

Lumen working at Solitude Mountain Resort in Utah. Photo by Kimberly Henneman.

# TIPS *from the* VET!

NEW COLUMN ADDRESSES NEEDS OF AVALANCHE DOGS  
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**I**t is said there is a first time for everything. Recently, as I was sitting on the deck of the Gornergrat Mountain restaurant in Switzerland, I witnessed my first natural avalanche. A sudden crack, then a rumble, was followed by the reverberation of snow and rocks cascading harmlessly into an area (fortunately) free of skiers. The sound immediately took me back to Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort in Utah and the first time I saw a Howitzer lob a shell into a bowl face, the explosion trying to trigger a slab fracture; that face also cracked and rumbled as it too missed taking any people into a tumble of snow and rocks.

Despite having spent my youth backcountry and alpine skiing in the Utah mountains, I was surprised to see experienced patrollers just as much in awe as I was of that trainload of snow heading down the mountain. As the dog I had come to see nuzzled my hand, I realized as a newbie veterinarian that I knew nothing about these rescue dogs trained to look for anyone who could be trapped in an avalanche like that. What did those dogs really do, and how did their training and work affect them?

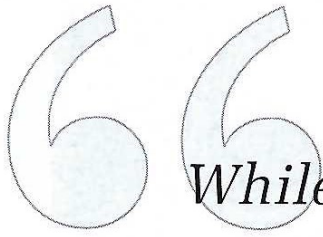
So, I volunteered to watch as well as be barrel-buried during training exercises. Boy, was it a sight when that snowy muzzle burst through the snow! That was when I realized that I wanted to get to know and care for these amazing canine athletes — because athletes they are. Now, 20-plus years later, I've had the great privilege of working with avalanche handlers and dogs from not only my home mountains, but also from all over the United States and the world.

The care and training of the avalanche rescue dog has evolved through the years as much as mountain safety techniques and equipment. Sometimes, however, evolution involves more than an upgrade of equipment — it takes a change in thinking. This is true when it comes to the overall recognition of working dogs as athletes. While the Labradors, Border Collies, and shepherds that ride lifts or helicopters up to mountain peaks are no different physically than those that play or hike as pets, they are as different in their needs as competitive athletes are to occasional gym users.

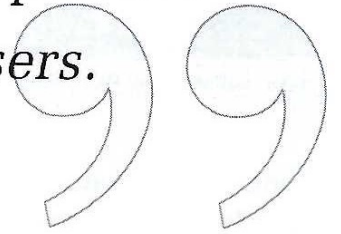
There are many different demands in the training and conditioning of the working dog. Different nutrition is needed to support the mental and physical aspects of training, as well as to restore the body after the physical and nasal effort of searching a slide toe. Different ways to evaluate movement and structure are needed to identify injuries earlier. Different injury management and rehabilitation techniques are needed to minimize recovery time and not interfere with scent detection. In all, different attitudes and observational skills are needed on the part of handlers, veterinarians, and management in order to maintain an avalanche rescue dog at its peak function and longevity.

Smokejumpers have a saying that “Every fire starts small.” This means preventing disasters involves catching problems as early as possible, and disaster prevention is all about awareness and education. The people responsible for any dog's health may come from different backgrounds and knowledge in terms of nutrition, training, exercise,





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conditioning, injury awareness, and therapies, but together they comprise the team that is needed to keep a working dog functioning.

I come from a background of active snow and ice sports combined with years of medical management of various canine athletes. While the medicine part is important, I have also learned important management tips from handlers of SAR (wildland and urban), avalanche, sledding, agility, police, detection, and herding dogs, to name a few. The veterinary world has just recognized the importance of proper care for the working canine athlete by forming a specialty board in sports medicine and rehabilitation. Veterinarians and handlers alike need to make sure that everyone can understand and share the research and practical information starting to percolate between different dog disciplines. That is why this column about avalanche dog health topics is important.

With this regular column, we'd like to discuss various issues, concerns, and problems that can occur with the working avalanche/SAR dog, and for you Fernie Canadian Avalanche Rescue Cat Association folks, maybe even for the odd avalanche rescue cat! There are plenty of medical topics to cover, but maybe we can also discuss concerns that handlers have as well. To start us off, here are some basic questions and tips for working dogs, whether they work in the sun or snow:

- Can your dog's feet pass the credit (or gift) card test? Standing on a hard, firm surface, can you slide a credit or gift card between the ground and your dog's nails? If not, the nails are too long and need to be trimmed. Nails that touch the ground, even when the dog isn't walking, can strain and tear toe tendons over time, as well as set them up for early arthritis. Not much can be done for toe arthritis in dogs, so prevention is key here!
- Did you know that giving your dog a small sugar (glucose) snack after work can help with muscle and nose recovery? In humans it's called glycogen post-loading. Glucose or sugar ingested within 30-45 minutes AFTER exertion goes straight into the cell without the need for insulin. Nerve (smell, movement) and muscle (movement) cells recover much faster when you can give your dog honey, yogurt, berries, or an electrolyte shortly after finishing strenuous training, work, or play.
- No matter what food you give your dog, adding antioxidants such as Vitamin E and Vitamin C can help joints and muscles recover more efficiently. Dogs that weigh between 35-50 pounds can take 200-400 international units of Vitamin E and 250 milligrams of Vitamin C (discontinue if it causes diarrhea).
- Adding a joint supplement early in the life of a working dog can help protect joint structures and maybe keep your dog working longer (cats too). Find two supplements that you like made by different manufacturers, and rotate between them every few months.

Have a question about avalanche dogs? Send it to the editor at [editor@nsp.org](mailto:editor@nsp.org) for a possible future column! I look forward to sharing knowledge with all of you about dogs (and possibly cats)! 