

Swimming With My Agility Dogs

Lisa Norris

MY DOGS AND I have always had an affinity for water. Long before I discovered Agility, my Bostons and I spent many summer days wading up the creek behind our home or devising fun games like "Bobbing for Toys" in the baby pool. And even if those weren't available, a simple garden hose would suffice. For Pandora, water in ANY form will do!

In early Spring of 2002, my Agility girlie sustained a crippling ACL injury requiring surgery and rehabilitation. For a six year old, high drive dog, this spelled a very LONG and tedious summer and rest of the year. Dreading the consequences of a bored dog who possesses traits of both Bull breeds and Terriers, I was inspired to find some other means to both stimulate her mind as well as restore her soundness. Pandora's love for water immediately came to mind and soon became our new favorite game. But little did I realize just how much MORE than just Hydrotherapy we would both gain from our new swimming endeavors. (See Lisa's previous article about the advantages of Water Work in *Dog & Handler* Vol 4, #3)

For most dog owners, myself included, water play had always been just another game of fetch, with Mom repeatedly tossing articles into pools or lakes for recreation or for fun after Agility-run cool off. But when I left shore and was in the water with my dogs, it suddenly became a whole new handling experience and offered me a new way to share in my dog's enthusiasm. No other dog event or activity had ever permitted me to be on an eye-to-eye level while working with my dog! I realized a whole new level of teamwork with my dogs.

Swimming opened up a floodgate of new training opportunities to my Agility partners and me; targeting, distance work, directionals, front crosses and tandem turns ALL could be practiced in the water! Thus, the water became our new training ring during summer highs of 90 degrees plus. Even my "attention deficit dog," Mr. Peabody, was refreshed and re-born, willing to work in the water in heat that previously had shut him down. Both dogs thrived from the muscle conditioning and aerobic



Pandora loves her sprinkler play.

workouts in the pool during our "water-work only" summers of 2002 and 2003.

Pandora, at age 7, returned to running Masters level Agility one year after her knee injury and rehabilitation and earned her ADCH (USDAA Agility Dog Champion title)! Eleven months later and she is still going strong coming into the new season which attests to the great benefit that her swimming rehab gave her.

But even better was the stronger bonds that swimming built between me and my dogs. This carried over directly to Agility and made for huge improvements in my young dog, Mr. Peabody. He blossomed and took to the water play, greatly appreciating the chance to work with Mom in a much cooler place — and with fish to chase, what could be better? Peabody came off his summer swim time and zoomed through his MAD (Master Agility Dog title) and three other Masters games titles, causing many to wonder where my "new" Agility dog came from? "Swimming" was all I could reply!

Water Safety Training Tip: Just Say NO to Sticks!

Lisa Norris

With warm weather and summer fun upon us, our best friends are ever-eager to engage in play with us at a moment's notice. What experienced trainer and pet owner hasn't taken part in a pick-up game of fetch the stick? However, have you also considered what injuries such a seemingly harmless game can cause? As a vet tech, I've had to remove several sticks that had become embedded in the roof of dogs' mouths or treated punctures to mouth and sinus cavities as a result of overzealous chomping of inappropriate items.

Sticks and branches, especially dried wood, splinter very easily and can quickly puncture the tongue, mouth or throat of even mild-mannered Retrievers. When it comes to water play, these hazards are increased by waterlogged branches that can break off and wedge into the roof of the dog's mouth or become lodged in the esophagus. Such incidents can be lethal. Even our brilliant performance dogs can make some bad decisions, so please be sure to be your dog's advocate and resort to using only safe dog toys that are designed for retrieving and water play.

Instead of sticks, you can choose from a huge array of water-appropriate toys. From 99-cent vinyl or rubber toys that float to tennis and Kong toys, to top of the line neoprene — these are all preferable as they are meant to hold up both in the water and in the mouth of your demanding dogs. Some of the toys with nylon rope can also be hard on a dog's gums, not to mention your hands, when tugging — so you might also look for toys made from rope or float line. Discard toys that have become mangled and have small pieces hanging. Remember that purchasing a new toy is far less expensive than an emergency vet bill.

From a training standpoint, I also prefer to be the one determining what toy is in play with my dog. Allowing dogs to scavenge up their own sticks for playtime is a distraction to water training sessions and not something I want to encourage with my dogs. Instead, I prefer to be the focus of their attention and want the toys that I present to be the most rewarding to them. After all, I have enough trouble keeping their Terrier heads out of the water from chasing fish!

Splash and have fun!!