

Motivate the Distance

Contributed by Tom Dropik at SportMutt - August 2009

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If we were to put a list together of our canine companions' natural athletic abilities, I don't think too many would argue that Running and Jumping would be at the top of that list. I also don't think too many would argue how wonderful it is that DockDogs provides us the stage and opportunity to exercise those athletic abilities. And judging from the response of those that have seen a DockDogs event, I don't think too many would argue that watching a dog run fast, jump high, and break the surface of the water some 25 feet later, is nothing less than spectacular.



Of course we're talking about the sport that started it all, Big Air. It's Speed, it's Height, it's Distance, and it's that simple, right? Sure it is. All a dog has to do is run as fast as they can down a 40 foot dock and jump as hard as they can in to a pool of water. From there the laws of physics take over and the dog simply enjoys the ride that, for a moment, seems to defy all rules of nature before plunging in to the water, making a splash big enough to soak anything and anyone that dares to watch within a few feet of the Splash Zone.

Ok, so how do we get a dog to run as fast as they can and jump as hard as they can?

As SportMutt continues our travels, observations, and hands on training, it becomes more and more evident to us that each and every dog is different and requires different levels of work to get them to exercise these abilities. Some dogs come out of the gate doing 98. That is, they require minimum training and are fast and jump hard pretty much right away. Most, however,

require some level of work to get them to run fast and jump hard. We've also come to realize that many dogs exercise these abilities at different levels depending on different things like Environment, Conditioning, and of course Toy Motivation.

Dogs are natural outdoor creatures. They are most comfortable and perform best in their natural surroundings. A natural surrounding or environment would be a lake or a pond with a dock extending out in to the water (water on both sides and in front) that is somewhat low to the ground. A DockDogs event is typically anything but natural, in a dog's mind anyway. Consider an above ground Pool, an elevated dock (5 /12 feet in the air with no water on either side), 100s of other dogs, HUGE crowds, loud music, and an announcer that just loves working up the crowd over the microphone. Each one of these can affect a dog's performance. And then to bring them all together at an event can really become overwhelming to the dogs.

A DockDogs event is usually 2 – 3 days of High Energy, tons of Anticipation, and of course a lot of Running and Jumping. It is very common for an unconditioned dog to feel the effects of a DockDogs event right away causing them to lose that ever so important spring in their step.

In the last issue of DD magazine, we talked about Toy Motivation in general and how to condition our dogs to perceive the Toy as the reward, thus teaching them to perform in anticipation of receiving that reward. I'd like to take that step further and talk about using that Toy Motivation to teach our dogs to run faster and jump harder and hopefully increase their distance in Big Air. I'll do this by discussing dock work and throwing techniques.

We always want to start with the Speed. Let's get our dogs to run as fast as they can down the dock. Jumping is not important at this stage of the game. We want to keep things simple and work in a progressive manner that will build confidence and will

make that transition in to the jump an easy one and something that comes second nature to the dog.

Remember a Fast Dog is a Motivated Dog. We must always strive to keep that Motivation alive. We want to keep building on the concept of teaching our dogs to perform in anticipation of receiving a reward, the TOY. So, we can start by letting the dog see the Fun Toy, but keeping the Fun Toy away from the dog as long as possible while making our way to the dock. Don't let them carry the toy to the dock and don't let them carry the toy while on the dock. Keep the toy visible but keep control of the toy. This is an awesome way to build the anticipation. Always start a training session with short runs on the dock. Remember, everything in dog training starts short and ends long. We're using the Toy Motivation as a tool here, but it's always a great way to build the confidence.

Now, we got our excited dog on the dock, toy in hand, and a big old body of water just waiting for the action. Start with tossing the Toy in the water with out releasing your dog. Once the Toy is in the water, take a few seconds to build on the excitement your dog is showing you in anticipation of getting that Toy. This is key. When you think your dog is about to jump out of his furry coat let him go. Don't forget to jump up and down and yell and scream so the next county can hear you. That's key too.

As soon as you can, get the toy from your dog, I like to take the toy while I'm making a fool of myself giving him affection and att-a boys and telling him he just accomplished the most terrific thing he's ever attempted. I'll then keep it away from him until it's time to go again. Take a few minutes before going up on the dock again. Take some time to build that excitement of wanting the toy again.

Do this place and send routine on the dock moving back a little further each time. Be sure to keep an eye on the speed. If at any time the dog is showing you a slow down, or lack of effort in the run, shorten the run or move up on the dock.

Now here is the important thing to remember, dock time is Fun Time. It is a time that must intrigue the dog. It is a time that the dog absolutely looks forward to. Keep the number of jumps to a minimum. We like to jump anywhere from 3 – 5 jumps per dock session. This way you'll be ending the session with your dog wanting more. If you feel you're really making some great progress and want to continue jumping, take a 30 – 60 minute break away from the dock and come back to play some more. We'll usually take this time to work on some obedience or take out a different toy work and work on retrieves or what ever else needs some work.

Ok, now let's take some time to talk about jumping. We're happy with the speed we're getting and we're ready to start producing some Big Air. In this article we're going to use the common technique called "The Chase". We're going to assume at this point that you have a dog that is chasing the Toy. If your dog is not chasing the Toy you'll want to train "The Chase" prior to moving on to the next step. Go to www.sportmutt.com for great training tips on how to introduce "The Chase".

Getting back to the dock now and going through the same pre-dock routine where he doesn't get the toy, we start short again. Set up your dog on a sit and stay 1 stride back from the jump point. Release your dog while timing the throw so he catches it in the air. The idea here is to teach your dog that he can in fact get the toy and catch it. This is key to keeping the drive alive and keeping him driving toward the toy in the air.

The trick to working the chase is to keep your dog jumping up and out after the Toy in anticipation of getting that ever elusive reward. It's imperative that your dog catch the toy every so often. However, you want your dog to condition his thinking that he has to jump hard to achieve this. Too many catches will condition the dogs thinking in that he doesn't have to keep pushing to catch it. Not catching it will condition your dog to think the toy is unachievable in the air causing him to reduce his effort.

It's the perfect combination of catches and non-catches that condition the dog to continue pushing out toward the Toy.

It's also very import to toss the Toy out in front of the dogs nose. This too will condition the dog to stretch out toward the Toy. Continuous late throws, throws that are too high, and throws that are off to the side will begin to condition the dog in to thinking he won't be able to get the toy in the air.