



# Feeding the Canine Athlete

**Training Tip** by George Hickox

*Proper nutrition from the beginning develops healthy adults.*

**G**enetics, training, and nutrition are required in order for the canine athlete to maximize his stamina and bird-finding abilities, and exhibit stellar field manners. A dog lacking hunting instincts is a bench warmer and simply cannot produce blue-ribbon memories. Likewise, an untrained dog is a frustrating partner in the field and causes owners to have high blood pressure and premature baldness.

By the same token, a genetically talented dog that has developed his abilities through a successful training program will be unable to stand up to the rigors of hunting if fed improperly. The canine receives the nutritional benefits from eating eight to 16 hours after ingesting his food. Feeding a pup the morning of the big hunt is not a sound program – it raises the dog's body temperature, and pre-hunt feeding can cause gastrointestinal problems. A dog should never be fed within two hours of exercise. In addition, digesting food requires water. A dog fed before exercise is more prone to becoming dehydrated. There is no plus to feeding in the morning before a hunt. We feed in

the evening to allow the dog time to digest his food and receive the necessary calories that will be demanded during the following day's activities.

The calories individual dogs require varies considerably. A dog with a high metabolism will demand more food than a pooch with a lower metabolism. A dog that is kenneled outside in lower temperatures will need to ingest more calories to maintain his internal temperature than a companion living in the house. Here's a guideline: A dog will require seven percent more or fewer calories for every 10-degree rise or fall in temperature. If the temperature was 50 degrees on Tuesday and 30 degrees on Wednesday, a dog would need 14 percent more calories on Wednesday than on Tuesday.

A good gauge for determining the proper weight a dog should maintain is by viewing the dog from above – he should look like a horizontally placed hourglass. He should have a noticeable "waistline," sucked in stomach, well-developed muscles, and a deep sprung chest. If it's

a straight line from the shoulders to the hips, he is overweight; if the dog's stomach is wider than his shoulders, he is obese. Do not allow the dog to become overweight. Weight is a function of calories in and calories out: Pounds are put on if the dog digests more calories than he burns. Carrying extra weight places more stress on the bones and joints, as well as internal organs, leading to health problems and premature aging.

**C**arbohydrates heat and fat cools. A diet high in carbohydrates and low in fat will raise the dog's body core temperature. Overheating is a serious concern for all hunting dog owners. In addition to keeping the dog well-hydrated, a high fat-balanced diet will aid in keeping him cooler. "Balanced" is the operative word when it comes to diets. A diet high in fat should also be high in protein in order to be balanced.

A high protein diet that is low in fat will not supply the needed energy for the hard-working dog. Very little protein is utilized by the dog as an energy source. Protein offers a multitude of benefits, such as helping rebuild muscles, but being a major energy fuel is not a protein function. Studies have shown that dogs fed a low protein diet were more susceptible to injuries. Dogs do not suffer from high cholesterol and triglycerides; they are protein eaters. A diet consisting of 30 percent protein and 20 percent fat is my recommendation for the metabolically sound and healthy working dog. Quality in equals quality out. A diet consisting of quality ingredients is a cheap insurance policy for the health of the dog.

A dog has two energy fuel tanks: One is the fat storage tank, a large tank with a hard-to-open tap. Fat is there for the long haul. The second tank is the glycogen tank, which is small with an easy-to-open tap. Glycogen is rocket fuel and is available for the short haul. A dog typically opens the jets to his glycogen tank before utilizing the fuel in his fat tank. Once he has emptied his glycogen tank, the dog is running on empty. It takes up to four days of rest and proper feeding before the glycogen tank is replenished to full.

Glycogen supplements will considerably speed up the time it takes to refill the glycogen tank, but be mindful that these supplements do not take the place of conditioning or feeding a top-tier diet. They are utilized in conjunction with a proper exercise and feeding program. (One supplement I have used for years is called "R," for "recovery." More information can be found by visiting [www.Elements-Nutrition.com](http://www.Elements-Nutrition.com).)

The hunting dog is an athlete and is subjected to tremendous demands in the hunting arena. Feed your dog properly. He will perform better on hunt days and will live a healthier and longer life. ●

Check out George's video training series (see ad in this issue), which covers everything you need to know to take your retriever from a pup to a finished upland hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and Stonecreek English setters, pointers, and Labrador retrievers, check out [www.georgehickox.com](http://www.georgehickox.com).

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