

Does Your Puppy Know Where His Back End Is?

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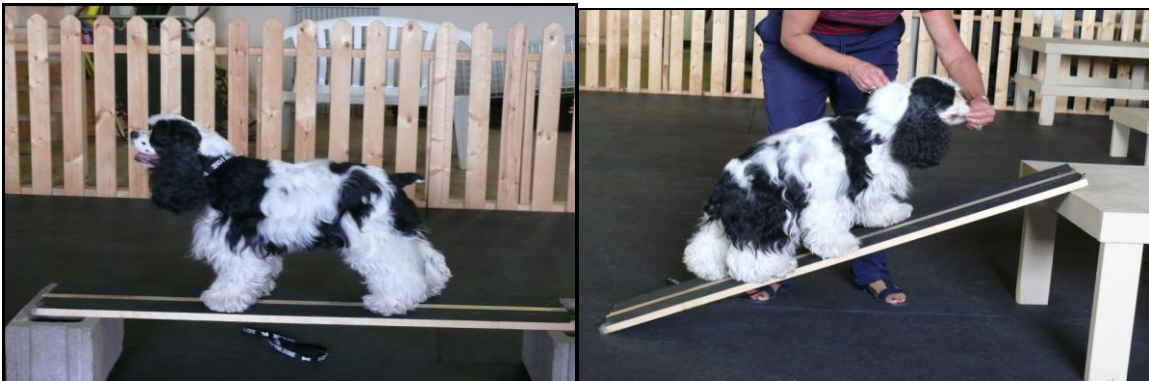
You have just brought your new puppy home. His arrival has been much anticipated and he is just as perfect as you expected. He's so loveable, so cute and cuddly – and *so clumsy*. You have big plans for this puppy – possibly showing him in the conformation ring or competing in obedience trials or perhaps in one of the many dog sports such as agility, flyball, scenting or drafting. How can you help this clumsy puppy achieve the coordination and movement control required to perform efficiently and effectively in these activities? It is well recognized by many trainers that dogs do not naturally have a sense of where their hind quarters are in relation to the rest of their body. Unless the dog learns to control the hind end and move in a coordinated fashion, they may find that some activities are more challenging than they need to be, and they may even become a cause for accident or injury.

With a little imagination and creativity, you and your puppy can engage in some playtime activities that will teach him the control and coordination that will make him safe and effective in any activity that you both choose to pursue. One of the easiest exercises to set up simply involves laying a ladder down flat on your back lawn. With puppy on leash, you can gradually introduce him to this obstacle course. Soon he will be walking confidently through the rungs of the ladder and learning that he has to pick up his hind feet as well as his front ones. If a ladder is too large for your small breed puppy, you can use other handy objects such as handles of brooms or rakes. A similar set up can be done indoors utilizing any variety of objects to create an obstacle course along a hallway. You can even find a good use for dirty laundry by rolling items up to make obstacles to step over. Another simple techniques to increase his awareness of the hind feet is to wrap the hind feet with material such as vet wrap or baby socks or even hair 'scrunchies'. He may try to chew off these annoying additions, but the entire exercise will definitely improve his awareness and proprioception of his hind legs.



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As your pup becomes aware that he has four feet to control, you can then introduce him to 'walking the plank'. Placing a board approximately 6-10 feet long and 10-12 inches wide on the ground, you can walk puppy on leash onto the plank. As he becomes comfortable with this new obstacle, try to get him to walk along the length of the plank. This may take several attempts over a few days, and you may find that placing some barriers along the sides to keep him walking along the length may be helpful. As his confidence improves, you can progress this game by elevating one end of the plank by placing it on the bottom step of a flight of stairs. A few small treats placed along the plank may be helpful for encouragement. Soon you will find you will be increasing the elevation by placing the end of the plank on a higher step.



Other activities that can train puppy's balance and coordination are walking on a variety of uneven surfaces or on surfaces that feel slightly unstable, such as a camping foam mattress. A rocker board is also a fun tool and can be created quite easily with a piece of plywood (suitable for the size of your pup) that has a rocker shaped piece of wood or a piece of banister/railing attached to the underside of the plywood. This can be a little scary for some dogs initially, but with some small treats and lots of praise, they will soon be enjoying the game. As with all training exercises, keep the sessions short and fun - suitable to your puppy's attention span.



You will be surprised at how much these simple games will develop your puppy's coordination, balance, movement, muscle development and confidence – an asset in whatever “career” you have planned for you new family member. As your dog develops and you become involved in activity specific training, you may occasionally notice some small movement or performance issues which may be interfering with the progression of training. We frequently find that these seeming small ‘glitches’ or issues are often due to minor but impacting musculoskeletal dysfunctions in the back, neck, ribs, or pelvis. These dysfunctions are usually easily corrected, and specific exercises can be designed for you and your dog to work on to aid in the correction of such dysfunctions.

Therapists experienced in canine rehabilitation can perform “Fitness Assessments” or “Well Puppy Assessments”, which can identify and intercept any potential problems and can therefore, be useful in developing a performance athlete from your playful pup.

About the Author:

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