

OK, it is time to start working off those holiday pounds and your canine pal should probably do the same. Dog running partners are much more motivating than humans. Unless they are sick, a dog will never say “I just don’t feel like it this morning” and they will probably roust you from your bed even if you don’t feel like it. A dog will not make fun of your lycra or criticize your form. He will not mind running the same boring route everyday. And, a dog that exercises is a happy dog all day long.

Before you head out with your new jogging partner, you need to make sure that he or she is up to the task. The ideal running dog weighs 30-70 pounds and has a short to medium length hair coat. Giant dogs like Great Danes do not have appropriate body proportions to support long distance running. And, believe it or not, Greyhounds are not great for long distance either. They can sprint like the wind, but long trots are not really their forte. Obvious breeds that cannot become running partners include small or miniature dogs, those with squashed noses like Bulldogs and Pugs and short legged dogs like Basset hounds and Daschunds.

Young growing dogs should not be considered a good long distance partner either. At this early age, it is best to begin training the puppy to obey commands so he or she will heel, stop, slow down and respect traffic. My dog even understands “right” and “left”. This is very helpful when I decide to make a sudden turn or if she us out ahead of me. All this obedience training can be done within a couple of blocks of your home while you are waiting for the dog to mature. Most are ready for long distance training by the time they are 2 years old.

Once you have determined that your age and breed of dog is going to make an appropriate running partner, go see the vet. He or she will check out the dog’s heart, joints, muscle and weight. If all goes well, he’ll get a clean bill of health and you can begin training. If your dog has been enjoying the couch as much as you have over the holidays, you should probably start very slowly. Start with half a mile every other day. Increase the distance by 10% each week and give the dog a day off for every day of running. In no time you will both be enjoying the spring for an hour or so at a time.

Always keep your dog on a leash. Some people like the waist leash attachments and others think they are dangerous because the dog could pull you over if he sees a squirrel or other dog. Know your companion and his habits when making a decision about what type of leash to use. Stay visible. Use reflective vests, collars and leashes. Flashing lights around the dog’s collar are very effective. If you must run near traffic, remember that your dog’s nose is the same height as automobile exhaust pipes. Try to keep him away from these nasty pollutants. Check your dog’s paws before and after the run. If you are running on the beach, where sand can clump between the pads, you might want to do this more often.

As it starts to warm up, be very cautious. Dogs do not sweat like humans. The dissipate heat through panting and through seat glands in the paws. If the

surface is hot, it will be more difficult for the dog to cool off. Let him run through puddles, along the edge of the ocean and stick to morning or late evening running when the roads and beaches are cooler. Carry a collapsible water bowl to allow your partner to refresh himself frequently and keep his tongue cool. Include your dog in warm up and cool down walking to help prevent injury.

The most important point to remember is that dogs will run to the edge of the earth for their human companion and may not complain until an injury is severe. It is up to us to make sure that we stop immediately if a dog seems exhausted, sore or hot. If you notice excessive panting, increased salivation, red gums, vomiting, diarrhea or weakness, stop immediately, get some water, walk home and consult your veterinarian.

In general, you probably shouldn't enter running races with your dog. Some runners are terrified of dogs and under crowded circumstances, leashes can be a source of trips. However, there are some races that encourage canine participation, and these can be great fun. As my friend and client ran across the finish line of our local Reindeer Run with her dog Lulu, she couldn't have been more proud of her pal and running partner. The trophy they were awarded is now a symbol of their powerful human-animal bond that drives so many of our lives.