

Agility

Performance Puppies

Part 2 - Once your puppy is home

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So you've picked up your brand new potential performance star puppy. What now? What do you do over those first six months? This is part two in the series on performance puppies. Part one examined finding a litter and choosing a puppy, and part three will examine preparing your adolescent puppy for a performance life.

First and foremost be sure to take time to enjoy your beautiful puppy! Take the photos (or get clever friends to), have all the cuddles, and take them out to show off to your friends so that they can get a puppy fix!

In the first few month's at home you should have a couple of focusses for your performance puppy. These are fitting into the household and learning routines, socialisation and exposure to the world, health and cooperative care, and base communication skills. Notice how performance foundation skills are NOT a priority at this time!



Not only are these potentially dangerous for your pup at this stage in their growth, but also not necessary or important. When you get the foundation skills (like clear and consistent communication and marker cues) then the performance skills will be a piece of cake to teach.

Having lists of things, and skills that you would like your puppy to cover are really great for giving you ideas, and ensuring you don't miss anything. But it is also important to work on what you need to when it is important.

Fitting into the household

Not only do the vast majority of performance home's have pre-existing canine family members, but our home's have lots of things, and expectations that are new for puppy dogs. Of course the essential things to start with are toilet training, and not destroying the house! To help with both of these things, as well as making sure the puppy isn't annoying older family members is the use of baby gates, puppy pen, and crates. I follow, and recommend a happy crating protocol rather than crate games. I believe it's not only more beneficial at home, while travelling, and also at a show if a dog sees a crate (or puppy pen) as a quiet and relax space rather than a working space.



than that. The human world that we expect our dog's to survive in is foreign, and strange. We expect so much more of our performance dog's. It's our responsibility to make sure that they are not only okay with everything they may come across in our human lives, but they have a positive association with them.

In the past (and unfortunately sometimes still today) vet's used to recommend not taking puppies out of the home until full vaccination was complete after 16 weeks. We now know that that period up to 16 weeks is a very critical period in puppy socialisation.

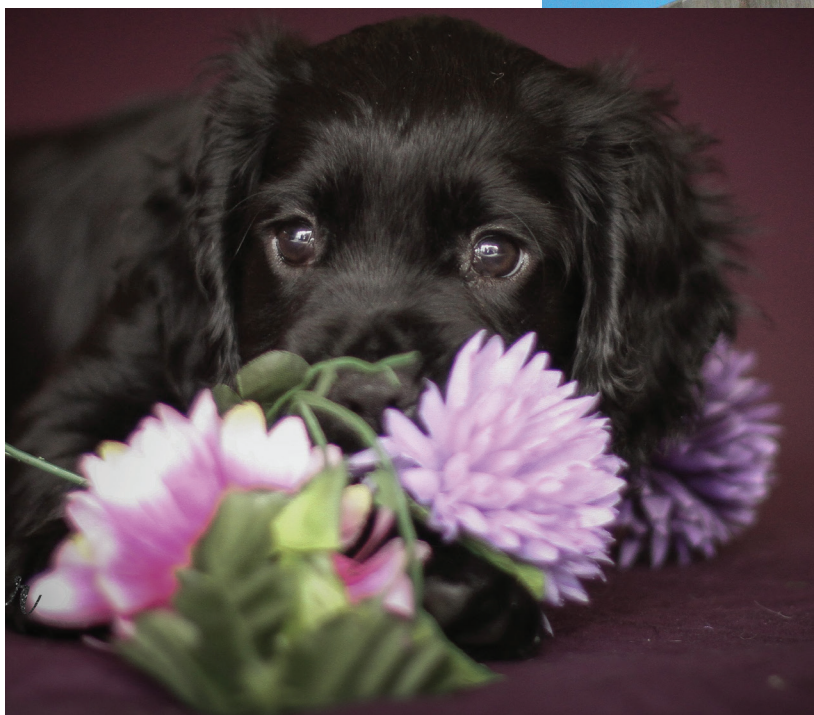
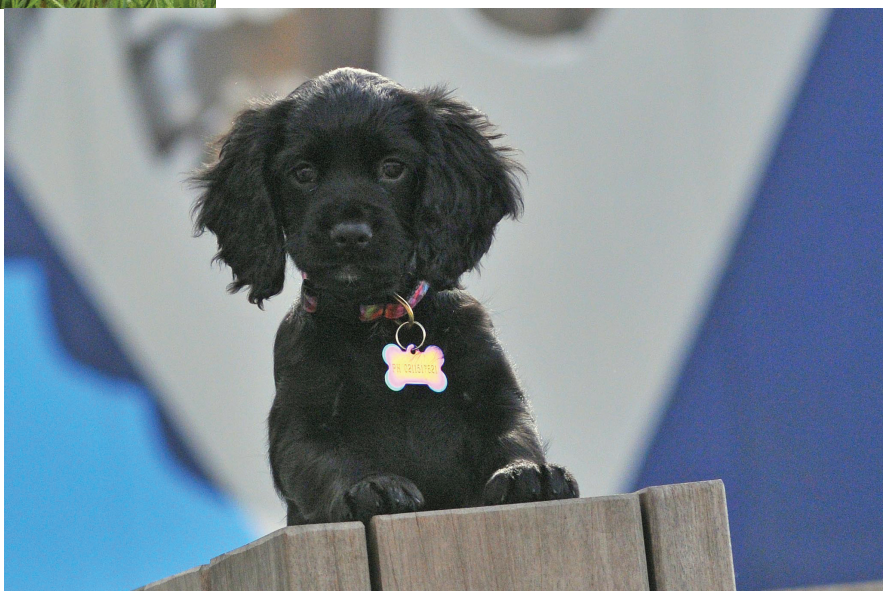
"The primary and most important time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life. During this time puppies should be exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing overstimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior. For this reason, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated."

Socialisation during this period has also been coined as 'vaccination for behavioural problems'. It's about being smart with where you allow your young puppy to go, and what dog's you allow contact with.

We also need to teach other important skills. How to wait at a door, not to jump up and scavenge food, where the dog's are and are not allowed to go. When is 'quiet settled' time, and also how to unwind and relax. All high drive performance dogs need to learn how to relax. This mental engagement is just as important as physical engagement. And young dog's need to learn how to do this. This includes problem solving (treat puzzles etc.), food enrichment, scent related work, shredding, and decompression walks.

Socialisation and exposure to the world

The term socialization used to mean 'play time with other dogs'. Nowadays it is so much more



Health and cooperative care

Veterinary care is an essential part of every dog's life. It's a required part of their health and wellbeing, therefore it's important that this is not stressful to them. I want all of my dog's to enjoy vet visits, therefore we have to do some work! At home we can work on handling and examination practice, with a high rate of reinforcement, and mimic the veterinary environment. Outside of actual vet visits I will routinely visit the vet clinic, work on stationing on the scales, and visiting members of staff. I will continue to reinforce the puppy being handled in this environment. When it is time for actual vet visits (that normally involve something unpleasant like an injection) it is important to advocate for your dog, and carefully monitor their stress and anxiety levels. Keeping this experience positive is in your dog's long term best interest. And you know what? Saying 'No she is too stressed, we are going to come back next week' when the visit is for non urgent care may work better for you and your pup in the long term.

I include handling and treatment by sports professionals such as an animal physio as an important base skill for performance puppies. We treat these visits much like vet visits - positively reinforced, and monitoring stress and anxiety.

Puppy's also need to be exposed to any healthcare or grooming they may need as an adult - this may include eye drops, ear cleaning, teeth checking and potentially brushing, coat brushing and grooming, bathing, and nails.

Base communication skills

To be a successful performance team you and your canine teammate must be able to communicate in a clear and consistent manner. Not only will this make it easier to teach any skills, but it will also reduce frustration or anxiety associated with inconsistency in training. This training can (and should) start the minute you get home.

For most sports having different ways of reinforcing behaviour is useful. Also many dog's have differences in what they consider reinforcing. It's important not to stress about your agility puppy 'not tugging'. It's not the end of the world, and you can work on it! To begin with find what IS reinforcing for your puppy, and start to mark behaviours consistently and reinforce them with that thing. Remember that something is only reinforcing if it has an impact on behaviour. Start with one food marker, for example 'yes' and deliver the piece of food to their mouth, and if they like tug one 'take tug' marker. As you and your puppy develop your training communication system you may add more markers, indicating different types of reinforcement and delivery.

With these communication skills you can more easily teach the essentials such as house manners, toilet training, and cooperative care. You can also have a blast teaching some cute tricks. This will help your puppy with body awareness, learning how to learn, developing your communication system, and helping to build your bond.

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