Rear End Awareness and Conditioning Exercises

Conditioning is very important for all dogs. Conditioning works all muscle groups to help your dog have a better quality of life and help prevent injuries due to muscle imbalances and weakness. It is very helpful for puppies to gain rear end awareness as well as it is extremely important for older dogs to maintain good rear end conditioning. Starting as puppies and continuing through all life stages can be extremely helpful with senior dogs maintaining good rear end strength. You can start at any age, however be mindful of your dog's current fitness level. As well as if their rear is already weak, you want to start very low level and few repetitions and then watch for how their body responds over the next 24-48 hours.

Conditioning / Fitness exercises are a great way to help your dog age gracefully and live a happier and healthier life. There is a great bonus too, we are also strengthening our relationship, our dog's focus, body awareness and key muscle groups. My dogs LOVE their fitness training! It also provides a great mental and physical workout.

If at any time your dog is not comfortable or not wanting to stretch in the manner you are asking – STOP! If your dog seems to be uncomfortable even with low level stretches, you should have them checked by their chiropractor, massage therapist or veterinarian. As well as never ask too much at once, just like in other behaviors, slowly increase criteria. This is a time that we should always respect our dog's wishes if they are uncomfortable with what we are asking. Observe closely how they are performing the exercises. Did they start out strong and then as the session continues, it becomes more difficult? If so, end the session and evaluate in 24 hours.

Pivots

Pivoting builds strength and provides awareness to the rear end.
Start with an object that your dog does not mind standing on with their front feet and that is easy for both of you to "pivot" around. Make sure it is large enough that your dog can comfortably maneuver his front feet on it. You can use a book, stool, upside down food bowl, disc, etc. Just make sure it is not slippery or put a "gripper" type mat on it. Reward for just interacting, then one foot, then both feet, etc. Do not push too much at once, just let your dog tell you what they are comfortable doing and reward that interaction.

When they are confidently putting both front feet on the object. Hold a cookie in front of your dog's nose and move the cookie so it requires your dog to move their head/body to follow the cookie. When this happens, your dog will move their rear legs, so mark/treat any rear end movement. (Mark can be a simple "yes" or "yip" and then reward after you mark. Mark then reward.) You can pivot with them, but it should be your hand movement that is moving the dog, not than the pressure of your body. If your dog is pressure sensitive be sure they are comfortable in the manner you are moving with them. Video can be very helpful as many times we will not see everything in real time.

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Reward for any movement. After your dog understands the movement and takes several steps, go the other direction. Very slowly increase the number of steps before rewarding, going both directions.

Here are two videos demonstrating the beginnings of pivoting on an obstacle:
Edge:
http://youtu.be/45VtEUXDaK4
Strike:
http://youtu.be/u19K_-LCduA

Wobble cushions
Wobble cushions are one of the best investments you can make in your dog's fitness, not to mention they also help build confidence. You can work all muscle groups, balance training and flexibility. They work the core, can help prevent injury and provide overall body strength. They are also great low impact work for senior dogs. Wobble cushions come in all sizes and shapes, including peanut, donut, egg, cushion or fit disc, bosu ball, paw pods and wobble boards. You can even use couch cushions! And an added bonus – you can use the same wobble cushions too!

Start with any interaction with the wobble cushion, front feet on, walking across, four feet on, sitting on it. You can use it as a pivot cushion with front or rear feet. You can use 2 cushions with front feet on one and rear on the other and ask your dog to go from a sit to a stand. Just sitting on the cushion is great for the core and balance. Again, respect your dog's opinion, working on wobble cushions can be very tiring and we do not want to overwork our dog's muscles. Start slowly by rewarding any interaction with the cushion and slowly increase time and difficulties.

Make sure your wobble cushions are not over inflated. Take a look at those in the videos and make sure that they move with your dog's weight shifting.

Interaction: https://youtu.be/wqaOITzHuL0

Edge sit and rear pivot:
http://youtu.be/vqaQ9nnvWdA

Side Steps
Side steps provide a more balanced muscle development and helps strengthen seldom used muscles which can assist in injury prevention.
Stand facing your dog with a cookie at their nose, step sideways and move your hand slowly and try to get your dog to step sideways to follow the cookie. It may take a few sessions for them to understand what you want. Try both directions at first as most dogs do better one direction than the other. So if we work on their good side, it will build confidence and clarity in what we want. Then you can start working the other side.

Sidestep beginner: https://youtu.be/xPKM3Yi2AoI

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Sidestep Step 2: https://youtu.be/SVHhkoQVcZ8

Advanced: https://youtu.be/pQOW9lhqjUE

I have also been playing with pivot to side steps. Our dog is using his rear on the pivot, so moving off and going straight can be good communication to continue using your rear. Grit really struggled with side steps and here is what we accomplished in 3 sessions. I focused on going one direction until he had fluency, and then added the other direction.
https://youtu.be/79bJ2bBxyp8

Back Up
Back up helps with rear end awareness and strengthening.
There are many ways to teach back up. I like to start with your dog on a yoga mat with rear feet on it and front feet off to the front of the mat. Start by building value in this behavior by rewarding position. Then hold a cookie under your dog's chin and close to his chest. When he looks down at the cookie, move the cookie toward his chest, this will encourage him to step backwards and onto the platform/mat. Be sure to keep his head down to shift the weight off his rear. This is very important that the weight is shifted to the front so it is easier to move their rear feet.

My thought is that it is best to have a target for your dog when teaching backup. Try to mark when your dog is still in motion so he is rewarded for "backing up" not standing still. This helps with adding duration as the rewarded behavior is moving backwards.

Beginner: http://youtu.be/6nmzDd0v0ZY
Advanced: http://youtu.be/N6m8SZUcrw0

Pick Up Sticks helps your dog be aware of their rear end as well as coordination in not stepping on the poles. They need to work a little harder than cavalettis as it is not a pattern and they have to specifically move for each pole. I like to start with 4 and just have your dog walk through them. Sometimes it helps if you walk backward and "guide" your dog through when they are first learning. I do not worry if they step on them in the beginning as long as they are stable on their feet.

Beginner and advanced: https://youtu.be/SDRC4sNq6pM

I also teach Parkour, and here is a fun video of things to use around the house.

https://youtu.be/U2yPC2p-1eI

Enjoy!

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