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Care of the competitive Obedience dog

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ABSTRACT: Competitive Obedience is a sport enjoyed by handlers and dogs alike. The competitive Obedience dog is an elite canine athlete, and as such is exposed to additional stresses and strains over and above those experienced by the average pet dog. Owners of competition dogs have high expectations from their veterinary practice in terms of the treatment and prevention of sport-related injuries, and this demand for highly-specialised care has led to the development of canine sports medicine.

Introduction

Competitive Obedience evolved from the Working Trials competitions run by German Shepherd Dog clubs, and the first set of rules and regulations were drawn up by the Kennel Club in 1928 (Rugby Dog Training Club, 2015). The sport is about more than just having an obedient dog; it requires handler and animal to work together in partnership to complete a series of exercises with accuracy, drive and precision, and as such has been compared to the equine sport of Dressage.

Many of the exercises in competitive Obedience evolved from everyday tasks designed to demonstrate a dog's good manners, such as walking without pulling on the lead or coming when called; however, the Obedience dog must perform these exercises in a defined manner and with accuracy and style (**Box 1**). Each exercise is allocated a number of points and the judge awards penalties for mistakes; therefore, the dog and handler with the lowest number of penalties is the winner.

Box 1. Obedience exercises

Heelwork – Dogs must maintain a consistent position and walk close to the handler's left leg whilst the handler follows a series of directions decided by the judge and commanded by a steward. All heelwork exercises start and finish with the dog sitting next to the handler's left leg.

Recall – In the lower classes, the dog must wait while the handler

walks away from the dog. The handler will then turn to face the dog, and call the dog to sit in front of him or her. When commanded, the dog must return to a sit position next to the handler's left leg (the 'finish'). In class A and higher, the dog must return to the heelwork position whilst the handler continues walking.

Stay – The dog must remain in the position in which he or she has been left by the handler. All the dogs competing in the same class carry out the stay exercise at the same time.

Retrieve – The dog must sit next to the handler's left leg whilst the handler throws the article. When commanded, the dog must pick up the article and sit in front of the handler (the 'present').

Scent – The dog must find and retrieve a cloth with a scent on it. There will be other unscented cloths through which the dog has to search and there may also be 'decoy' cloths with other people's scent on them.

Send-away – The dog must wait in a sit position at the handler's left side, then run forward in a straight line until commanded to stop by the handler.

Distance control – The dog must wait in a designated area whilst the handler walks away. The dog must then change position into a sit, down or stand (in any order) when commanded.

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Obedience shows and classes

Competitive Obedience classes run under Kennel Club regulations are available at different levels (**Box 2**), and, as dog and handler progress up the classes, the exercises become more difficult. Once a dog has won out of its class, it can no longer compete at that level; this allows dogs and handlers of all abilities to participate on an equal footing. In general, two wins are required in the lower classes in order for a handler and dogs to progress, and three wins in the higher classes. Although dogs must be registered with the Kennel Club in order to compete, the sport is open to all dogs, as non-pedigrees can be enrolled onto the Activity Register (Kennel Club, 2014).

Box 2. Competitive Obedience classes

Introductory – This class is designed to support newcomers to Obedience competition. Heelwork, recall and stays are all completed on lead.

Pre-beginner – Off-lead exercises are included – heelwork, recall and stays.

Beginner – Exercises are similar to pre-beginner, with the additional exercise of retrieve any article.

Novice – This is the class where more experienced handlers will start with a young dog. The retrieve article must be a dumbbell.

Class A – In class A and above, all exercises are carried out off-lead and handlers are not allowed to talk to their dog whilst under test. The scent exercise is introduced - in Class A the dog must retrieve the cloth with the handler's scent.

Class B – Heelwork is carried out at normal, slow and fast paces and the dog must retrieve an article supplied by the judge. Both sit and down stays are carried out with the handler out of sight of the dog. The new exercise is a send-away. In Class B scent the dog must find the cloth with the handler's scent, but there will be a decoy cloth.

Class C – The new exercise is distance control. Class C scent

involves the dog finding the cloth with the judge's scent and there may be up to four decoy cloths.

Open C classes – Dogs must have won Open C at least once and been placed at least third three times before they can compete in Championship C classes.

Championship Class C at Championship Shows – Three wins at this level makes a dog an Obedience Champion. It is the dogs and handlers that work at this level that compete against each other at Crufts.



Figure 2. Straight sit

Canine injuries associated with competitive Obedience

Competitive Obedience is not as high-intensity as Agility or Flyball, but, like all canine sports, it carries the risk of associated injury. The raised head carriage seen in the heelwork position (**Figure 1**) may result in muscle tension and repetitive strain injuries (Veterinary Integrated Physiotherapy, 2010), whilst the sudden stop required in a send-away may cause strained muscles and torn tendons (Canine Massage Therapy Centre, 2015). Additional sport-specific issues include neck spasms, back pain, shoulder problems and stiffness (Canine Massage Therapy Centre, 2015).

However, minor injuries may be hard to identify, as many Obedience dogs enjoy training and competing so much that they continue to work even if they are



Figure 1. Heelwork position

in discomfort (Physio-vet, 2015), and a subtle loss of performance may be the only sign of a problem. The competitive Obedience straight-sit (**Figure 2**) for example, requires a dog to be fully mobile in his or her hips, stifles, hocks, tail and sacro-iliac joint, and to be able to flex the lower spine (Edge-Hughes, n.d.); a crooked sit could therefore be caused by any stiffness in these areas. Additional signs of discomfort include a loss of concentration or moving during stays, mouthing of the retrieve article or a reluctance to train (Safe Haven Clinic, 2014). It is therefore important that any such change in behaviour be investigated (Safe Haven Clinic, 2014) and treated by a veterinary surgeon.

Role of physiotherapy in the rehabilitation of Obedience-related injuries

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the diagnosis and treatment of specific orthopaedic and soft-tissue injuries, it is well recognised that physiotherapy can be of benefit following surgery or trauma (Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy [ACPAT], 2015). Although human physiotherapy began following the return of injured soldiers from the First World War, it wasn't until the 1980s that the concept of animal rehabilitation gained recognition, and the increasing numbers of owners taking part in canine sports has led to a demand for veterinary rehabilitation services (Van Dyke, 2012).

Physiotherapists are trained in mobilising muscles, joints, ligaments and tendons in

order to restore normal function, and use manual techniques such as manipulation, massage and trigger point or myofascial release (ACPAT, 2015). Electrotherapies including ultrasound, laser therapy and electrical muscle stimulation, or tailored exercises such as hydrotherapy may also be employed (ACPAT, 2015).

Although the Veterinary Surgery (Exemptions) Order 1962 permits physiotherapy to be carried out by non-veterinary surgeons, this is only the case if the animal has been previously examined by a veterinary surgeon and he or she has directed that the physiotherapy should take place. It should be noted that the terms 'animal physiotherapist' or 'veterinary physiotherapist' are not protected by law, which means that anyone, regardless of qualification, can refer to him or herself as such. It is therefore essential that veterinary surgeons ensure that they refer cases to suitably qualified and trained physiotherapists; these include members of either the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy (ACPAT), or the National Association of Veterinary Physiotherapists (NAVVP).

Canine sports medicine

Although rehabilitation services are obviously important when dealing with injuries, the veterinary profession also has a role to play by reducing the risk of injuries *before* they occur. A new field in veterinary medicine has therefore developed, one concerned with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of injuries sustained during canine sports, and known as canine sports medicine (Zink, 2013).

Canine sports medicine incorporates a number of different fields, including (Zink 2013):

- anatomy and biomechanics
- exercise physiology
- sports conditioning
- rehabilitation
- orthopaedics
- internal medicine
- pulmonology
- cardiology
- neurology
- gerontology

- nutrition
- integrative therapies

The range of expertise required to offer a full canine sports-medicine service means that a multi-disciplinary team comprised of both veterinary surgeon and veterinary physiotherapist may be involved. RVNs also have a vital role to play in terms of assisting in the implementation of the rehabilitation programme drawn up by the veterinary surgeon and physiotherapist (Rew, Davies & Sharples, 2009).

Veterinary canine sports-medicine professionals offer and advise upon a number of specific services. All of these services can help both the canine athlete and the handler to prepare appropriately for training and competition, to maintain fitness and athleticism, to reduce the risk of injury and to minimise recovery time if an injury should occur. Canap and Zink (2008) suggest that the number of injuries can be reduced by 25% if handlers follow the advice of a canine sports medicine practitioner.

Pre-season evaluation

A full examination before the competition season begins is important to ensure that the Obedience dog is healthy. This should incorporate a full veterinary examination, including an assessment of the orthopaedic and neurological systems (Carr & Canap, 2014).

Gait analysis

A thorough analysis of a dog's gait involves a subjective assessment through observation of the dog's movement together with an objective assessment via the use of pressure-sensing walkways (Carr & Canap, 2014).

Conditioning and training programme

A tailored conditioning and training programme is designed to increase strength, endurance, proprioception, flexibility and balance (Carr & Canap, 2014). Overtraining can lead to increased chances of injury, altered immune function and decreased fitness, so dogs should have at least one day a week off sport-specific training (Carr & Canap, 2014).

Warm-up and cool-down routines

All human athletes begin training and competition with a warm-up and end with a cool-down and the same should apply to canine athletes. Proper warm-ups and cool-downs are important in

order to improve performance and reduce the risk of injury (Carr & Canap, 2014). A warm-up routine increases respiration and heart rate, warms the joints and muscles and speeds the transmission of nerve impulses (Canap & Zink, 2008). Ideally, a warm-up should involve similar movements to those which the dog will be expected to carry out during competition. These can be accomplished through exercises such as tugging (Figure 3) and stretching (Figures 4 and 5) (Carr & Canap, 2014).

A cool-down routine should be comprised of a gradual decrease in activity followed by a rub down (Carr & Canap, 2014). While the muscles are still warm, passive range-of-motion (PROM) exercises, consisting of taking each limb through a normal range of motion, can



Figure 3. Tugging exercise which stretches the gracilis and hamstring muscles; handlers should avoid jerking the dog's head



Figure 4. Offering a treat at the dog's hip encourages a paraspinous stretch



Figure 5. Dogs can be trained to adopt the play bow position, which stretches the front end, especially the triceps

be carried out (Canap & Zink, 2008). In cold weather, a dog coat can be fitted in order to avoid too-rapid cooling of the muscles, which can result in a build-up of lactic acid and subsequent muscle cramps (Canap & Zink, 2008).

Joint health supplements

Many canine sports-medicine professionals recommend joint health supplements such as glucosamine-chondroitin and omega-3 fatty acids in order to reduce the effects of wear and tear on the joints (Carr & Canap, 2014).

Annual wellness assessments

Annual wellness assessments comprising of a thorough clinical examination are useful in detecting early signs of musculoskeletal problems (Canap & Zink, 2008).

Maintenance treatments

Therapies such as massage or acupuncture can be useful in treating minor strains or sprains thereby reducing the risk of further injury and enabling the dog to maintain peak levels of performance during the competition season (Canap & Zink, 2008).

Tailored rehabilitation programmes following injury

In order to return the dog to competition successfully, the rehabilitation programme should include exercises and activities based upon the demands of the specific canine discipline (Jones, 2013).

Conclusion

Training and competing in Obedience provides mental stimulation and physical exercise for dogs, and is an enjoyable and challenging hobby for owners. Obedience handlers devote a great deal of time and money to their hobby, training dogs in all weathers and travelling across the country to compete at shows. This dedication extends to the care of their dogs, and owners of these canine athletes have high expectations of veterinary professionals, requiring highly specialised care.

Working in the fields of rehabilitation and canine sports medicine can be highly rewarding as it offers the opportunity to work with highly committed clients and to practice state-of-the-art rehabilitation medicine (Zink, 2013). It also allows veterinary professionals the opportunity to witness the unique partnership between elite canine athletes and their handlers.

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Multiple Choice Questions

1. To ensure treatment is performed by a suitably qualified and trained physiotherapist, you should seek out a member of:

- (a) The veterinary physiotherapists
- (b) The animal physiotherapists
- (c) ACPAT
- (d) BVNA

2. Following advice of a canine sports medicine practitioner, injuries can be reduced by:

- (a) 15%
- (b) 25%

(c) 35%

(d) 45%

3. An objective assessment of gait analysis can be performed with:

- (a) Observation of movement
- (b) Manipulation
- (c) Pressure sensing walkways
- (d) Flexibility tests

4. A crooked sit in an obedience test could show stiffness in any of the following joints except:

- (a) The hips
- (b) The sacro-iliac joint

(c) The stifles

(d) The cervical spine

5. Non-pedigree dogs are enrolled on which register held by the Kennel Club in order to compete?

- (a) Activity register
- (b) Agility register
- (c) Sports register
- (d) Competition register

For the answers to the MCQs, please go to: <http://www.bvna.org.uk/publications/veterinary-nursing-journal>