

Feature

Preparing your dogs for the season

by Mark Elliott BVSc VetMFBom MRCVS,
committee member of the NGO's Deer Branch.

I WAS AMUSED WHEN I WAS ASKED TO WRITE a piece on this topic. Like most people involved in the gamebird rearing cycle, my time is not my own from one season's end until mid-September. My dogs have to come down from a life of being in the field three or four days a week to that of many dogs – walked around the local field, or possibly in the woods at weekends.

When the season approaches we are all somewhat unfit and out of practice. None of my charges has ever seemed to mind too much, but there is a need to consider some key points when the time for working approaches:

- Unfit dogs are more likely to injure muscles, ligaments and tendons, and these can translate over time into more chronic deficiencies in mobility, even arthritis, if uncorrected.
- Excess weight costs energy to carry and puts more strain on the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems.
- Dogs that have not been hardened off, and lived the soft life of an indoor pooch will be less resistant to long cold days.
- Working your dog unfit can expose small weaknesses and developing lameness problems that should have been identified and treated earlier if not for the down time when such niggles did not show. By the time the season has arrived it is too late to make the needed corrections and interventions and the season can be lost for that animal.
- Increasing the plane of nutrition to that needed in the season is best done over time; reliance on a larger meal on the day is not useful as the body needs time to adapt to the changes fitness demands. This is less of a concern for natural-fed dogs as the increasing volume does not reflect changes in protein sources.
- Dental health can affect many aspects of body function, but is less of a problem for dogs fed proper food rather than pelleted porridge. I always think it's preferable that my food is retrieved by a clean mouth rather than coated in a



SOPHIA GALLIA



seething mass of bacteria-loaded slobber.

- Using vitamins and supplements, such as those for joint health in older animals, take time to work, so start early.
- Bitches that have had time off with pups will probably be fitter than most, but care is needed when working them due to the enlargements of the mammary line that increase risk of injury, if that has not gone down completely. If late weaning puppies then consideration has to be given to timing complete weaning to ensure this has happened.
- Preparing a first aid kit to carry in your vehicle is best done before an injury occurs. It's surprising how many are carried after the event!

From a health point of view, increasing the exercise, some time in the kennel and a good checkover by a vet who understands the demands of the field is a good idea. The same considerations apply to human participants as well.

So, will I get out there, get my dogs fit and keen before the season kicks off, and start the season as invigorated by the days in the field as I am at the end? Or will I fall asleep exhausted in the chair by the Aga, with a terrier on my lap and a dram in my glass (a state of being that is known and loved by many)?

Much depends on how easy (or not) the rearing season has been – at least that is my excuse!

MARK ELLIOTT

As well as being on the NGO Deer Branch committee, Mark Elliott runs the NGO's Dogs for Deer courses, and in the close season is a gamebird vet running South Downs Veterinary Consultancy. He is also part of the Gamebird Veterinary Group, www.gamebirdvetgroup.co.uk