

The Benefits of Float-Training for Watersports.

by Deborah Lee Miller-Riley (2014)

Float training, teaching your dog to balance and work on a water float, is a development tool. Because, it is not a competitive test, it releases trainers from the pressure of perfection and comparison and makes balance and float work about having fun and boosting canine ability. Float training is a time for growing, experiencing, building confidence, creating water-joy, adding depth to your relationship and developing canine muscles and the ability to work on moving vessels.



The floats used in a training program are the large commercial towable floats, the kind kids love to hang onto while skimming across the water behind a fast motorboat. They are sold at most marine and sports stores during the summer. The float should be large enough to provide roomy support when the dog is standing or lying down on the float's durable cover. The towable float will have a series of grab handles for people on one side. **It's important that the handle side is flipped to the bottom so your dog's limbs are not exposed to them.** A buoyant tow line can be attached to the float's tow ring to aid in trainer control and safety. Your dog can later learn to tow the float by this line -- passengers included!

Float training starts with shoreline balance work. Simply expose the dog to the big bouncy, teeter table, toss treats on and around the float and let the dog explore at his or her own pace. Praise for experimentation. When the dog is happily jumping up and off the float you can ask for a few familiar behaviors such as Stand, Sit, and Down. A treat and praise-based introduction to the float, beached on land, progressing to a shallow water launch, then moving to



full buoyancy in deeper water, over increasing lengths of time, is the way to start. This gradual exposure to buoyancy will help the dog build the strength and confidence to stay comfortably balanced on a float. (For year-round indoor balance-building equipment, check out FitPaws: <http://www.fitpawsusa.com>)

Here are some of the benefits of Float-Training:

- **Improves coordination.**

When my physical therapist first pointed to a wobble board and told me to get 10 seconds of balance on the board I thought, “What’s so hard about that?” It was much harder than I expected, I couldn’t keep the board level for two seconds the first day. My brain and body had to learn how to **balance**. Balance work serves to build core muscle strength (abdominal, back and pelvic-area muscles) and challenges brain development, improving sensory awareness and coordination - the communication between brain and muscle that keeps us stabilized. Dogs also benefit greatly from balance training. It gives them the **ability, strength, and confidence** to work off boats and builds an athlete with power and flexibility to ward off fatigue and injury.

- **Broadens canine spatial awareness and offers exposure to new and unique perspectives.**

Dogs spend most of their life looking up at us. It’s unusual for them to interact with us eye to eye or from above us. Float training exposes dogs to different vantage points and gives them the opportunity to learn and read our body language from these different positions. Communicating with our dogs from below their eye level is also an awakening experience for us.

Some dogs are hesitant about moving or swimming too far from shore. Free-floating peacefully away from shore, then waiting for canine calm and comfort before floating a little farther from shore, can help teach the dog that safety and comfort are not subject to shore proximity. They can learn that being away from shore can earn them treats and pleasant experiences, thus gradually preparing the dog for long distance water work and boatwork at a pace that is comfortable for the dog.

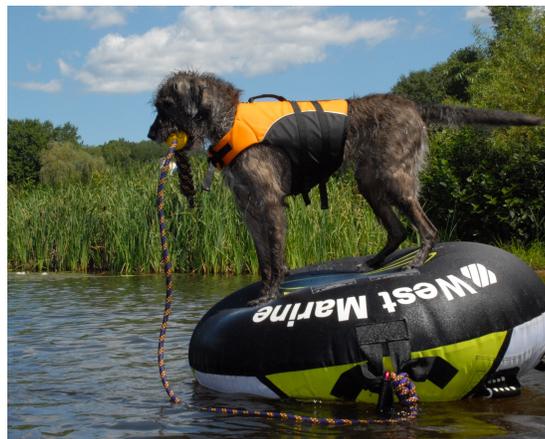


Dogs are very aware of height changes off the surface of the water. Some dogs need gradual shifts in height with more time to adjust to changes. Taking a dog from swim work to dock or boat jumping is asking a great deal from a cautious or under-conditioned canine student. Dogs will learn faster and have more fun if we don’t rush them from swim work to boat work. Paired with water platform training, float work offers a smaller learning step toward boatwork. It gives the dog a lower, stable base to prepare the dog for confident work on a taller, sometimes less stable, rowboat. Float training also serves to increase joy, ability, strength, directional control and flexibility when the dog is allowed to learn and rehearse upward float boarding, stretching downward to get off and reach-stepping between floats, a water platform or a boat. Teaching the dog how to transfer from the float down to a water

platform, the water platform to float, the float up to a boat and back down and to transfer between two floats, will build ability, strength and confidence for moving between different heights above the water. (A grooming table is an effective substitute for a homemade water platform).

- **It's an opportunity to increase behavior *fluency* and expand criteria for familiar behaviors**

Here's the game -- when your dog is confident on the float, start rehearsing familiar behaviors such as *Sit, Down, Stand, Spin, Shake Paw, Touch Targeting*, and any other trick behavior that is doable on a float. Beach the float on shore first and then ask your dog to perform those basic and familiar home behaviors. When the dog is doing these behaviors quickly, take the float to shallow water and repeat. Each success, under the new context, distractions and proximity changes, will serve to strengthen those behaviors. Then try challenging your dog a little further. How many dogs do you know who can; *Sit-stay* on a float while his/her human is swimming, *Sit-stay* on a float holding a rope, *Sit-stay* on a float and wave a paw, *Sit-stay* on a float while ducks swim by, or *Sit-stay* on a float while other dogs retrieve toys all around?



Distance between the trainer and the dog is also part of the criteria for strengthening manners and sports behaviors. For most dogs staying on the float is more rewarding than the effort it takes to leave the float, so trainers can use that knowledge to strengthen *Stay* durations, distraction tolerance and build distance tolerance between trainer and dog.

Will your dog Sit (Down, Stand, Spin) on cue after you take a few steps away? From how far away can you cue the dog to perform a familiar behavior? Will your dog Sit-stay on cue if you turn your back to your dog? Will your dog Sit-stay if you turn your back and take a few steps away? Will your dog Sit-stay if you start swimming around the float in ever widening circles? Will your dog Sit-stay while you sing a full chorus of Happy Birthday? Will your dog Sit-stay if you walk toward shore? Will your dog quickly obey your cue as you submerge and then pop out of the water? (Warning: Some dogs might become agitated when their human disappears underwater and try to dive toward the trainer. So be aware if you try a submerge and cue game). Will your dog Sit-stay if you jump up and down? Splash and chase a toy? What a wonderful list of achievements if your dog can do all these and more from a float!



- **It's a step in the right direction when building joy, confidence, strength and ability for boat jumps.**

Some dogs think nothing of hurling their bodies off a rocking rowboat. But, if you have a dog that is not so sure about the joys of jumping, you might find float training the triumph ticket and the best confidence-building step between swim work and boat jumping.

Dogs need time to develop the muscles and ability to push their bodies up and out into the water. Jumping off boats and docks is scary for some dogs. Other dogs may have weak structure, injuries, damaged joints, Lyme disease or another illness that sap their strength and desire to leap. Make sure your dog is healthy and up for the challenge before starting jump training.



Here are a few pointers before you start jump training off a float:

1. If you have access to a table or water platform, start jump training from a top placed below the water surface. The water should be about elbow deep on the dog when the dog is standing on the platform top. Rehearse easy push-off behavior, building the dog's awareness and pleasure for these little push offs.
2. Gradually, over days-months-years (if necessary) of practice, bring the top closer to the surface. Watch for confidence and endurance before challenging the dog with a higher leap. When the dog is having fun and jumping without hesitation the dog is ready for an introduction to jumps from the float.
3. **For safety's sake, always jump the dog at a water depth where the dog cannot collide with the bottom.** Unexpected jolts from an impact with the bottom can create an aversion to jumping or worse, injure your dog.
4. **Always let jumping be the dog's choice.** Never push the dog off or pull them into the water. You may scare or injure the dog and you are certainly being unkind and betraying the dog's trust if you force them. Let kindness and patience prevail. It may take a little time before the dog decides jumping is fun, but it will be worth it. I coached one of my dogs for several years before she felt she could jump for joy.
5. When you ask for jumps from the float, **make sure someone is holding the float steady** or the tow line is held taut in front of the jump direction so the float doesn't kick back under the dog's feet as the dog leaps off.
6. It would seem like a no-brainer, **but training your dog in a life-jacket is a smart, safety-conscious decision**, especially when jump training a cautious dog. Why risk an unwanted submersion during early experimentation and strength building? Your goal is to build canine desire to experiment and to maintain the trust that nothing scary or painful is going to happen - right?



AND THE BEST BENEFIT TO FLOAT TRAINING --

- **It's a pleasant, relaxing way to commune with your dog and nature.**

Spiritual growth and relaxation are just as important as physical training. The wise trainer affords time for both. Floating on a tube in the water is peaceful, calming and renewing. Free floating with your dog can be a wonderful opportunity to add depth to your relationship and appreciation for water. It is the first activity encouraged after land and shallow water experience. Free-floating allows the dog the safety and perch advantage to ponder concerns, accept, relax and satisfy curiosity -- see the sights and acclimate to the sounds, movements and odors in a water environment. Cautious dogs usually relax and look forward to water play when there is a history of free floating with kind, supportive words from their human coach and no performance demands.



I especially recommend free-floating for teams who suffer from training anxiety or training challenges. It is a soul-felt adventure that must be experienced to be truly appreciated. Floating together can renew relationship priorities, revitalizing your intention for connection, companionship, love and trust as the number one priority. It offers both travelers the opportunity to share demand-free moments of peace, comfort and harmony while gazing into each other's eyes.