



## Training Zone

# RUN FIDO, RUN

## Tips to turn your dog into your best training partner

By Tim Shuff

When Paul Trebilcock won the Ontario Ultra Series 50K Challenge Cup in 2006, he shared his award with his number one training partner, Greta. "I fed her dinner right out of the cup," said Trebilcock. "She helped me get there. It was the least I could do, along with extra treats." Greta is a four-year-old German shorthaired pointer-vizsla cross.

"Dogs make the greatest companions for running," Trebilcock says. "They never say no. They never have anything pressing. They're always there and they're great company." Staring into the eyes of a restless mutt can be like looking into your own runner's soul – "You and I both know we've been inside too long. Now let's go!" Follow these tips for running with your dog and the reward is a training companion who will never turn you down.

### Choosing a Breed

Trebilcock chose well. Both pointers and vizslas are on *dogbreedinfo.com*'s list of 100-plus "excellent jogging companions." What top running dogs have in common is that they're working dogs – hunters or herders – in the 20- to 40-kg weight range with light coats. Toy breeds and giant breeds are not recommended. Nor are the so-called brachycephalics – flat-faced dogs with restricted airways.

People think of big dogs as the jocks, yet runner Jed Grieve of Victoria runs with an indefatigable nine-year-old, 11 kg Jack Russell terrier named Bert, who joins Grieve on 35K trail runs and has even developed a diehard cardio junkie's taste for gels and visits to the chiropractor (Grieve's specialist is a dog fan who treats Bert at the same time). Grieve's advice: get a smaller, shorthaired dog.

Large or small, probably the best determinant of a dog's running ability is its energy level. Just know that the more energy a dog has, the bigger your commitment to run.

### Obedience

Start new dogs early in puppy obedience classes. Heeling and recall are the two most important skills. For running on Hamilton's trails, Trebilcock taught Greta to wait for him at every road and trail junction.

A dog's tendency to stop and sniff –

hounds being the worst offenders – is a danger to both of you. Dr. Tom Gibson, an orthopedic surgeon at the Ontario Veterinary College, says the resulting stops and starts can damage the dog's spine. Gibson suggests using a body harness instead of a collar or choke chain, or a head-halter option like a Halti if you need more control than a harness provides.

### Puppyhood

You'll often hear recommendations not to run with a dog before 18 months to two years of age, but Gibson says this isn't necessarily so. "Different dog breeds reach skeletal maturity at different ages." He says a better bet is to just check with a veterinarian to make sure your dog is fully grown and to clear it of other health problems before taking it running. Veterinarians also recommend annual checkups for early detection of problems.

### Physical Training

Like people, dogs need to be introduced to running gradually. If you're in better shape than your dog, start by only running with your dog on recovery days, or drop your dog off after a short loop and then continue on alone. Some dogs will literally run themselves to death to keep up with you. Grieve's dog Bert loves running so much that if she's injured, she will conceal the limp when she sees Grieve suiting up.

"She's basically one big muscle. It's like taking your thigh and putting four legs on it."



Photo: Bob Allen / Aurora Photos



## Paw Health

Winter and spring are the hardest on a dog's paws. Winter road salt causes dry, cracked and irritated pads. Use neoprene booties or a protective ointment such as Invisible Boot (some swear by cooking oil spray) and rinse paws with fresh water.

Gibson says he sees a lot of paw injuries in the springtime when pads are tender and there is more debris, like broken glass. A dog's pads toughen with use, so build them up slowly to running on hard surfaces.

## Heat Stress

Tongue and paws are among the few areas where dogs can dissipate heat. Springtime heat waves are the most dangerous because dogs haven't shed their winter fur and acclimatized. Slow down, shorten your route, or leave the dog at home for all or part of the run on very hot days, particularly in high humidity. Do not run in the heat of the day between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., and watch for signs of heat stress like heavy panting with the tongue fully extended and a slowing pace.

"By the time they tell you, they've already gone beyond," says Ontario Veterinary College emergency care specialist Dr. Karol Mathews. "Dogs exercising with owners will frequently run until they stagger and drop." Offer your dog plenty of water when they begin to pant. Cool them with a hose

or a 15-minute swim. You can also try a cooling vest, such as the Ruff Wear Swamp Cooler. Do not put them straight into a hot car after a run.

## Pacing

Pacing with a dog can be trying, especially on leash. Some dogs' long-distance trot is slower than a fast runner's gait. Gibson suggests fast runners bring their dogs only on recovery runs or stick to trail running where the dog can stop or sprint.

That said, speed and distance are seldom an issue for Trebilcock or Grieve. Both run with their dogs 60-80K a week in peak season, on runs up to three hours. Over the past decade, Bert has kept pace with Grieve's training for seven 3:10-pace marathons and shows no sign of slowing down – or slowing him down. "Speed is never, ever, ever the issue," says Grieve. "She's basically one big muscle. It's like taking your thigh and putting four legs on it."

Greta even accompanies Trebilcock's running group on intervals and hill workouts. "She'll bark if we're not running fast enough," he says. "We've got some pretty fast runners and no one can touch her."

*Tim Shuffis is a Toronto-based writer whose composition of this article was interrupted several times to go running with his high-maintenance hound, Ranger.*

## ▶ RUNNERS' TIPS FOR DEALING WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S PROBLEM DOGS

### Slow or stop

Movement is a trigger for many dogs to chase. Slow down and walk past dogs calmly.

### Distract with treats

Canine behaviourist Joan Weston recommends using treats to buy getaway time. "Cut the pieces up so that they're small, and pitch them all over as you pass by."

### Spray

Wade says you can carry pepper spray, but you're unlikely to ever get it out in time. Weston suggests a harmless citronella-based spray, available at pet stores. "The citronella spray

canister should work appropriately for most and generally won't cause lasting fear/aggression fallout behaviours," she says.

### Call for help

Scream or use a noisemaker like an air horn to scare the dog and summon help.

### Ditch fashion accessories

John Wade, a canine behaviourist who advises Canada Post, recommends taking off sunglasses and hats. "Sunglasses give the dog the impression it's under constant challenge because you've got two giant bug eyes staring at it."

### Back away

If a dog is being aggressive, back away slowly, turned slightly to the side so you appear less threatening. Dogs may nip at your heels if you turn your back.

### Fight back

If attacked, fight back with a stick, says Wade. Rocks work too, but once you throw them, then what do you do?

### Report problems

Contact authorities and insist they follow up on any problems. Provincial laws typically prohibit dogs from displaying aggression or roaming off-leash. 