



WHY FLUFFY CAN'T GO HUP

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The basics of jumping problems.

By Suzanne Clothier

NOTE: First in a 4 part series on jumping that originally appeared in Off Lead magazine.

Of all the skills we ask our dogs to perform at our request, jumping is one of the most misunderstood, least thoroughly trained, and most common source of performance problems in agility and obedience. This is the first of a series of articles that examine various aspects of training a dog to jump. In future articles, we will explore in greater detail each of these; for now, let's look at the basics of how jumping problems arise.

For more than a decade, I have watched dogs jumping: big dogs, little dogs, puppies, senior citizens, and dogs of every imaginable shape and size under a wide variety of conditions. I have found three basic causes for jumping problems: physical, mental, and mechanical. (The fourth cause is the handler, but that's a whole 'nother article!)

Physical problems can be structural or functional or both. I am endlessly amazed at how little the average trainer knows about structure. Many handlers tell me, "I don't worry about that conformation stuff. I've got a dog with drive." This approach makes no sense and can have serious consequences for the dog. If the driver of an Indy 500 car said he didn't bother his head about the details of mechanics but simply chose his car because it went fast, we'd wonder about him. The winning drivers understand not only how to drive well, but also how and why the car performs as it does. Imagine that same driver telling us that he was going to select the biggest, most powerful engine he could find and put it in a Volkswagen Bug body. It doesn't take a mechanical genius to figure out that this is not going to be a winning combination.

No matter how much drive a dog may have, if his physical body is not a match for the "engine" of his mind, trouble will arise. Unfortunately for dogs, trouble can be long term and not immediately evident, thus handlers often ignore structural problems. The more you expect from a dog, the more you need to know about structure. This requires study and practice, yet many trainers I've met will spend hours looking at videotapes of their last runs rather than educating themselves about the workings of their dogs' bodies.

Function is how your dog's body actually works. Flexibility, muscular strength, and endurance are all functional qualities. No matter how beautifully structured a dog may be, if he is not fully functional, problems will arise. A moderately structured dog who is fully functional may easily outperform a more correctly structured dog who is not fully functional; structure and function are NOT synonymous.

We are all familiar with functional limitations - pause for a moment to consider your own body. Is your neck a little

sore? How about that bum knee or creaky ankle? Are you as flexible as you used to be? The cumulative effects of age, stresses and lifestyles add up to functional limitations: our bodies may not work as well or as easily as they used to. The aches and pains we experience may not be obvious to others, but they do take their toll. Depending on the work load we place on our bodies, we may find ourselves more easily fatigued, injured or simply just cranky and unmotivated because we are uncomfortable.

Our dogs are no different. But without a voice to complain about their aches and pains, our dogs' functional difficulties may go unnoticed and misunderstood as dominance, resistance, stupidity or even poor temperament. Although you cannot change structure, there is a lot you can do to improve function. Massage, stretching, proper conditioning, veterinary chiropractic and an understanding of physiology help you provide effective coaching to bring out the best in your canine athlete.

The mental aspects of jumping include an understanding of the task, a systematic refinement of the dog's understanding, and the dog's emotional state. The typical "problem" jumper presented to me has only a rough concept of what jumping is about; translated from dog it might be just this: "hurl your body over that obstacle." That's a pretty basic level of understanding, and the equivalent of saying that driving a car means stepping on the gas.

The dog must also learn to lengthen or shorten his stride length, gauge jump height and width, handle diagonal or awkward approaches, moderate his speed (up or down) according to the footing or previous/subsequent obstacles, and perhaps do all that while also carrying something in his mouth (a seemingly simple task that actually has profound impact on the dog's jumping style). Just as children first learn their alphabet and then individual words before they can read entire sentences, paragraphs and books, dogs need to learn jumping in a way that allows them to learn the basics before putting it all together. In addition to building the dog's understanding, a systematic approach that progressively refines the dog's skills has the added benefits of building confidence and physically conditioning the dog's body.

The dog's emotional state is often overlooked as a critical component of athletic performance. Emotions have a profound impact on our bodies, as any competitor knows. It is one thing to give a smooth performance in a familiar setting; it is quite another to coordinate mind and body under the stress of competition. Our dogs are no different, yet we sometimes fail to take into account the degree to which the dog's emotional state can impact his athletic performance. No matter how physically sound or thoroughly trained, a dog who is fearful, confused, overwhelmed or even overly

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excited will not be able to use his body to its fullest.

Mechanical causes for jumping problems include footing, visual aspects, the sequences of obstacles before or after a jump, and the actual space available to the dog before, after and between jumps. Soft, deep and/or slippery footing makes jumping difficult and potentially dangerous for the dog. What may seem reasonable footing to us may not be reasonable for a jumping dog. Canine vision is different from our own, and the dog views the jumps from a very different perspective. Lighting, background, shadows and/or the shape/color of the jump itself can make jumping more difficult. For the agility dog, where a jump appears in a sequence of obstacles can make jumping more difficult, especially if there are turns or changes of direction involved. Spacing of jumps is critical, as even a medium sized dog moving fast can require 16-20' between jumps; yet handlers

and judges often fail to appreciate how spacing can add to the dog's jumping difficulties.

Humane training is not simply a matter of kind, motivational techniques. Humane training begins with an understanding of and respect for your dog's abilities and limitations. Jumping is physically and mentally demanding, yet - distanced as we are from the actual workings of our dogs' bodies - we sometimes forget how much we are asking when we point and say, "Over!" Hopefully, this series will encourage handlers to think critically about the complex skill of jumping, about various training techniques, and to learn more in order to keep their dogs safe and sound.

Read all in this series:

Why Fluffy Can't Go Hup / Can or Can't? / I Think I Can! / Just Right Jumping