

Agility

Performance Puppies

Part 3 - Adolescence performance prospects

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You've had your performance puppy for a few months, and he (or she) is starting to look 'like a real dog'. So what is necessary, and what is too much for a potential performance puppy of this age? This is the final article in the performance puppy series. Part one looked at finding a litter and puppy, and part two examined your young puppy's development.



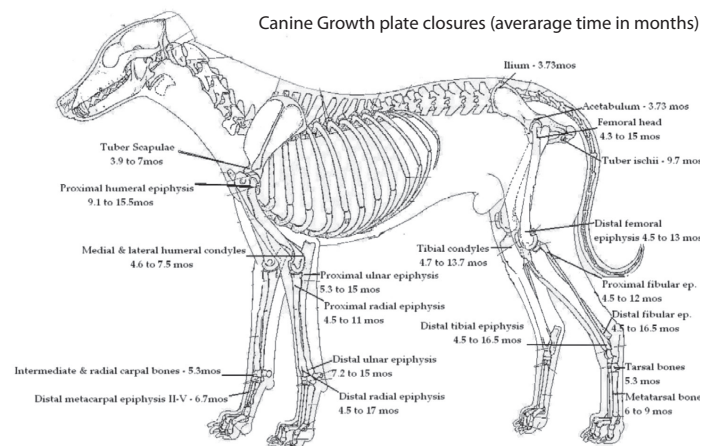
Flori learning at a seminar.

Photo by Nicole Robinson (Finishing Touch Photography).

Look after their bodies

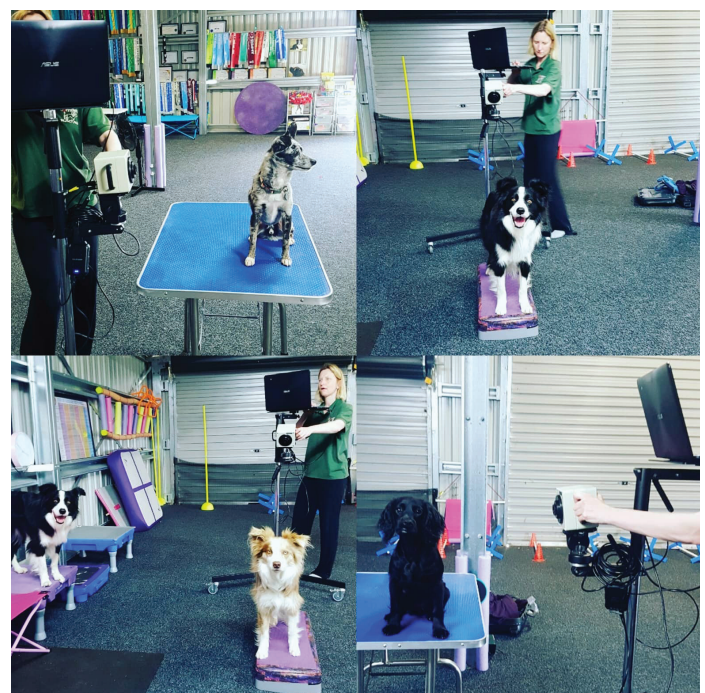
This is a really hard time for us, sports trainers, because often our puppies are starting to physically look more like a grown up dog. And we are excited about training the fun sports things! But the reality is that their bodies are not physically mature. Typically puppies of this age do not have great coordination, or agility to move and control that not quite adult body.

The traditional measure of adulthood is normally described as 18 months, or when growth plates close. The reality is that in New Zealand it is extremely rare for a performance dog owner to X-ray to confirm growth plate closure. And a physically mature body is much more complex than just the examination of a single growth plate. Growth plate closure times can vary with the bone being examined, the size of the dog, and also the individual dog and it's growth and circumstances. Skeletal maturity is also much more than growth plates. It's time for the tendons, ligaments and muscles to grow and stretch to the full length of the bone. It's time for the



muscular skeletal features to gain strength and stability. It's time for the dog neurologically and behaviourally to be able to smoothly control the body.

This is also an excellent time to get some baseline data on a young dogs body - before they are put under the physical pressure of sport specific skill training. For my dogs this includes physio treatment, hydrotherapy, SyncCanine body scans, and if there are any concerns a check with a Rehabilitation Vet.



Flori having her first set of Sync Canine scans with my older dogs, with Rachel from <https://www.hydropaws.co.nz/>

Hormones and if or when to neuter or spay

Whilst many experienced performance owners and breeders are aware of the implications of early neuter or spay, many newbies to sports, and veterinarians are still pushing an early de-sex. Obviously there are many circumstances to take into consideration when thinking about the most appropriate time to de-sex your dog.

In particular for agility the physical impact on a dog's structure and body size is the increased long bone growth with an early spay or neuter. This can result in dogs with disproportionately long legs. Which sounds great in theory, except that it means that their overall structural balance is off. Their legs are too long for their body length, and it can mean that they may have more difficulty jumping and moving in a smooth and fast way. It may also push them into a higher height class. There are also other advantages, as shown with scientific studies, such as decreased risks of some cancers, and behavioural advantages.

An experienced and responsible owner is very capable of managing entire dogs and preventing unwanted litters, however it is a decision that should be carefully thought about and advantages and disadvantages considered. It is also important to consider alternative procedures such as vasectomy, ovarian sparing spays, and ovariectomy. Some of these procedures will enable a dog to be kept hormonally intact as opposed to a traditional de sexing.

Look after their brains and emotions

As with teenage children, adolescence is a difficult period both physically and mentally. Dogs are having surges of hormones, and other brain chemistry changes that impact their behaviour. The traditional '9 month old fear period' isn't always that simple. Dogs can have periods of their lives where things that were previously unnoticed become scary, up to two or three years old. And some dogs will remain inherently fearful into their adult years. There are a number of factors that can implicate their general fear and anxiety, and these things include genetics, early socialisation, your reaction to fearful events, and desensitization / counterconditioning protocols.

Along with physical wellbeing, emotional and mental well being must be at the top of your priorities in a performance puppy of this age. This will have more of a positive (or negative) impact to your dogs future performance than any 'skill' you can teach them.

Take it easy in fear periods. Don't try to teach them volumes of new things, as they may have a negative conditioned emotional response that sticks to that thing you teach them. Play, cuddle, and help them slowly and carefully to see that life is ok. Show them with dog role models that it's ok. Provide bucket loads of de stressing



Flori playing with her big brother Evo.

Photo by Emily Taylor.



Flori working on a chin rest as a foundation concept skill.

Photo by Nicole Robinson (Finishing Touch Photography)

enrichment activities. Lot's of off lead decompression walks where sniffing and peeing in things is allowed (even encouraged!), things to shred, chew, and lick. Puzzle toys and challenges which teach them to problem solve without pressure, and in something that is unrelated to their future sport.

Performance sports foundations

Given that at this age we cannot guarantee our dog's future preferences, or physical suitability, it's important to provide a wide base of skills and activities. I always 'cross train' my puppies on a range of performance sports foundations. This is for four reasons: 1. because I'm a training geek and love it! 2. Because it allows me to develop a clear and consistent shared training with my puppy, 3. Because I want to see what my dogs natural skills and preferences are, and 4. Because I want other options to fall back on if my dog physically / emotionally cannot compete in agility, or does not



Flori experiencing an indoor agility training seminar at break time.

like the sport or environment. Not all dogs are made to compete in agility, or like it! I don't want to push a dog that is physically or emotionally uncomfortable just because it's a sport that I love.

I expose my puppies to a little of everything, ranging from obedience, agility, scentwork, tricks, disc, IPO... anything I have access to in terms of workshops, online classes, or personal experience. The great thing about this is sometime your dog's preferences can develop a new love and training challenge for you! With Flori I have recently started exploring Gun Dog training and competition, given her breed and background. Something I know absolutely nothing about, but we are both having a blast learning.

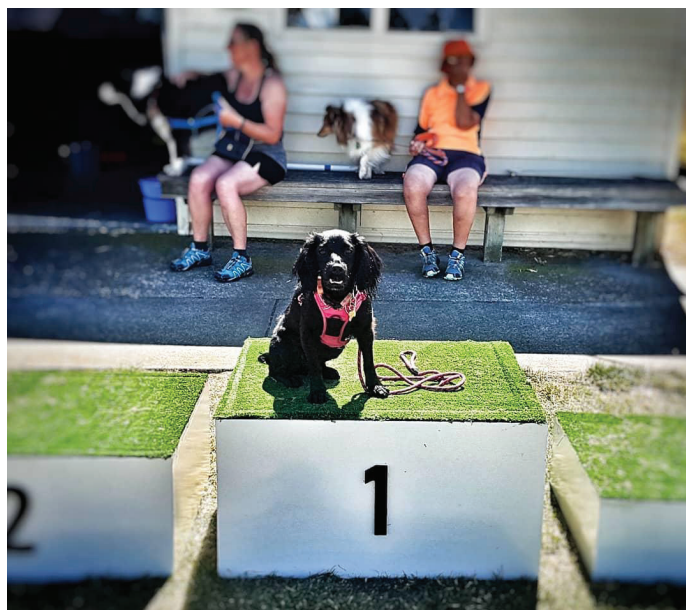
This is important not only for the start of your puppies life, but also towards the end. Now that Chace my oldest border collie is retired from agility competition we have gone back and put some of these foundation skills to work to keep her active. We have completed an online obedience qualification, and have started some super fun concept training (match to sample).

Remember that an important foundation skill is the ability to cope, and work in the agility training and show environment. Exposing your puppy in a carefully controlled way is really important, provided that they are getting a good experience.

When to start sport specific skill training

Of course there are so many factors to consider. Young dogs should have had regular checks and clearance from experienced sports professionals before starting physically intense sports skills. This is important for their immediate, and long term health.

A performance dog should already have a strong foundation in life skills such as cooperative care, socialisation, enrichment, problem solving confidence, and general skills like being able to walk nicely, and recall. It's important that you have already built a strong foundation in clear and consistent communication, and 'soft skills' such as reinforcement markers and toy play. With these skills teaching any agility specific skill should be a breeze!



No matter what our future in agility she's already a winner to me.

Remember it's not a race to have your puppy ready to compete at 18 months. You have years of competing ahead of you as a team. Take the time to make sure that your puppy is physically, and emotionally equipped to deal with competition, and you work well as a team.

References / more information

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