

Safety for both you and the dog.

Footballer's injuries

Yes, been there. Hard to explain to a doctor about my ankle – you could see he was struggling to question why a 50 year old woman had a footballer's injury. This is why we now use IKEA soft balls! You will thank me.

These softballs also absorb our lousy kicking skills and will not cause harm to the dog's face on impact. The woolliest of sheep.

Injuries to dogs

The dogs are most prone to injury when they try to catch the toy in midair and land badly. There are hundreds of cool pics of dogs jumping for "discs" with "amazing" acrobatics. I would hope these dogs are fully prepared, fit and able to live a long, injury free life. But it still makes my skin crawl to see it happen. It is not worth the risk.

All toys should be no higher than your waist height.

The surface you play on will also impact on their fitness. They will need a good grip for turning and accelerating and short jumps need soft landing. Grass with a deep underturf is excellent. Contrary to the recommendations for agility, they can have long nails for extra grip since no equipment is being run across. Play, duration, repetitions and expectations will also need to be age and experience appropriate.

Pulling wool

This is the term for a dog nipping or grabbing sheep. In trials conditions a dog is immediately disqualified if they cause this transgression. In real life down on the farm, dogs will nip and charge at extremely pushy sheep, or rams, tackle the faces of cattle when needed. If you have particularly pushy livestock that can make a dog back down they can break the confidence of that dog for life.

Ewes with lambs can change immediately into protective mothers and take on any dog.

If you are on FB this is a video of Cap moving ewes and lambs: young lambs do not know about dogs, they have to learn from their mothers how to be "herded". It does show why he is so valued as a stud dog, besides being a Supreme Champion. Moving ewes and lambs is a very tiresome job.

<https://www.facebook.com/aled.owen.33/videos/10220714921240834>

Your hands

The main risk to injury will be your hands.

The whole business of working sheep and chasing balls is about a delayed capture of prey. Capture involves quick, hard grabbing. Although the collie is considered to have an inhibited bite in comparison to many of the predatory breeds it is inhibited, they will still nip. The inhibition is usually in the style of not ripping out the throat of the sheep. When dogs are working livestock they are exhibiting great

patience, waiting for the perfect conditions to give that One Ewe a slap in the face if she turns around to butt me one more time. Ideally the threat of the bite should be sufficient, but that threat without an intent to follow through is empty.

In our games we are asking them to grab toys. Constantly. This builds up the arousal, and there are many times when this needs to be expelled with a few circuits, usually carrying the toy. You should always be monitoring arousal – building when needed and reducing frustration to let the steam expire. Youngsters and all players will need to be able to tell the difference between grabbing a free moving toy, and a non-moving toy that is in your hands.

One is moving, one is not.

<https://vimeo.com/555152515>

You can see on my “nursery” video Todd is trying to grab the disc in my hands. This is evidence that he is yet to discriminate when to grab and when not to grab – this takes practice.

Even if you are playing with a tug toy the dog should never be grabbing the toy unless it is presented to them, the cue to grab is given. No dogs should be learning to jump into your space and grab at what it is your hands.

But under these conditions, when the dog is fully aroused, it becomes harder (neurologically) for them to tell the difference. They become fixated on any and every opportunity to grab.

Even when working in the field, if I go to catch a single ewe or lamb that becomes the permission the dog has been working towards and will join in the kill process. It takes practice and experience to keep the dog back in those conditions, particularly if it has been hard and frustrating work to get to that point.

You should all be able to collect the balls and walk TO the centre of the play area without the dog jumping into your space or grabbing at a toy.

You should all be able to collect the balls and walk OUT of the play area without the dog jumping into your space or grabbing at a toy.

Take time with this and needs practice and monitoring every game, even practice during the game, perhaps walking to and fro every third chase.

If the dog looks like they are coming in to jump or bite, stand still, and relax. I know it is hard, but if you look tense and defensive it can add to the urgency.

Wait.

When you see the dog come out of arousal, which will happen if you wait with stillness, you will see their eyes soften and blink, perhaps lick their lips and relax a little. Move off slowly, fast movement will arouse them again quickly.

If you feel particularly vulnerable take a clipboard, or jump pole to use as a shield. At no time are we going to be hitting dogs with plastic bags, poles, whips or sticks, but you do have permission to take

along a shield if the dog has a bad habit of toy snatching. If they grab from under the foot, which hurts just as much as the hand grab, then take an old tennis racquet, or jump pole. We do need complete acquiescence that when the toy is yours it is always yours until you decide otherwise.

If they have “done a fast one” and got the toy from you, be nonchalant, walk away as if it is of no matter. Do not turn it into an argument. It will happen because they are so much faster than us.

You can see at the end of the video when I collect the toys his body language is quite different.

This is when I add the cue “that’ll do” or “stand down”.

So remember the safety:

Clean kicking – watch the ball not the dog

Good shoes will help.

Good surface, no trees or furniture or other people or dogs running free

Safe toys

No toy stealing, snatching or grabbing, ever.

Never argue if they have the toy you want – this is why we have plenty.

If anyone does have issue with this or is struggling – please let me see the video. We will not be able to have much fun until we feel safe, and have that little bit of space from those teeth.

Remember we are building the skills that can quickly overspill into chasing / biting small running children, bikers, joggers etc. Building these disciplines and virtual barriers is important for the future of your dog.