



Mind, Body & Spirit Fitness for Dogs?

By Chris Shaughness

It is 6:25 am in the dark of winter when my radio alarm flips on the Oldies station and the DJ announces, "It's twenty-two degrees and windy, with a wind-chill index of ten!" My Golden Retriever bounds to his feet, oblivious to the bone-chilling cold awaiting us. He stands by the side of my bed and delivers an unrelentingly intense stare until he hears the words, "Is it walk time?" which makes him whirl around in delight. As for me, I'd rather forego the walk to jump into a hot shower and slowly wake up with a cup of tea. But my dog has other plans. It would be so much easier to let him out into the yard to do his business as I watch him from the warmth of the kitchen window. I realize my dog needs to stay healthy, just as humans do. So we walk 30 - 45 minutes twice a day, rain or shine, warm or cold. Without regular walks, he may gain weight.

He may also develop behavior issues and be unable to satisfy his natural instincts. Walks are for physical fitness but what's this about behavior issues and natural instincts? Call it 'mind and spirit' fitness.

Body Fitness. Dogs need activity. Nothing upsets me more than an overweight dog. Watch as a fat dog waddles slowly down the street. Wouldn't he rather be happily running? Sadly, he's more prone to diabetes, arthritis and other health problems. Overfeeding and lack of exercise can prematurely kill a dog, not to mention take all the fun out of life for him because he has so much trouble moving. Giving a dog too many treats or people food may be well intentioned but ultimately are so bad for your dog. A slim dog is a healthy, happy dog. Regular exercise for dogs has the same benefits as it does for humans. A brisk daily walk helps to maintain healthy heart and lungs, appropriate weight and keep muscles toned. A healthy body is better able to fend off disease and recover from illnesses or injuries. A physically fit dog equals less veterinarian bills and a longer life. What could be better than that?

Of course, not every dog has the same physical needs. While all dogs benefit from exercise, some require more than others. Become familiar with your dog's breed history so you can best understand the dog's exercise requirements.

Mind Fitness. Okay, physical fitness for dogs is easy to understand. So what's this about behavior issues? Call it "mind fitness". Dogs can become bored, much like humans. Think of a dog as a young child - if the child or the dog does not get enough mental stimulation, he will find his own entertainment. That can mean trouble! Behaviors such as chewing, excessive barking, and even more serious problems like growling and biting can be a result of the dog not having enough to do. Most of us think that dogs will entertain themselves. True, some dogs can be content to snooze on their beds all day or chew on a bone for happiness. If you have a dog like this, you are very lucky! However, many dogs have greater needs.

Activities such as obedience training help dogs to use their brains. Obedience encourages your dog to focus on what you are saying to him. Obedience is not about making your dog submit to you; it's more about learning



how to communicate with each other. Teach your dog how to sit, stay, come and lie down. Watch your dog's happy reaction when you praise him for coming to you! A little training goes a long way in easing dogs' boredom.

How does obedience training fit in with a daily walk? Walk-time is the perfect opportunity to practice important obedience skills. Before going out the door for your walk, have your dog practice "sit" and "stay." This simple routine shows your dog that he is not the leader, you are. Dogs are happier and have fewer behavior problems when they look to you for direction. A dog that bolts out the door before you do is not only showing that he's in charge, but can also be hazardous to his and your safety. Once outside, make it a habit to ask your dog to "wait" each time you come to a street or a curb. Here again, this routine tells your dog that he must look to you for direction and it ensures safety for both of you as you look for oncoming cars. When it's safe to go, give your dog the "okay!" signal and proceed with your walk.

Spiritual Fitness. Do dogs have a spiritual side? Of course they do. You won't find dogs contemplating the purpose of their lives, but they do have a connection to the earth that so many of us have lost. They know what they need and what feeds their spirits. Dogs love to be outside, especially out for walks. To a dog, a walk is like a hunting trip, a chance to explore the world. The sights and smells of the outdoors expand your dog's universe. He loves to smell where other dogs have been and to leave messages of his own for other dogs to know that he was there.

Dogs have an instinct to socialize with people and other dogs. That's why they have bonded so nicely with us humans. They love being with their pack. Deprive them of that opportunity and they, like us, can get depressed. Physical interaction with other dogs feeds your dog's spirit too. A walk on which your dog gets to see and maybe even play with other dogs is so much fun. The explosion of dog parks recently shows that dogs need to have that interaction. If you don't live near a dog park, find a friend who owns a dog and walk together!

Don't forget your furry friend's mind, body and spirit fitness needs. Happy walking!



Chris Shaughness is the President of Pet Therapy Services, Inc. which provides behavior counseling, obedience training and massage for pets. You can find more information on-line at www.pettherapyservices.org or contacting Chris at cshaughness@phillyfitmagazine.com