both NZ Dog Agility, and ShowSec websites? This is one simple way to get an idea if their performance (speed) has changed. Another keynote in terms of orthopaedic and medical issues is that a change in behaviour can be related to pain and injury. So, if your dog starts resource guarding to a high degree when they never have before or starts becoming aggressive to other dogs in your family, or you see other new behavioural issues, you should get a thorough medical and orthopaedic check.

Next, we can look at the stance. This is the ability of a dog to hold themselves in certain positions. How is their form in a sit, a stand, and a down? Are there irregularities with these positions, or has the dog changed how they hold themselves?



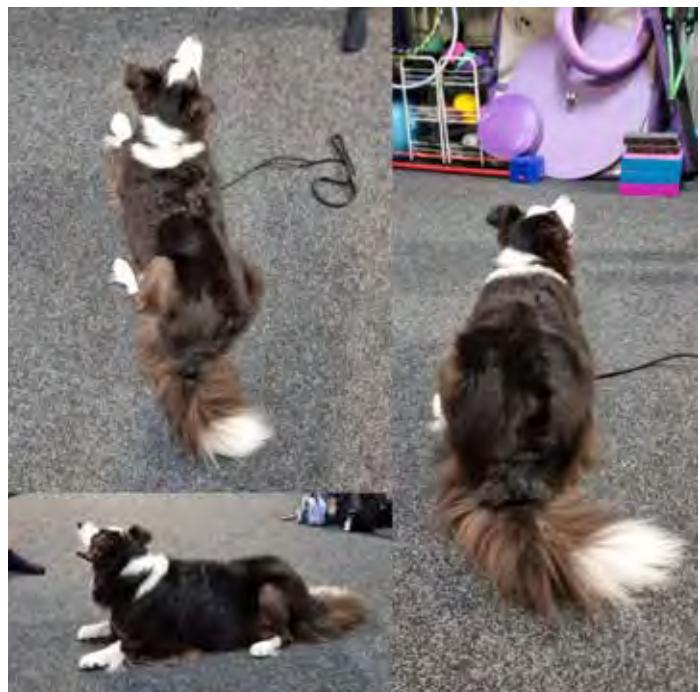
When watching our dogs move there are also key indicators that there may be an issue. If any of these things drastically change, or there are multiple indicators of an issue then further investigation and diagnostics are required. Indicators of potential issues in movement could include:

- A head bob in a walk, or trot
- Pacing when the dog does not normally
- Reluctance to move out of a walk into faster gaits
- Crabbing, when the dog's back end tracks to the side of the front end
- A difference in stride length between limbs

### Diagnosing an issue

Diagnostics can be tough. Some dogs are very stoic, meaning that they show very little response to pain. Dogs are excellent at 'cheating' and often compensate for one area of pain or weakness in another area of their body. This can at times 'hide' the issue, or the severity of the issue. But compensations can also cause pain or trouble in other parts of the body. This can

BlueBoy is currently rehabilitating from knee surgery. In the down he is shifting his weight off his hind left leg, more onto his right hip. This allows him to bend the left knee less and push it forwards. His tail is always curling to the right. This is creating a curve in his spine. BlueBoy is also pulling his forearms back underneath his body.



lead to secondary issues. In short, it can make diagnostics complicated!

A prime example of this is an iliopsoas strain or injury. Around 32% of rear limb injuries involve some aspect of iliopsoas strain or dysfunction. However, often the iliopsoas injury is secondary to another issue, such as knee injuries, lumbar spine, or sacral-ilio problems.

While iliopsoas dysfunction or injury should also be addressed through rehabilitation, if thorough diagnostics are not performed there is potential for an underlying condition to not be identified and treated.

While we can treat the symptoms of lameness, it is important to get a definitive diagnosis of the cause of the lameness, so that an appropriate treatment plan can be made. Diagnostics for lameness, orthopaedic issues, or other issues causing lameness could include:

- Routine examination and blood tests
- Physical examination, palpation, gait and stance analysis
- Radiographs
- Scans such as ultrasound, CT scan, MRI scan
- Potentially more invasive diagnostics like arthroscopy.

### Accessing Professionals

Until more recently in New Zealand, being able to find experienced, certified professionals that have experience with performance sports dogs was hard. We are lucky now to have greater access to the availability of people. While this does vary significantly region to region, some professionals may be able to provide distance or online consultation.

#### • Primary vet

Your primary vet should be your first step in diagnosing and treating any potential issues. They are also able to refer you to another veterinary specialist, or another related service provider.

#### • Specialist vet

Such as a rehabilitation vet, orthopaedic surgeon, internal medicine specialist. This is the next step if you are unable to get a diagnosis, treatment, or a surgery from your primary vet. A specialist vet will require a referral from your primary vet and will need all relevant veterinary records prior to booking

a consultation. The advantage of a specialist veterinarian is that they can diagnose, treat in their specialty area, and treat with traditional veterinary medicine (prescribe medications).

#### • Physiotherapist

A physiotherapist can work with your sports dog to maintain physical well-being, diagnose orthopaedic issues, and help rehabilitate from these issues.

#### • Hydrotherapist

A hydrotherapist can help both with general fitness for sports, and also rehabilitation from injury or orthopaedic issues. They should be appropriately certified, and ideally a member of the New Zealand Association of Hydrotherapists. This ensures that the best practice is being followed. You will need a referral for hydrotherapy from your primary veterinarian, unless the hydrotherapy is for general fitness.

#### • Rehabilitation Therapist

Until recently there have been very few rehabilitation specialists available in New Zealand. Like the other specialty areas, it's important that you ensure your rehabilitation professional is certified. There are different types of rehabilitation options. There are some specialty rehabilitation veterinarians. This is the most intensive and highest degree of rehabilitation. Then there are others who are certified in various types of rehabilitation (Certified Exercise Rehabilitation Therapist, Certified Canine Rehabilitation Therapist and so on).

It's important to note that in New Zealand, while you can 'self-refer', most of these professionals should still request a formal referral from your primary vet, and access to relevant medical records. If you are unsure if a certain treatment is appropriate with a professional, or if that professional is right for you, your dog, and your situation, it would be important to consider their qualifications, their experience with performance dogs, and their practice ethos.

#### • Integrated care: Building your team

It's important to consider that developing a multi-disciplinary team can be of huge benefit to your dog's rehabilitation process. Professionals are generally very happy to work collaboratively, and pass on key information to one another. This will enable you to utilise multiple treatments for your dog's rehabilitation.



Puppy Deo is not standing in correct form. His forelimbs are not evenly weighted or placed under his shoulders. His rear limbs are also incorrectly placed, with the left being too far forwards, and the right too far back. We can see this as his hocks are not vertical. This incorrect foot placement is also creating some roaching (bending upwards) of the lumbar spine





### What could rehabilitation look like?

Rehabilitation could and will likely look different for each individual dog. Even two dogs rehabbing from the same issue, like surgery to repair CCL rupture, could have an entirely different plan. This could be because of the specific details of the dog's issue, the current strength and weaknesses of the dog, the specific goals, and the treatment modalities available to the owner.

The main goal is returning the dog to a functional life. Therefore specific goals are important to not only focus the rehabilitation plan, but also track progress. What a performance sports owner would consider to be a functional and normal life for their dog might be quite different to a pet dog owner.

Some issues may need surgical and/or medical intervention. Rehabilitation treatment modalities may include cryotherapy, heat, hydrotherapy, exercises and range of motion stretches, controlled walking, massage and myofascial release, laser, PEMF, electrical stimulation like TENS, acupuncture, kinesiology tape, support and assistive devices like braces, and more. A treatment plan is likely to utilise multiple modalities.

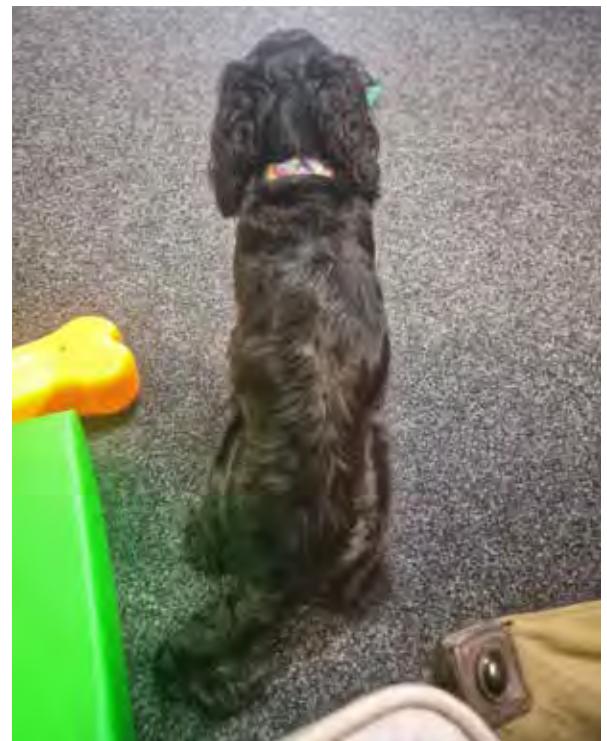
### Tips to cope with rehabilitation

Having a dog that can't do all the normal things is tough! Especially if you have a highly driven athletic dog, from working lines. Often movement and exercise is hard wired into their bodies, and behaviour.

However, there are a number of strategies that we can use to provide some stimulation and enrichment to try to account for the change in exercise. This could include changes in the way that food is fed (slow feeders, kongs, Westpaw Topplz and similar), activities that encourage snuffling, shredding, and searching which are natural dog behaviours.

Novel sniffing can often be done safely and help with engaging a dog's brain, without putting too much demand on the body. This can be safely managed with a harness, longline or regular lead, or even a puppy pen in the yard. Car rides are another brilliant way to provide some novel and engaging activities for a dog while keeping their body safe. Driving to new places and letting them look and smell the sights.

Managing transitions between rest, and movement can be tricky. Exploding from a crate can be dangerous, and skittering



Flori is showing issues in the sit form. She has rotated her pelvis to the right side backwards. Whilst her rear feet are not sticking out sideways, they are not evenly placed or weighted. This pelvis rotation has created a curve in her spine as well as her tail being placed to the left rather than middle. We cannot see this well, but she is also unevenly weighting her forelimbs to compensate for this uneven sit.

across slippery floors could also potentially cause harm. We can help reduce this by using strategically placed snuffle mats or treat scatters when exiting crates and puppy pens, or even doorways, and looking at the surface of the ground at strategic points in the house.

Sometimes it's hard to manage a dog on restricted activity, and some dogs will engage in destructive behaviours while on restricted activities. For these dogs it would be worth discussing medication to help manage their rest.

### Getting back to sports (or not)

Be prepared for taking time to get back into sports training, and competition. A rushed process could mean the initial injury is never completely resolved, which may result in ongoing issues and potentially a shortened time frame where competing is viable.

Passive, or active range of motion exercise can help with mobility.





Evo doing a balance and strength exercise.

After an injury and rehabilitation, the way that your dog may use their body could be different. This means it is important to take time to go back to basics and making sure they are able to do all the skills, and remain sound, before competing. It is also important to consider that if the initial injury occurred while performing sports, there may be a change in how the dog feels (or the conditioned emotional response) in relation to that sport.

For some dogs, the injury may be too severe, or they may never return to a reasonable level of fitness and soundness. So, it is important to consider if they should remain competing in their sport, or look at other options. For example, a dog that can no longer compete in Agility may be able to compete in nosework, as this is less physically demanding, and movement can be controlled with a harness and lead.

#### **Active care: Preventing problems where possible**

There are a number of things that we, as trainers and guardians of our canine teammates, can do to be active and try to prevent issues that might limit our dog's participation and physical well-being.

- Considering the physical health and orthopaedic history of multiple dogs in a line, before getting a puppy from that line or breeding.
- Ensuring that the breeder of your potential puppy performed appropriate and thorough health tests of the dogs being bred.



Cavaletti poles can not only increase functional range of motion but also engage the core and provide cardiovascular exercise.

- Managing your young dog's activity, avoiding highly repetitive activities, concussive jumping and landing, and over exercise.
- Building strength, body awareness and proprioception with appropriate exercise.
- Not doing sports-specific skills too early, or too much for a young dog.
- Having experts treat your dog's body before there is a problem.
- Giving your dog regular and appropriate breaks from sports and competition.
- Warming up, and cooling down from physically intense activity.
- Train essential cooperative care skills before you need them! This includes standing for exam, desensitisation to handling, moving joints through range of motion, injections, taking pills, and wearing a muzzle. These skills are generally useful for all dogs, not just those in rehab!
- Be sure to take the time to train loose leash walking. This is often an essential rehabilitation exercise, and nice balanced walking can have a huge positive impact in rehabilitation, while pulling and lunging can have a detrimental effect.

While no one wants to have to rehabilitate a dog from an injury or orthopaedic issue, as the human half of the team it is our responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of our canine teammates' long term physical health. We owe this to our dogs as ultimately it is our decision to train and compete in sports, not our dogs. We want happy, healthy family members. This is more important than one more ribbon. 

