

The Whole Dog Journal™



VOLUME 15 | NO. 8 | \$5.95

A monthly guide to natural dog care and training

AUGUST 2012

FEATURES

3 Positive Pedi-Pedi's

Three force-free nail-trimming procedures to try on your dog.

6 Safe Swimming

Most dogs enjoy cooling off in a pond or pool, but many could benefit from swimming or safety lessons.

12 Fat, Lazy, and/or Grumpy?

If this describes your dog, the problem may be hypothyroidism. Learn about the many signs and causes of this disease, and how to treat it.

20 Of Dogs and Discs

We asked disc-throwing experts and disc dogs alike for their feedback about safe, far-flying fetch toys (and we'll reveal our top pick in discs).



Rules for the Pool
Teach them to your dog.
page 6



No Longer Tragic
What a puffy face can signify.
page 12



Flying High
The best discs for this!
page 20

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Editor's Note
- 24 Product and Expert Resources



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NEWSSTAND

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B THE WHOLE DOG JOURNAL (ISSN #1097-5322) is published monthly by Belvoir Media Group, LLC, 800 Connecticut Avenue, Norwalk, CT 06854-1631. Robert Englander, Chairman and CEO; Timothy H. Cole, Executive Vice President, Editorial Director; Philip L. Penny, Chief Operating Officer; Greg King, Executive Vice President, Marketing Director; Ron Goldberg, Chief Financial Officer; Tom Canfield, Vice President, Circulation. Periodicals postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices. Copyright ©2012, Belvoir Media Group, LLC. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is strictly prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. Revenue Canada GST Account #128044658. Canada Publishing Agreement Number #40016479.

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Subscriptions: \$39 annually (12 issues). Bulk rate subscriptions for organizations and educational institutions available upon request.

Postmaster: Please send address changes to THE WHOLE DOG JOURNAL, PO Box 8535, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8535

THE WHOLE DOG JOURNAL, PO Box 39, Norwich, ON, N0J 1P0



What it Takes

The gratification of finding a home for a shelter dog.

BY NANCY KERNS

Back in May, I wrote a blog post on WDJ's website (wholedogjournal.com/blog) about a little dog named Mickey. He was surrendered to the shelter where I volunteer in June 2011; his age was estimated at 5 months. He's a strange-looking, high-energy mixed breed dog with a docked tail and floppy ears; at admission, the shelter staff guessed he was a Pug/Chihuahua-mix, but as Mickey matured, his legs grew and grew. Today my guess would be a Chihuahua/Fox Terrier-mix. He's so unusual-looking, and so bouncy, that it took a full six months to find someone to adopt the little guy – and the adoption lasted just three months. To the dismay of the shelter staff, he was returned to the shelter at the end of March; the stated reason was that the owner's original dog was picking on Mickey unmercifully.

In early May, my shelter participated in an Adopt-a-Thon, with extended hours and lowered adoption fees. I decided to make a mission out of getting Mickey adopted that weekend. I went to the shelter every day for a week, and worked with Mickey on one thing: sit. He's so frenetic that it puts people off. Few people are willing to look past that bouncy desperation in the shelter kennels and take him outdoors to the exercise yards, where they can get a better idea of what he's really like. I thought that if I could teach him to offer a sit behind the kennel gate instead, maybe someone would give him a second look.

It didn't work. I mean, I succeeded in teaching him to offer a sit when you looked at him – which impressed the shelter staff, who regarded him as a short-attention-span-nutjob – but nobody took the bait.

May and June were busy for me, and I wasn't able to get to the shelter much. In late June, however, I organized an orientation for prospective shelter volunteers, and made several visits to the shelter to prepare. As it happened, I walked through the adoption kennels and chanced to see Mickey. I hadn't seen him since the Adopt-a-Thon two months prior, and was saddened to see him still in the

shelter. But he wasn't sad to see me! He leaped about barking for a moment, as he always has, but suddenly he recognized me – and *he sat*. And *held* that sit, wiggling but solid.

I practically burst into tears. What a good dog! What a smart boy! What self-control! I *had* to make finding a home for Mickey my mission again.

A couple days later, I was making a planned trip to the Bay Area, and spontaneously decided to bring Mickey with me. I figured I would introduce him to anyone and everyone I knew in my former home town, in hopes of finding someone who might be looking for an odd-looking, high-energy, but whip-smart little dog. Happily, one of my friends and her family fell in love with Mickey. They needed some time to prepare their home for the arrival of a second dog, so I brought Mickey home with me for a week or so, until I could deliver him to them again.

It's hard to imagine why this dog has been up for adoption for almost a *year* when he's so sweet, smart, and quick to learn. He's been a good guest, and has learned all sorts of good manners behaviors (waiting at doors, not jumping on laps unless invited, no barking at passers-by). He's added "down" to his repertoire of offered behaviors. But I'm overjoyed to see him go to a great home – and determined not to (somehow) let any other shelter ward languish in those kennels so long. Best of luck, Mickey!

NK



Positive Pedi-Pedi's

Three force-free nail-trimming procedures to try on your dog.

BY PAT MILLER, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

Nail-trimming used to be so simple. You found a stalwart friend or family member to restrain your dog tightly while you quickly clipped his nails in spite of his struggles, trying not to “quick” him (by cutting a nail too short and making it bleed), which made him struggle harder each time. If you ran out of stalwart friends, you started dropping your dog off at your vet’s office for nail clipping – out of sight, out of mind! He came back seemingly none the worse for wear – until your vet told you that they would need to start sedating him to trim his nails, after he tried to bite one of the techs. Hmm . . . maybe not so simple after all.

For owners and trainers who have come to value relationships with dogs that are based on cooperation rather than coercion, forcible-restraint nail-trims are a thing of the past. Muscle-power has given way to brain-power as the primary tool for clipping canine nails. Our job, as humans who choose to live our lives in

peaceful partnership with our dogs, is to make creative use of our grey matter to figure out how to get our canine companions to enjoy nail trimming – or at least to be relaxed and cooperative about it.

When positive reinforcement was new to the dog training world, we hadn’t yet gotten creative with the nail-

trimming challenge; we almost always used counter-conditioning to convince the dog that nail trimming was a good thing. Since then, smart trainers have come up with *new* ideas; these days there’s even less justification for manhandling your dog into submission for his pedicure. At my spring 2012 Peaceable Paws Behavior Modification Academy, trainers implemented three distinctly different methods to help their dogs overcome an aversion to nail trimming. Check them out!

1 COUNTER-CONDITIONING FOR CONVENTIONAL NAIL-TRIMMING

There is nothing wrong with using this old standby to help your dog love a pedicure. It’s the method selected by Academy trainer Valerie Balwanz of the Dogg House, Charlottesville, Virginia, for her Beagle-mix, Trixie.

Classical conditioning, also called Pavlovian conditioning, is a long-established principle of behavior science: creating an association between two stimuli in order to affect behavior. Many dogs are classically conditioned to *dislike* nail trimming, thanks to the scary restraint and accidental nail-quicking.

Counter-conditioning pairs nail trimming with one or more things your dog loves, so he comes to associate the procedure with *good* things instead of bad. A counter-conditioning protocol might start with simply picking up the clippers (or grinder) in one hand and feeding the dog a very high value treat from the other – and this is repeated until the act of picking up the clipper makes your dog’s tail wag and eyes light up as he searches for the expected goodie. You gradually move the clipper toward the dog, eventually touching him with it, all the while working to maintain the positive association: nail clipper/grinder makes really good stuff happen!

A separate, equally important procedure includes conditioning the dog to love having you touch (and eventually hold) his paw. Finally, you put the two together – the now-beloved clippers touch the now-comfortably-held paw – and eventually, a nail is clipped. (See “Counter-Conditioning for Nail Trimming,” next page.)

Valerie used counter-conditioning with Trixie, who had long been sensitive

Valerie Balwanz uses counter-conditioning to change her dog’s response to the stimuli of nail clippers, having her paw held, and finally, having her nails clipped.



to having her paws touched. By Day 5 of the Academy, Trixie was offering her paw to be held, and gaining a positive association with the clippers. Valerie continued with her training, and reports that she is now trimming Trixie's nails with ease.

2 COUNTER-CONDITIONING FOR NON-TRADITIONAL TRIMMING

Somewhere along the line, dog people decided it was necessary to hold a dog's paw securely (tightly) in order to trim the nails. But it really isn't so. You can teach your dog to voluntarily offer a paw and hold it still for trimming – and avoid having to counter-condition the restraint part of the procedure. (Of course, you still have to condition your dog to love the nail trimmer or grinder).

This was the method selected by Academy trainer Steve Buckmann of Bloomington, Indiana, with his foster

Steve Buckman used "shaping" to teach his dog, Apple, to lie down with her paws on his leg, and then to accept the touch of clippers on her nails, and then to accept restraint-free nail clipping in this position.

dog Apple, a lovely young hound. Steve sat on the floor next to Apple, and used "shaping" (reinforcing small pieces of the behavior to build the complete behavior) to teach her to place her paws on his leg. (For more information about shaping, see "The Shape of Things to Come," WDJ March 2006.) In that position her nails were easy to clip. By Day 5 of the Academy, Steve was happily and carefully clipping his cooperative dog's nails.

This is also the method I use with my Corgi, Lucy, who used to hate the *sight* of the clippers. I used counter-conditioning to help Lucy overcome her strong dislike of being touched on her



legs and body. After we had completed her paw/nail clipper-touch protocol, I did the following:

- Told Lucy to "Down" and "Wait."

A COUNTER-CONDITIONING PROTOCOL FOR NAIL TRIMMING

1 Determine the location of touch your dog can tolerate without reacting fearfully or aggressively. Perhaps it's her shoulder, perhaps her elbow, or maybe her knee. She should be a little worried, but not growl or try to move away. This is called the threshold.

2 With your dog on-leash, touch her briefly and gently at threshold. The instant your dog notices the touch, start feeding bits of chicken, non-stop.

3 After a second or two, remove the touch and stop feeding chicken.

4 Keep repeating steps 1-3 until touching at that location for 1-2 seconds consistently causes your dog to look at you with a happy smile and a "Yay! Where's my chicken?" expression. This is a conditioned emotional response (CER) – your dog's association with the brief touch at that location is now positive instead of negative.

5 Now increase the intensity of the stimulus by increasing the length of time you touch her at that same location, a few seconds at a time, obtaining a new CER at each new time period before increasing the time again. For example, several repetitions at 2-4 seconds, until you get consistent "Yay!" looks, then several repetitions at 4-8 seconds, then several at 8-12 seconds, etc., working for that consistent CER at each new duration of your touch.

6 When you can touch her at that spot for any length of time with her in "Yay" mode, begin to increase the intensity of stimulus again, this time by moving your hand to a new location, 1-2 inches lower than your initial threshold. I suggest starting at your initial touch location and sliding your hand to the new spot, rather than just touching the new spot. Continue with repetitions until you get consistent CERs at the new location.

7 Continue gradually working your way down to your dog's paw, an inch or two at a time, getting solid CERs at each spot before you move closer to the paw.

8 When you get below the knee, also add a gentle grasp and a little pressure; each is a separate step in the CC&D procedure. Continue working down the leg, all the way to the paw.

9 When you can touch grasp, and put pressure on the paw, add lifting the paw.

10 If your goal is *happy* nail trimming, start the process over, this time with the nail clipper or grinder in hand. Show the clipper to your dog and feed a treat, again and again, until the appearance of the clipper or grinder elicits a "Yay!" response. Then counter-condition the clipper action (squeezing the clippers) or the sound of the grinder. Go through the whole touch sequence again, this time with the clipper in your hand, also touching her with the clipper, then again while you squeeze the clipper. Remember that you are still feeding yummy treats and obtaining CERs throughout the whole process. When you can hold her paw and make the clipper action right next to her nail with a happy response, clip one nail, feed *lots* of treats, and stop. Do a nail a day until she's happy with that, then advance to two nails at a time, then three, until you can clip all her nails in one session.

The more complex the stimulus, the more successful the dog's avoidance or aggressive strategies have been, and the more intense the emotional response, the more challenging the behavior is to modify. Take your time. Be patient. A few more weeks – or months – of long nails isn't going to hurt anyone, and the result – a canine family member who willingly participates in the nail trimming procedure – is well worth the effort.

(When she lies down her nails are more accessible than when she sits.)

- Placed a yummy treat 12 inches in front of her nose.
- Clipped one nail.
- Told her “Take it!” so she could jump up and eat the treat.
- Repeated the previous steps for the next nail.

She now adores the nail clipping procedure, and I clip multiple nails in between “Take it!” cues, always keeping it random so she never knows which nail clip will result in the “Take it!” cue.

3 OPERANT CONDITIONING FOR NAIL TRIMMING

Perhaps your dog truly hates the nail clippers, a grinder sends him trembling under the bed, and he’d prefer you leave his paws alone, thank you. You may want to select a nail-trimming procedure that requires neither restraint nor clippers by teaching him to file his own nails.

Positive trainer M. Shirley Chong of

Grinnell, Iowa, suggests this method: Teach your dog to paw at a sandpaper-covered board to file his *own* nails. (See “Canine Emery Board Training,” below.) Shaping a dog to file his own front paws is pretty simple. I had already done this procedure with my Scorgidoodle, Bonnie, who loves shaping games and hated nail trimming, despite lots of counter-conditioning work.

Bonnie quickly became quite adept at filing her own front nails, but I had never pursued shaping a scraping behavior with her *hind* paws. Academy student Gina Burger, of Carthage, Missouri, elected to try this with Bonnie.

It proved to be a challenge. If your dog scrapes his hind paws on the ground after eliminating, you can capture the behavior with a click and treat as he scrapes. Bonnie doesn’t scrape.

She was, however, happily willing to move her hind feet in all sorts of ways. Gina tried putting emery boards flat on the floor, and then at various angles to try to elicit even a tiny scraping motion. The scrape proved to be elusive. Gina tried getting Bonnie to back up and then move forward. She tried clicking Bonnie for moving sideways, and reinforcing her

for moving straight. The week ended without success for the hind-foot nail-filing project. (Gina did, however, pass the course!)

I have since reconsidered the exercise. In my own shaping sessions with Bonnie, I’ve determined that an actual “scrape” isn’t necessary – just movement that occurs while the nail is in contact with the abrasive paper. Bonnie moves side-to-side, wagging her tail and filing her nails in the process. Success!

Cooperation rather than coercion. Partnership rather than conflict. Voluntary participation rather than submission to force. Wagging, happy dogs rather than fearful, shut-down ones. What more could a dog – or a human – want? 🐾

Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC, is WDJ’s Training Editor. She lives in Fairplay, Maryland, site of her Peaceable Paws training center, where she offers dog training classes and courses for trainers. Pat is also author of many books on positive training. See page 24 for more information.



CANINE EMERY BOARD TRAINING

According to trainer M. Shirley Chong, the easiest way to trim a dog’s nails is to have dogs trim their *own* nails. Chong says, “It’s easy! Find a board about 8-12 inches wide (the wider the dog, the wider the nail file needs to be) and about 24-36 inches long. At a hardware store, get some of the stick-on tape that is used on wooden steps to make them slip-proof. It’s rough, like extremely coarse sandpaper, and the adhesive lasts through anything. Cover the board with the slip-proof tape. You could also use sandpaper. The most important thing is to make sure the edges of the sandpaper are firmly glued down because otherwise the dog will peel it up. The adhesive used on the slip-proof tape won’t budge for anything. You now have a giant nail file for dogs!

“Teach the dog to paw the board with his front feet. If you can get a paw touch and then deliberately delay the click, you’re almost certain to get a raking motion. Once the dog starts pawing, he usually gets enthusiastic about it! Some dogs alternate feet as if they were digging, but it’s not difficult to get a dog who uses only one foot to alternate.

“Some dogs prefer the board propped at an angle, other dogs prefer it flat on the floor. You can put a foot on one end of the board to keep it from slipping around.

“So far, it’s been a cinch for everyone who has tried it to get a dog

to paw the board with his front feet. Capturing the hind leg kick that many dogs perform after pooping and then transferring it to the board is reportedly not difficult either.

The only caution I have is to put the board away where the dog can’t reach it when not in use; some dogs who are left alone with the board quick their own nails and then get blood everywhere. And oddly enough, dogs do not seem to mind quicking their own nails on the board! My theory is that the sensation builds up slowly and so is not surprising the way it is when we do it. Keep a sharp eye out and stop proceedings when the dog is getting close to quicking his nails.

“If the dog started out with really long nails, the first few times he uses the board he is likely to file the nails unevenly and at funny angles. When the nails are shorter they will even out.

“I’ve been teaching people how to do this for more than 10 years and so far it’s been very easy to train, even with handlers who had terrible timing. Plus, dogs seem to enjoy it a whole lot more than they enjoy nail trimming.” – M. Shirley Chong
shirleychong.com

Safe Swimming

Most dogs enjoy cooling off in a pool or pond when it's hot – but many could benefit from swimming or safety lessons.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE COLMAN

Imagine this: A hot summer day, blue skies, a beautiful lake, and a bunch of friends tossing toys into the water for their dogs to fetch. One gorgeous, healthy Labrador swimming strongly to retrieve a toy that has sailed out beyond the rest. Cue some ominous music as you notice that the dog, who is powering through the water like she is driving toward an amateur field champion win at a hunt test, already has a toy in her mouth. As she reaches the second toy, a large ball with an unusual shape, she confidently bites toward it for the retrieve. But with one toy already in her mouth, she can't quite get hold of the second object, so she diligently powers on, heading farther and farther into the lake with each failed attempt to grasp the toy, even as her owner repeatedly calls her name and uses her recall cue.

This scene actually played out in front of me at an annual retreat that I organize as a dog trainer. That's why, when I realized what was happening, I was as horrified as the dog's owner, Elisa Becker of Malibu, California. "I thought she would hear her recall word and turn around," says Becker. Her dog Julia, a six-year-old Labrador, was obsessed with retrieving. This is ordinarily a good thing, but in this case, Julia's passion was taking her farther and farther out into the water. I knew Julia was a strong swimmer, but I also worried that, given her persistence, she might exhaust herself. Plus, she was heading far enough out to get in the way of the miscellaneous watercraft on the lake.

"I started to panic as she was getting farther and farther out," says Becker. "I just kept thinking, 'Turn around! Turn around!' Then I thought, 'What am I going to do when she swims across the lake?' and I remember feeling myself starting to hyperventilate, and think-

ing I needed to take deep breaths or I wouldn't be able to swim; and I'm not a strong swimmer, so that was concerning me."

I stripped my pockets of electronics and started swimming toward Julia. I knew I'd never catch up to her if she kept going, but my plan was to splash around

and become interesting enough to break her fixation with the second toy.

The plan worked fairly quickly. She turned around so she could see what all the splashing was about, and then finally "heard" Becker calling, and swam right past me on her way to shore, preparing herself for the next retrieve.

"When she finally turned around and swam past you to come back in, I remember thinking that she had no idea of the danger she was in," Becker says. "She dropped the toy and acted like she wanted to go back in, and I knew we were the only ones who were ever worried. She never panicked and didn't seem tired."

DOGS DO DROWN

Fortunately, all we lost that day was the one toy. Not all owners are as lucky. Many dogs do drown, especially when the summer sun finds dogs of all shapes and sizes in contact with backyard pools, beaches, lakes, stock ponds, and neighborhood swimming holes. Water fun can be a great way for pets and people to play together and cool off, but just as specific safety precautions must be followed when children are near water, similar precautions exist for pets.

Drowning ranks fifth among leading causes of unintentional injury and death to humans in the United States. Every day, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 10 people die from unintentional drowning. There

Julia is an enthusiastic swimmer and fetch addict, who is now benefitting from some extra "recall" work, both in the water and facing away from her owner.



PHOTO BY DONNA BECKER

isn't an equivalent government agency to compile statistics for dogs, but various groups have collected some relevant data:

- One pet products company estimates that the odds of a pet drowning are 1 in 1,028.
- Jules Benson, DVM, vice president of veterinary services with Petplan Pet Insurance, reports that about 1 of every 34,000 submitted insurance claims are related to drowning or near-drowning.
- Cynthia Jones, DVM, a shelter veterinarian for the Humane Society of North Texas in Fort Worth, reports dealing with two to three water-related pet fatalities, and lots of water-related injuries, every summer in her former career as a private practice veterinarian.
- Even pool maintenance professionals have stories of entering clients' homes, only to discover a dog clinging to life on the edge of the pool – or worse.

LESSONS LEARNED

Many dogs benefit from a swimming lesson or two. A common misconception is that all dogs can “dog paddle” and keep themselves afloat in the water. Inexperienced (or panicked) swimmers often concentrate their efforts on the front legs, forgetting to fire up the back end. Front-end-only swimming is rather ineffective and uses a tremendous amount of energy. As a result, dogs end up near-vertical in the water, with lots of splashing.

Getting in the pool with the dog and supporting his back-end as he swims a short distance is often a great way to prompt him to begin effectively using his back legs. Using a dog life jacket to help keep him afloat can help anxious swimmers relax enough to paddle with all four legs. As a dog gets the hang of using his front and back ends in unison, the body evens out and splashing becomes minimal.

The “make and model” of your dog can have a lot to do with how effectively he can handle himself in the water. Breeds with broad chests and shorter legs (Bulldogs, Corgis, Pugs, etc.) aren't really designed for effective swimming, and heavily muscled breeds (like many of the so-called “bully” breeds) exert a lot of energy in the water due to their greater body mass. Sighthounds (Whippets, Greyhounds, etc.) often have the double

WHEN TO SEEK VETERINARY CARE

Did your dog have a scary, sinking moment in the water?

“If the dog comes out and he's fine, he'll shake it off,” says Jules Benson, DVM. “You need to watch him for the next 24 to 48 hours, because that's when aspiration pneumonia (caused by water going down into the main-stem bronchi) can occur. Especially if it's water other than a pool, where there could be bacteria or protozoa in the water. If they aspirate any of that and it goes into the lungs, the bacteria spreads and multiplies. This begins an infectious process and the dog becomes notably depressed, lethargic, might be feverish and exhibits a loss of appetite. The history of, ‘He fell into the pool,’ or ‘He fell into the river’ can be really useful to a veterinarian.”

“If the dog ingests enough water where he's nauseated or doesn't want to eat afterwards, he needs to go to the vet,” adds Cynthia Jones, DVM. “Most of the chlorinated pool water isn't an issue, but the exertion of trying to stay afloat, plus the stress and the shock of a near-drowning experience, can be a problem.”



disadvantage of heavy muscling plus little body fat to help with buoyancy, especially if they regularly partake in recreational racing and coursing. A well-fitting life jacket helps provide an added layer of safety during water play.

EASY DOES IT

Swimming is a great way for dogs to burn off excess energy, stay in shape and even shed some unwanted pounds. When swimming an overweight dog, be sure to check with your veterinarian first and be careful not to overdo it. The more overweight the dog, the more quickly he will tire. Start slowly and gradually increase the amount of time your dog swims. Similarly, when dealing with dogs who lead mostly sedentary lives, avoid the “weekend warrior syndrome” of too much of a good thing. Dogs, like people, experience muscle soreness and stiffness, and they're counting on us to look out for their best interests. Even dogs who love the water often need to be forced to take a break. Always be on the lookout for signs of fatigue (such as when a dog's rear end starts to ride lower in the water as he's swimming) or over-stimulation (in water-loving dogs, this is often a wide-eyed, frenetic pace).

Heat stroke is often a hidden danger

that lurks along the sidelines of water play with our pets, especially during summer months.

“The water play keeps the body temperature down unless they're being exerted at the same time,” says Jones, describing the common scene of a dog running along the shoreline to retrieve. “The dog is running back and forth and getting cooled off when he jumps in the water, but then he's getting hot because he keeps chasing the stick.”

The water helps lower the dog's external body temperature, but the activity, especially on hot days, can still drive internal body temperatures to dangerous – even deadly – levels.

“Once a dog starts panting, owners need to look at the gums and tongue color,” explains Jones. “When the dog begins panting and the gums start getting dark pink, you need to stop. Throw the ball four or five times and then bring your dog in and let her rest in the shade and have some water.” (Note: Being able to recognize the dark pink nature of your dog's tongue and gums requires that you are familiar with the “normal” pink color. Every dog is different. Be sure to learn what's “normal” for your individual dogs.)

Dr. Benson agrees. “The biggest thing

with heat stroke is to be aware that dogs really have no other form of getting rid of heat other than panting,” he says. “Panting causes heat to be lost through the evaporation of saliva in their mouth and on their tongue. My general advice is not to have pets out in direct summer sunlight during the usual times that we’re told not to go out in the sun: after 10 a.m. and before 4 p.m., especially if there’s going to be exercise.”

If your dog does overdo it and is falling victim to heat stroke, signs to watch for, says Benson, include a staggering gait and an overall “drunken” appearance. In that case, it’s time to head to the nearest veterinarian.

“I would always seek vet care for heat stroke,” advises Benson. “The normal body temperature for a dog goes up to about 103 degrees. An internal temperature of 103 to 105 degrees is uncomfortable. Anything above 105 degrees can cause brain damage. You need to get to a vet to make sure everything is okay, and if the temperature is above 105, the vet can give IV fluids and help cool the dog down properly.” While en route, wet towels along the back of the neck, groin and armpit areas (sites of major blood vessels), with a fan blowing over them, is one of the best ways to begin cooling



LIFE JACKETS FOR DOGS:

Life jackets for dogs are available at most pet supply and sporting good shops, but one size definitely does not fit all. A proper fit is critical to helping ensure the safety of your pet.

“When you put a life jacket on your dog, it should fit snug around the belly and chest so that when he’s floating, his head is above water,” explains Cynthia Jones, DVM. “If it’s too big, you’ll see the jacket come up and be floating with the dog resting in the bottom. When that happens, the dog has to really paddle to keep her head up. It’s important that it fit snug across the chest and around the belly.”

A well-fitted life jacket can also be used to pull a dog out of the water, if need be.

This can be a huge help, whether rescuing a dog who fell over the side of a boat or who is simply exhausted from swimming.

A good fit, reiterates Jones, trumps brand name. “I haven’t come across any brands that I think are bad; just ones that are a bad fit on the dog.”



A well-fitting life jacket must help a dog keep her head above water.

the dog. As with people, avoid the “old wives tale” remedy of total submersion in ice water, as it creates too much shock to the system.

UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

If the backyard pool is your water spot of choice, there are several important things to consider. It’s imperative that your dog knows how to safely exit the pool. Even accomplished swimmers can drown while trying unsuccessfully to claw their way out from the edge of the pool.

“I think people would be surprised at the number of pets who drown in backyard pools because they fall in and can’t get out,” says Jones, who says obese dogs, geriatric dogs, and small dogs are especially at risk because of the added physical challenges associated with trying to climb out at the edge if not properly trained.

“The biggest problem (seen in her former private practice) was the old dogs who were blind or partially blind. They’d go outside at night to use the bathroom, not see the edge of the pool, fall in, and between it being dark and the dog not



It's vitally important to teach your dog to enter and exit a pool by its stairs, so she can get out easily even if you're not there.

having good vision, they'd be gone before you know it."

Whenever possible, veterinarians and trainers alike recommend installing a fence around the pool or, at the very least, training the dog to confidently find and use the steps to safely exit.

"People who have a backyard pool and a dog really need to teach the dog how to go in and out of the pool using the steps," says Jones. She also recommends marking the stair area with an easy-to-spot visual, such as a large potted plant, to help the dog orient and find the way out, especially if in a panic.

"Put something where the stairs are, so when the dog falls in and he's scared and turning around trying to figure out which way is out, he just has to spot that one thing to know where the stairs are and be able to find the area of safety," Jones says.

Proper training is necessary to teach your dog to effectively use the stairs or other pool-exit device, such as a ramp or set of pet stairs. If your dog is a willing swimmer, associating the area with plenty of treats, petting, and praise is a

A STRONG RECALL IS CRITICAL DURING YOUR DOG'S WATER PLAY

No matter how strong your dog's recall may be (and we recommend it be quite strong if you're considering letting your dog off-leash at the beach, lake, or river), it's important to remember that the excitement of being in the water, coupled with the potential desire to swim out for a toy or chase a flock of ducks, could result in his recall falling on deaf ears. Prior to fun water play, consider brushing up on your dog's recall with the following:

- ✓ Remember that coming when called is a skill that requires maintenance for the life of your dog. It's easy to find yourself feeling "too busy" to train, but designating just 10 minutes a day to recall training can go a long way toward bolstering the skill.
- ✓ Make sure your training includes teaching your dog to purposefully turn away from distractions in favor of coming to you. Avoid static recalls where the dog sits and waits as you leave, then call him to you. A "real life" recall rarely looks like that.
- ✓ Reward generously every time your dog comes to you. Really invest quality time in the process of rewarding your dog. Combine genuine praise with the types of petting, play, and treats your dog loves best. Imagine that the process of rewarding your dog is the like making a deposit in the bank. You want to make hefty deposits because challenging recalls (especially away from distractions) are expensive. Make sure you can afford it!
- ✓ Consider working your dog on a long line when you first get to the water and aren't sure how your land training will carry over. Long lines are also a good alternative when local laws prohibit off-leash dogs.
- ✓ If you're struggling with teaching a reliable recall, consult a qualified trainer who can help you use positive reinforcement methods to strengthen your dog's ability to come when called.

great way to help establish the habit of exiting the pool at specific points. For toy breeds, consider placing a landscaping brick or two on the top pool step to make it a shorter climb out (or in) for your dog. Additionally, teaching your dog to only enter the pool at a specific spot – such as via the steps – not only reinforces its value, but can also prevent the dog from leaping into the pool and landing on unsuspecting swimmers. Also, when you don't want to the dog to go in the pool at all, using a barrier to block access to the stairs effectively announces to your dogs that the pool is temporarily closed.

Reluctant swimmers require great care and patience when working in and around water. Just because your dog will never voluntarily go for a swim, doesn't mean he gets to skip the safety lesson.

Marsha Rothpan of West Hills, California, knows all too well what can happen when water-reluctant dogs find themselves on the wrong side of the

pool's edge. Her Labrador Retriever, Max, once took a surprise spill into the backyard pool while absorbed in chasing a squirrel.

"He fell in the deep end and was probably doggie paddling for 10 minutes before I figured out why Stokley, my other dog, kept coming to me and acting strange," she remembers. "I tried calling him to the stairs, but he went to the side with a freaked-out, panicked look in his eyes. He reminded me of a wild mustang being roped." In her panic, she managed to haul the then 100-pound dog out of the water. "His nails were gone, his paws were bloody and it was one of the scariest things I've ever experienced with a dog."

The incident prompted her to contact a trainer to come help teach Max to find the stairs. He's still not a fan of the water, and the Rothpan family now takes the added precaution of keeping an eye on the dogs when they're outside and closing the dog door when they aren't home.

SAFE BOATING WITH PETS

Special considerations should be taken when boating with your dog. The importance of life jackets for pets recently made headlines when a 5-year-old Pomeranian fell from his family's boat on the Chicago River near Lake Michigan, and was missing for nearly 24 hours before turning up safe on land.



Well-fitting life jackets are mandatory for even boat-savvy dogs; accidents happen!

PHOTO BY
PRACTICAL-SAILOR.COM

For owners with dogs who love to swim, getting the dog safely back aboard the boat can be a challenge. Many owners underestimate the height difference between the surface of the water and the edge of the boat, and struggle to haul their water-logged dogs in from the water. That experience was exactly what motivated Jim Perkins of Waterdog Adventure Gear to invent his patented Wag Boarding Steps.

"We looked at other products to help our dog board the boat, and as an engineer, I was disappointed with the design and function," he says, noting that some products attach to the boat's swim ladder

or swim step with straps that allow the dog ramp to move and sway with the movement of the water, which can frighten some dogs.

There are a number of water ramps and steps on the market. Perkins says the proprietary attachment design of his product provides more stability than its competitors, and describes his stairs (which are 14 inches wide with a 4-inch rise between each step) as a "more natural, pet-friendly approach" to water ladders for pets. His product debuted in January at the Chicago Boat Show and based on customer feedback, he's already working on a pool version, a version customized to meet the needs of fisherman and duck hunters, and a set of automobile stairs.

When teaching a pet to be safe in the pool, it's absolutely imperative that you take your time and establish your dog's trust. Above all else, never throw your dog into the water to let him "figure it out on his own." Not only can this damage the relationship with your dog, a panicked dog is in survival mode, not learning mode.

For professional trainer Lisa Maldonado of Glendale, Arizona, canine water safety training makes up about 75 percent of her training business.

"The key is to make the pool positive and get your dog on the steps," says Maldonado. "Work with the dogs. When they're hot, they're more likely to want to go into the pool. If they've been sleeping all day and their core is cool from being inside with air conditioning, they're not as likely to want to be in the pool at all."

Maldonado initially outfits her canine clients in life jackets to help them remain buoyant, which, she says, reduces the chance that the dog goes into survival mode, and helps make him more receptive to learning. Her approach involves physically placing the dog on the steps, while leashed, and patiently encouraging him to venture out and explore the pool. As the dog begins swimming, the leash allows her to redirect the dog back toward the stairs if he tries to climb out along the side. Patience and repetition helps condition the dog to return to the steps, bench, or other "safe" area.

"I find out where his weak spots are in the pool and keep working past those," she says. "It's very incremental, but it's amazing to see when the dog knows how to get out." Maldonado adds that, whenever possible, it's best to avoid helping

your dog out at the side of the pool because he'll likely remember that, and you want it to be clear to the dog that the only way out (especially when you're not there to help) is at the stairs or bench.

Another option I've used is to back-chain a safe pool exit by establishing the stairs as the most valuable spot in the pool through a strong reward history, carrying the dog into the water, and having him swim to the steps from different points in the pool.

While some may scoff at the idea of specialty swimming lessons for pets, it's a valuable skill that can mean the difference between life and death.

"It just takes that one time," cautions Maldonado. "You would take care of a human child around a pool. We care about our dogs as much as human children. If you have a pool, either train the dog to be safe, or install a fence around the pool. It's that simple."

We would add, even if you have a fence, it's wise to invest in pool safety. "It just takes that one time," goes for accidentally leaving a pool gate open, too.

OTHER SAFETY TIPS

Even when your dog loves the water and has mastered the art of safe entry and exit when poolside, there are several other key points to consider to help ensure safe water play.

■ **JUST SAY 'NO' TO FLOATING POOL COVERS** – Floating covers are extremely dangerous in homes with children and pets. Countless dogs, even accomplished swimmers, have lost their lives following an unexpected tumble into a covered pool. Falling underneath or even on top of a floating cover is extremely disorienting and it becomes almost impossible for the dog to find his way out. Invest in a safety cover, which fits over the entire pool and is anchored in place to create a physical barrier between the water and those around the pool.



Keep your eyes on your dog's feet!



Here's a great idea: Organize a training session/pool party for water-loving dogs.

■ **UNINTENTIONAL PAWTICURES –**

Dogs can quickly wear their nails down to the point of bleeding as they excitedly race around the pool's exterior. It's important to keep an eye on the pads of their feet as well. Repeated launching from the pool steps can tear up paw pads, especially on dogs who spend most of their time on grass. Hot concrete, stone decking, and hot or rough rocks along the lake shore can also tear up or severely burn their pads. "Every year I see cases where the pads of the feet are sloughing off because they got burned," says Jones.

■ **POOLSIDE PATIENCE, PLEASE –**

It's also important to teach your dog to remain calm when others are swimming. Many dogs want to excitedly race around the exterior of the pool, barking madly while their favorite humans take a dip. If you don't want him racing around the pool in bark-fest mode, try not to ever let him practice.

When you want some dog-free pool time, consider confining your dog indoors where he can't see the pool activity, and give him his favorite chew bone or other consolation prize. Additionally, set up training sessions where one person works the dog (leashed, with wonderful treats in-hand) while another casually enjoys the pool, and reward generously for calm poolside behavior.

■ **BE AWARE OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS BEFORE ALLOWING YOUR DOG IN THE WATER –**

Be sure to take note of (and follow!) local regulations which may dictate whether or not dogs can be in the

water and if so, if they can be off-leash. Pay attention to hazards below the water's surface (such as logs or other obstacles), as well as general water conditions, especially potential rip currents, undertow, or deceptively fast-moving water. Keep an eye out for discarded hooks when near a fishing area, and consider adding a pair of wire cutters to your training bag. Speaking of fishing, pay attention to the birds at the seashore. If the birds are fishing, there are bait fish in the area, and bait fish can often mean that bigger fish, even sharks, are nearby.

■ **DON'T DRINK THE WATER –**

Avoid letting your dog drink excessively from the backyard pool. The same goes for rivers, ponds, lakes, and the ocean. Be sure to always carry plenty of fresh water – more than you think you'll need – when enjoying outdoor activities. While dogs are certainly more resilient to various bacteria in the environment than their human counterparts, Giardia is not uncommon among dogs who visit ponds and lakes. Leptospirosis is also extremely common in the southwest, and according to Benson, has also recently spread to the Midwest and into the north. For this reason, if your summer plans include travel, it's always a good idea to speak with your vet about diseases that might be uncommon or non-existent in your area, but prevalent throughout your travel route or at your intended destination.

■ **POST-SWIM SPA TREATMENTS –**

Be sure to rinse off your dog following an outdoor water adventure. Chlorine and

other pool chemicals can dry out a dog's coat and skin, and swimming in natural environments can result in a dirty dog. Be mindful of areas that tend to remain damp, such as the ears or area under the collar. Ear infections and hot spots are common in water-loving dogs. To help prevent ear infections, Dr. Benson recommends a post-water ear flush with a commercial ear wash or a mixture of half water, half white vinegar to help dry the ear and create an environment that's not conducive to yeast overgrowth.

■ **HAVE A PLAN –**

Accidents happen. Think ahead about what you'd do if you had to rescue a pet from the water. Are you a strong swimmer? Consider bringing a human life jacket so that there's one less thing to worry about in the heat of the moment. Know the location of the nearest emergency vet, and have a well-stocked pet and human first-aid kit in the car. It's also a good idea to learn CPR for pets *and* people.

It's not pleasant to imagine an emergency spoiling your summer fun, but a little pre-planning and diligent training will keep you and your pets enjoying the water for years to come. 🐾

Contact information for canine water safety product and experts mentioned in this article can be found in "Resources," page 24.

Stephanie Colman is a writer and dog trainer in Los Angeles. She shares her life with two dogs, and actively competes in obedience and agility. See page 24 for contact information.

What you can do . . .

- **Teach your dog a proper swimming technique and make sure he knows how to safely exit the backyard pool.**
- **Learn the signs of heatstroke, which can occur even when enjoying water play.**
- **Have an emergency plan, which includes knowing the location of the nearest emergency vet and CPR for pets and people.**



Fat, Lazy, and/or Grumpy Dog?

If this describes your canine pal, she may be suffering from hypothyroidism. Here's how to diagnose and treat the condition.

BY CJ PUOTINEN AND MARY STRAUS

You probably know someone with an underactive thyroid gland; in fact, you may have one yourself. The signs of hypothyroidism in humans include a subnormal body temperature, cold hands and feet, weight gain, hair loss, and constant fatigue. People aren't the only ones afflicted by this disorder, for many dogs are hypothyroid, too. They may seem lethargic, gain weight while eating normal or below-normal amounts of food, seek warmth, and develop skin and coat conditions. But hypothyroidism causes other symptoms, too, and an accurate diagnosis can require thinking outside the box.

Consider Logan, a highly trained search and rescue dog who, at age three, became so fearful that he could no longer work and was going to be retired. Brodie, an agility dog, had normal thyroid test results but was slow in competition and had constant ear infections. Brewser, an Alaskan Malamute, became aggressive and lost his appetite. Ruq, a Eurasier at a perfect weight, became short-tempered, lethargic, and developed entropion, a condition in which her eyelids rolled inward, requiring surgery to correct.

The veterinarians who treated these dogs insisted they could not be hypothyroid because their test results were "normal," they were not overweight, or they had beautiful coats. But the vets were mistaken; treating their underactive thyroids returned these dogs to health.

"Before" – In September 2008, Tillie was relinquished to a shelter. The Sheltie was seriously overweight (62 pounds!) and had skin and coat problems. Diagnosed with hypothyroidism, she was started on medication at the shelter.

METABOLIC HORMONES

The butterfly-shaped thyroid gland, which resides in the throat on either side of the trachea, manufactures and stores hormones that control the body's metabolism. When the thyroid is too active or not active enough, a variety of health problems result. In humans and dogs, hypothyroidism is the most common endocrine disorder; cats and a

smaller percentage of humans are prone to *hyper*thyroidism, an *overactive* thyroid gland. Hyperthyroidism in dogs is rare unless too much thyroid supplement is given, but can be linked to thyroid cancer or cystic nodules.

The thyroid produces two forms of thyroid hormone: T3 (triiodothyronine), which is the active form, and T4 (thyroxine), the inactive form. When T4 is absorbed into tissues, it is converted into T3, but most of the circulating (total) T4 is not available for absorption. The part that is available is called free T4. In dogs, about half of the body's T3 comes from the thyroid gland and about half is converted from T4 by other tissues.

The production of T4 is regulated by the pituitary, a tiny pea-sized gland at the base of the skull. The pituitary is known as the "master gland" because it controls so many hormone functions. Among other things, it produces thyroid stimulating hormone, or TSH, which causes the thyroid gland to release T4.

Every cell in the body responds to thyroid hormones, and low levels can affect multiple body systems. Nearly all canine cases of hypothyroidism are primary, which means they are caused by damage to the thyroid gland, usually by inflammation, degeneration, or a tumor.

HYPOTHYROID SIGNS

Because hypothyroidism affects many body systems, clinical signs are variable, non-specific, and often slow to develop. The most classic signs (significant weight gain, lethargy, and cold intolerance) do not appear until more than 70 percent of the thyroid gland is destroyed. Other



symptoms may appear earlier, such as behavior changes (lack of focus, aggression, passivity, or fearfulness), minor weight gain despite caloric restriction, and apparent food allergies or intolerances.

As many as 88 percent of hypothyroid dogs suffer from chronic skin disorders, including dry, scaly, or greasy skin (seborrhea); thin or coarse, dry coat; excessive hair loss; and offensive skin odor. Additional effects of hypothyroidism can include bradycardia (slow heart rate), constipation, diarrhea, chronic skin and ear infections, corneal dystrophy or ulceration, and female infertility.

One classical finding in hypothyroid dogs is a thickening of tissue, especially in the face and head. The thickened skin produces folds and what is referred to as a “tragic face.” This thickening can occur in other tissues as well, such as facial nerves, causing neurological disorders.

Autoimmune thyroiditis may occur in conjunction with other autoimmune disorders. While the following are not considered symptoms of hypothyroidism, there may be connections between hypothyroidism and megaesophagus, laryngeal paralysis, Addison’s disease, ear infections, ruptured cruciate ligament, pancreatitis, vitiligo (pigment loss), unprovoked aggression, and the sudden onset of seizure disorders.

As many as 77 percent of dogs with seizures may be hypothyroid, although the link between these conditions is unclear. One study showed a significant relationship between thyroid dysfunction and seizures as well as between thyroid dysfunction and dog-to-human aggression. Treatment follow-up in 95 of these cases showed a significant behavioral improvement in 61 percent of the dogs.



IS YOUR DOG AT RISK?

While some breeds appear predisposed to hypothyroidism, statistics pertaining to age, sex, and neutering contradict each other. Many experts agree that the incidence of canine hypothyroidism is increasing and that this condition, normally associated with middle-aged and older dogs, is becoming more common in younger dogs. It is safe to say that hypothyroidism can affect any dog (male, female, spayed, neutered, or intact) of any breed at any age.

Breeds with a definite predisposition to develop hypothyroidism include:

Boxer	Golden Retriever
Cocker Spaniel	Irish Setter
Dachshund	Miniature Schnauzer
Doberman Pinscher	Old English Sheepdog
English Setter	Poodle

The problem is also associated with these breeds:

Airedale Terrier	Irish Wolfhound
Alaskan Klee Kai	Kuvasz
Akita	Labrador Retriever
Beagle	Leonberger
Borzoi	Maltese
Chesapeake Bay Retriever	Mixed breeds
Chow Chow	Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever
Dalmatian	Petit Basset Griffon Vendéen
English Pointer	Pharaoh Hound
Eurasier	Pointer
German Shepherd Dog	Rhodesian Ridgeback
German Wire-Haired Pointer	Shetland Sheepdog
Great Dane	Skye Terrier
Greyhound	Staffordshire Terrier
Havanese	Tibetan Terrier
Irish Red & White Setter	

POTENTIAL CAUSES

The leading cause of hypothyroidism in dogs is damage caused by the body’s own immune system. W. Jean Dodds, DVM, author of *The Canine Thyroid*

Epidemic: Answers You Need for Your Dog, specializes in canine thyroid problems. Dr. Dodds estimates that more than 80 percent of canine hypothyroid patients have an inherited autoimmune disorder resulting in a condition similar to Hashimoto’s thyroiditis in humans. Lymphocytic thyroiditis, which is common in dogs, is an inflammation of the thyroid gland caused by the immune system attacking the gland by mistake.

Most of the remaining cases are caused by idiopathic follicular atrophy: degeneration of the thyroid gland without evidence of inflammation (idiopathic means that its cause is unknown), and

“After” – When Tillie was adopted in late December 2008, she was already down to 50 pounds. But today, with medication, a good diet, and plenty of exercise, Tillie is a happy and healthy 25-pound dog.

Is your dog perennially cold? Tending toward overweight, no matter how little you feed him? A Boxer? These are enough reasons to ask your veterinarian for a complete thyroid panel.

may be the end result of immune-mediated destruction.

Dr. Dodds blames poor breeding practices, frequent vaccinations, immune-suppressing medications, nutrient-deficient diets, and exposure to environmental toxins for today's epidemic of canine hypothyroidism.

Because the thyroid needs iodine in order to function, an iodine deficiency may contribute to hypothyroidism. However, most commercial dog foods contain adequate levels of iodine, so this is unlikely to occur unless the dog is fed a home-prepared diet lacking in iodine. Excess iodine from oversupplementation can also suppress thyroid function and even contribute to autoimmune thyroiditis. Do not add kelp to a commercial diet that already contains iodine. According to Dr. Dodds, excessive iodine resulting from adding kelp to commercial food while a dog is pregnant or nursing can destroy the thyroid glands of fetal or newborn pups.

Although rare, some dogs are born with congenital defects that prevent the production of thyroid hormones. This condition has been seen in Giant Schnauzers and Boxers.

Thyroid tumors are another uncommon cause of hypothyroidism, but unless a tumor affects both lobes of the thyroid and the gland is completely destroyed, hormone output usually remains normal.

Secondary hypothyroidism develops when some other influence causes the thyroid gland to produce insufficient thyroxine, such as when a brain disease interferes with the regulation of thyroid gland activity, or when the gland is destroyed by radiation therapy, surgical removal, or the administration of medications that affect thyroid gland activity.

DIAGNOSIS

To diagnose hypothyroidism, veterinarians rely on several thyroid function tests, including **total T4, free T4, total T3, free T3, TSH**, and tests for autoantibodies **T4AA, T3AA, and TgAA**, which indicate autoimmune thyroiditis.

Thyroglobulin (or Tg) autoantibodies will be high in about 92 percent of cases where T3 or T4 autoantibodies are



present, so tests for TgAA can be used in their place and to monitor response to treatment. About 20 percent of dogs with thyroglobulin autoantibodies but no signs of hypothyroidism will progress to overt signs within one year. Rabies vaccination within 45 days of the test can cause falsely elevated results; giving thyroid supplementation up to 90 days before the test will decrease the result.

The **TSH** test, which is commonly used to diagnose human hypothyroidism, is not reliable in dogs. High TSH combined with low free T4 helps to confirm the diagnosis, but normal or low TSH does not rule it out. The **total T4** screening test also cannot be used to rule out hypothyroidism, as the presence of autoantibodies can falsely increase the result. The most accurate test is the **Free T4 by Equilibrium Dialysis**, although even that by itself gives an incomplete picture.

T3 results are not reliable for diagnosing hypothyroidism. T3 levels are typically normal in hypothyroid dogs. High levels can be caused by T3 auto-

antibodies; low levels are often linked to non-thyroidal illness (NTI).

Normal T4 test results can vary by age, size, and breed – normal levels are lower in older dogs, large dogs, and especially sighthounds – and unrelated illnesses can reduce thyroid levels, as can treatment with seizure medications, corticosteroids, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, beta blockers, drugs used to treat separation anxiety, and some antibiotics. Because circulating blood levels of thyroid hormones may not reflect the cellular and tissue levels of these hormones, dogs with normal test results but with clinical signs may benefit from thyroid supplementation.

At the same time, an accurate diagnosis is important because treating a dog for hypothyroidism that doesn't exist creates new problems.

Sick Euthyroid Syndrome (SES) is often misdiagnosed as hypothyroidism. In SES, dogs with normally functioning thyroid glands (euthyroid) have decreased thyroid hormone levels because of trauma, stress, injury, or poor

diet, any of which can affect hormone levels. The thyroid responds to stress, illness, or injury by reducing thyroid hormone secretion, thus slowing the body's metabolic rate and conserving energy. Because the underlying cause of SES may be difficult to identify, this protective mechanism can be mistaken for hypothyroidism. Examples of non-thyroidal illnesses that can lower thyroid levels include Cushing's disease, diabetes mellitus, chronic renal failure, liver disease, and Addison's disease. When these diseases are treated, the apparent hypothyroid problem corrects itself.

Other test results may help confirm the diagnosis. Over 75 percent of dogs with end-stage hypothyroidism have high cholesterol levels in blood drawn after a 12-hour fast, though this may not be seen in early stages of the disease. Approximately 40 percent are anemic. Liver enzymes (likely due to altered fat metabolism) or creatine kinase (CK) are sometimes elevated. Because other factors can affect these test results, they support a diagnosis of hypothyroidism without being definitive on their own.

Even the weather can affect results, for a ride to the vet on a hot summer day may temporarily decrease total T4 levels, causing false low-thyroid results.

When diagnosis is in doubt, blood can be sent to Dr. Dodds' Hemolife Laboratory, a division of Hemopet. Dr. Dodds will also review test results from other labs with dog owners and veterinarians. She keeps track of normal test result ranges for different breeds and situations, which can help determine whether a low-normal test result might indicate hypothyroidism.

A therapeutic trial for at least six weeks can also be used when there is a question about diagnosis, although improvements may be seen in dogs with SES who are not truly hypothyroid.

TREATMENT

Hypothyroid dogs respond quickly to thyroxine (T4) treatment, with improvements in attitude, mood, mental alertness, energy, activity levels, appetite, and aggressive behavior during the first week or two. Skin and coat problems usually improve within four to six weeks, while hair regrowth may take four months or longer. In most cases thyroid medication is needed for life.

Medication can be given either

with or without food but should always be given the same way because food interferes with absorption and thyroxine binds to soy and calcium. Many veterinarians recommend giving thyroid medication at least an hour before or three hours after meals. If symptoms do not resolve or T4 levels remain low when supplements are given with meals, they should be given separately to ensure adequate absorption.

Soloxine (levothyroxine sodium) is the most commonly prescribed medication for dogs with hypothyroidism. (Synthroid is the same drug's human formulation.) Because thyroid supplementation increases the metabolic rate, dogs with significant heart disease or hypertension (high blood pressure) should be treated with caution.

The typical thyroxine starting dose is 0.1 mg per 10 pounds of ideal body weight every 12 hours (twice daily dosing works best due to the medication's short half life in dogs). Smaller dogs require higher doses for their size, while sighthounds should be given less. In complicated cases, where the patient also has diabetes or an illness affecting the liver, kidneys, or heart, treatment should begin more slowly, at 25 percent of the standard beginning dose, and gradually increase over three months.

Veterinarians report differences in how dogs respond to generic and brand-name drugs; many warn against using generics because of differences in absorption and bioavailability. Fortunately, brand-name thyroid drugs are inexpensive, just a few dollars a month, so there is little economic advantage to using generics. Once a dog is stabilized on a particular thyroid medication, it's better to keep the dog on that product rather than switch from one brand to another.

Follow-up T4 testing ensures that the dosage is correct. The timing of the test is important, as T4 levels will be lowest just before the pill is given and highest four to six hours after. This testing is usually done four to eight weeks after therapy begins. TSH levels can also be checked, for high TSH indicates that the dosage is too low. (Normal or low TSH levels are not meaningful.)



Signs of a too-high dosage can include increased thirst, drinking, and urination; weight loss; diarrhea; panting; nervousness or anxiety; rest-

lessness; pacing; hyperactivity; and an elevated heart rate.

After the initial dosage is confirmed, annual monitoring is recommended unless the dog develops new symptoms in the interim. If a dog has been on thyroid supplementation for some time and there is any question about the diagnosis, treatment must be discontinued for at least two months before test results will be valid. There is no apparent harm in abruptly stopping thyroid supplementation. If possible, medications known to interfere with thyroid levels should be discontinued.

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES

While thyroxine is safe when taken as directed, some caregivers prefer to avoid synthetic drugs and would rather use natural products whenever possible. Natural thyroid extracts made from bovine or porcine thyroid glands are used in human medicine (Armour Thyroid, Westhroid, Nature-Throid, and the Canadian product ERFA are all good choices), but because these products contain both T4 and T3 thyroid hormones, their dosages require adjustment.

Natural thyroid dosages are measured in grains (60 mg = 1 grain), and 1 grain natural thyroid extract equals 74 mcg (0.074 mg) synthetic thyroxine. Thus, 0.1 mg thyroxine equals about 1.5 grains natural thyroid, 0.2 mg thyroxine equals approximately 3 grains, and 0.3 mg thyroxine equals about 4 grains natural thyroid.

Dessicated thyroid extracts cost more than synthetics and larger amounts may be needed. Because they contain T3 as well as T4, they can help the few dogs who are unable to convert T4 to T3.

There are also non-prescription thyroid support supplements that contain thyroid glandular material from which thyroid hormones have been removed. Although these products cannot replace thyroid hormone medication in true cases of canine hypothyroidism, says Dr. Dodds, they have been used successfully to lower the prescribed dose, and may also help dogs with declining thyroid function who are not yet fully hypothyroid.

Dr. Dodds recommends Standard Process Thyrophin PMG and Standard Process Canine Thyroid Support. Other products that include glandular material among other ingredients include

Metabolic Advantage Thyroid Formula, Thyroid Glandular, Bovine Thyroid Health, and Thyrosine Complex (see Resources list on page 19).

Nutrition is a key factor in treating hypothyroidism, and a high-quality diet is crucial. The most important mineral for thyroid health is iodine, which should be present in optimal amounts.

The National Research Council (NRC) recommends about 100 mcg iodine daily for a dog weighing 10 pounds, 300 mcg for a 50-pound dog, and 500 mcg for a 100-pound dog. Iodized salt contains about 105 mcg iodine per ¼ teaspoon. (Unrefined sea salt contains trace amounts but is not a significant source of iodine.) Yogurt, eggs, and fish contain iodine, but the most important food source of this essential mineral is seaweed.

The famous herbalist Juliette de Bairacli Levy considered kelp an essential supplement for dogs and other animals. “I introduced seaweed to the veterinary world when a student in the early 1930s,” she wrote. “It was scorned then, but now it is very popular worldwide.” She credited kelp and other sea vegetables with giving dark pigment to eyes, noses, and nails, stimulating hair growth, and developing strong bones.

When adding kelp or other seaweeds to a home-prepared diet, be sure to consider their source, for plants grown in polluted waters can be contaminated by heavy metals. In 2007, researchers at the University of California/Davis found that eight out of nine kelp supplements tested contained abnormal levels of arsenic. Look for organic certification on labels and check with manufacturers regarding their testing for heavy metals and other contaminants.

Because the iodine content of kelp and other sea vegetables varies widely, there is no single dose that provides the NRC’s daily recommendation for dogs fed a home-prepared diet. If the label doesn’t provide a seaweed product’s iodine content, contact the manufacturer for that information.

Note that raw cruciferous vegetables (members of the cabbage family) can suppress thyroid function if fed in quantity. These include broccoli, Brussels sprouts,

cauliflower, cabbage, kale, collard greens, and more. Another ingredient to avoid is soy, which contains isoflavones that can block the activity of thyroid peroxidase (TPO), the enzyme that helps convert T4 to T3.

A selenium deficiency can slow the conversion of T4 to T3, a problem unlikely to occur in dogs on commercial pet food but possible with home-prepared diets. Ocean fish, turkey, chicken, and beef are all significant sources of selenium, but the mineral’s wonder food is the Brazil nut. The NRC recommends 37 mcg selenium daily for 10-pound dogs and up to 207 mcg daily for dogs weighing 100 pounds. Brazil nuts contain 70 to 90 mcg selenium each, so a single Brazil nut given every few days to a small dog or every day to a large dog can be inexpensive insurance for dogs fed a home-prepared diet that might be low in selenium. Like most minerals, too much selenium can be dangerous, so don’t oversupplement.

Because adrenal exhaustion or fatigue can impair thyroid production, adrenal support supplementation may result in a marked improvement.

DIAGNOSING OUTSIDE THE BOX

It would be wonderful if every hypothyroid dog presented the same obvious symptoms and veterinarians never missed a diagnosis. But hypothyroid dogs come in all shapes, sizes, and conditions, and you can’t always tell just by looking. Here are seven dogs who demonstrate the wide variety of symptoms that an underactive thyroid can cause.

■ LOGAN: TOO SCARED TO WORK

Logan is an IPWDA-certified Trailing K9

(search and rescue dog) active with ATT Search and Rescue Dogs of Virginia. A 7-year-old Golden Retriever/Malinois-mix, he lives with Joanne Kuchinski and Barry Wood in Danville, Virginia.

“After three years of training,” Kuchinski says, “Logan went from being a working fool to being afraid to get out of the car. He would sit and shake. He was scared of everything.”

She was about to retire Logan from search and rescue work when she had his thyroid tested. The result was very low normal. “The veterinarian brushed me off,” she says, “but from my research I knew that low normal might be the issue. I went to another vet who listened to my concerns and put Logan on thyroid medication. Two weeks later Logan attended a seminar and was almost back to his old self. He worked in a crowded parking lot (the same one he sat and shook in) like a champ.

“That was in February of last year,” she continues. “In May he took his International Police Working Dog Association trailing test during a thunder storm and passed it. The instructor, who saw him before and after his thyroid treatment, could not believe it was the same dog. Before his treatment we went to the beach because Logan loves water, but all he did was hide under a picnic table. The following year we went back to the same beach and he ran in the surf, chased a ball in the waves, and enjoyed himself racing all around.”

■ BRODIE: SLOW AGILITY DOG?

Brodie, a Labrador Retriever, has a long string of titles after his registered name (Weymouth’s Scottish Brodie, AXP, OJP, NFP, NAC, NCC, CTL3-R, CTL4-F, CTL3-H, CGC), most from agility, the sport in

Logan, a search and rescue dog, was too frightened to work or even play at the beach until thyroid medication returned him to his confident, people-finding, surf-loving self. Photo by Barry D. Wood.



which he's competed for eight years.

Despite all his titles, says Laura Williams of Old Bridge, New Jersey, Brodie was always slow, and he weighed more than she liked. "In addition," she says, "he always seemed to have dirty ears no matter how much I cleaned them, and his toenails grew so slowly, they never seemed to need clipping."

Brodie's blood test results were evaluated by Dr. Jean Dodds, who determined that as a performance dog, his thyroid levels were too low. "After being put on Soloxine," says Williams, "his coat improved to the point where friends noticed and commented, his nails needed clipping on a regular basis, his ears improved, and his weight came down from 77 to 65 pounds. I attribute all of these changes to getting his thyroid regulated. Also, his energy level improved, which carried over into the agility ring."

Brodie turns 11 on August 5 and he currently competes at the Excellent level in AKC Agility. "I hope to keep running him as long as possible," says Williams. "I think it helps keep him healthy."

■ DIAGNOSING RUQ

Ruq (which rhymes with duke and is short for Amaruq, an Inuit word for wolf) is a Eurasier living with Pam Richard in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

"When we realized something was wrong with her," says Richard, "we had a terrible time getting a diagnosis. Ruq's problems included a very delicate digestive system with frequent diarrhea, plus hair loss and lethargy. She went from being a social, playful dog to being short-tempered and uninterested in play.

"The vet we were seeing did not recommend thyroid testing. I eventually took Ruq to a holistic vet and asked about her thyroid based on

Despite her hair loss, lethargy, and low thyroid's classic "tragic face" (see inset photo) no one thought Ruq was hypothyroid because she wasn't overweight. Today she's active, healthy, and has a lovely coat.



Brodie was slow and heavy, plus his ears were always dirty. No more! He competes, at age 10, at the Excellent level in AKC Agility. Photo by Rich Knecht.

research I had done. Her blood was sent to Dr. Dodds, and in November 2008 she was diagnosed with hypothyroidism. We began giving her 0.4 mg of Soloxine twice a day."

One reason it took so long for Ruq to be diagnosed was that she was never overweight. She was her heaviest at 57 pounds, only two pounds more than her optimum 55 pounds. "I think the fact that she eats a home-prepared diet may have helped keep her weight under control despite the thyroid problem," says Richard, "but that was a disadvantage when we were looking for answers."

By 2008, when she was finally diagnosed, Ruq had developed the symptom known as "tragic face," and she eventually had surgery for entropion, which Richard thinks may have been a result of the change in her facial muscle structure caused by hypothyroidism.



Thanks to her medication, Ruq is once again a playful, amusing dog. She no longer suffers from chronic indigestion or diarrhea, and despite being almost eight, she acts like a puppy. "I am so happy to have my girl back!" exclaims Richard. "I have used Ruq's story to urge people to screen their dogs for hypothyroidism, as it is so much better to receive an early diagnosis."

■ BREWSER: ATYPICAL SIGNS

In 2007, Brewser, a 3-year-old Alaskan Malamute belonging to Lisa Jones of Uxbridge, Massachusetts, was a sociable, happy dog who played well with other dogs and people, worked as a therapy dog, and earned titles in Rally. He was working on his AKC Companion Dog (CD) title when, according to Jones, he suddenly became dog-aggressive. "He never hurt another dog, not even in day care where they were all loose together, but he growled and snarled at them," says Jones. "This took him out of competition. The group 'stay,' which had been his most solid exercise, was now impossible."

Brewser's veterinarian believed the changes stemmed from his breed, age, and a learned behavior from day care.

Jones removed Brewser from day care and began a painstaking process of rehabilitation by slowly building his tolerance for other dogs. She tried clicker training, but he wouldn't eat treats, so she found other ways to reward him. Brewser's behavior improved, and he even enjoyed



Brewser was dog-aggressive, tired, and depressed for four years, but after just 10 days on thyroid medication, his behavior improved and he became playful again.

“He is maintaining a healthy weight of 82 pounds,” says Jones, “and I no longer have to bait his food with special treats or hand-feed him. He takes treats in training and enjoys working

again. He does not want to compete, most likely because I get nervous and he is sensitive to me, but we train for fun. At seven years of age, he is more like the boy I knew from birth to age three.”

■ REESE: WHAT DOES CANCER HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Reese, an 8-year-old Dachshund living with Angel Seibert in Virginia Beach, Virginia, was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2009 when she was five years old.

Reese’s veterinarian removed the tumor but left “dirty margins” in the throat area, so Reese was treated with radiation at North Carolina State Veterinary Hospital, a procedure that destroyed her thyroid gland. “No one mentioned it to me at the time,” says Seibert. “I was just happy that the cancer was gone. She gained a lot of weight and never acted as though she felt very good. I just thought she was getting old and that the radiation treatment took a toll on her.”

Reese eventually grew seriously ill. “When the vet ran tests,” says Seibert, “everything came back crazy. Her liver levels were very elevated and her pancreas was abnormal. My vet was stumped but asked if anyone had mentioned that her thyroid might be damaged by the radiation. They hadn’t, but we immediately put her on thyroid medication, and what a difference! We didn’t realize how sick she was until she started the medication. She began to play all the time and chased critters in the back yard like she had a new lease on life. She lost six pounds over the next few months and is now a happy, healthy dog.”



■ DONNAGAN: FROM FRIENDLY TO FEAR-AGGRESSIVE

Marion Westerling of Maryville, Tennessee, adopted Donnagan, a 7-year-old mixed breed, from a rescue organization in 2005, when he was seven weeks old. “For the first two years he was an absolute joy,” she says. “He went to training class, got along with everyone, and was a great dog. Then we introduced another dog into the house. We knew it might be a little tough, but we had no idea what was coming.”

Overnight Donnagan became aggressive, viciously attacking both of the family’s other dogs – and Westerling, when she tried to break up the fights. “He bit me four times,” she says, “once putting me in the hospital with a blood infection. Everyone, including my own vet, told me he was just a vicious dog and needed to be put down.”

But Westerling knew there was something wrong with Donnagan, and she kept looking for answers. Finally she found a veterinarian who listened to her and did some blood work. “Sure enough,” she says, “hypothyroidism. Donnagan continues to have anxiety and we watch for certain triggers, but since he went on thyroid medicine, he is a different dog. Six months ago we introduced another dog to the family and after a week, he accepted her and loves her.

“It’s frustrating to me,” she continues, “that so many vets are not listening to their clients. We know our dogs and know when something is wrong. Euthanasia is not always the best answer. I own a doggy daycare and hotel, and when I see a dog come in with a lot of fear aggression, I encourage the owner to take the dog to the vet for a health checkup, especially a thyroid check. I know because I’ve been there.”

■ TILLIE: A GIANT SHELTYE?

Laura Simcox of Louisville, Kentucky, adopted Tillie, a Sheltie, from the nearby Woodstock Animal Foundation. When Tillie was first picked up in September 2008, she weighed 62 pounds, more than twice her ideal weight (see “before” photo of Tillie on page 12). She was diag-

Throat cancer treatment destroyed Reese’s thyroid and caused her to gain weight and feel awful. Now, thanks to treatment, she’s a trim, energetic squirrel-chaser again.



Donnagan got into fights and even bit his owner, but he wasn't vicious, just hypothyroid. Now he's once again a happy little dog who plays well with others.

ear infections but her skin issues had mostly cleared up. Over the next year she ate a low-calorie kibble. In addition to thyroxine, my veterinarian also has her on gemmotherapy, and I add a few drops of the remedy called 'bloodtwig dogberry' to her food."

nosed as hypothyroid and put on medication.

Tillie was Simcox's Christmas present in 2008. "At that time," she says, "Tillie was down to 50 pounds and still had

The plant bud remedies used in gemmotherapy, whose manufacturing methods resemble those of homeopathy, are said to stimulate the body's excretory organs and systems and promote

detoxification. Holistic veterinarians who use gemmotherapy recommend bloodtwig dogberry for the thyroid, using it as an adjunct treatment for detoxifying and strengthening the thyroid gland.

Tillie gradually increased her exercise. "She had a great desire to play fetch," says Simcox, "and she would waddle after my other two dogs as they chased balls. She lay down when she was tired and, as the weeks went by, longer periods elapsed before she had to rest.

"Today at 25 pounds, Tillie is a beautiful shadow of her former self. When we play fetch, I tire of the game long before she does. She has earned her Canine Good Citizen title, is training in agility, and is enrolled in a therapy dog class."

Like the other dogs described here, Tillie (seen in her "after" photo on page 13) could be a poster dog for hypothyroidism – a dog whose health problems were easily resolved once they were properly diagnosed, and whose life was transformed in the process. 🐾

CJ Puotinen lives in Montana. She is the author of The Encyclopedia of Natural Pet Care and other books and a frequent contributor to WDJ. See "Resources," page 24 for book purchasing information.

Mary Straus is the owner of DogAware.com. She lives with her Norwich Terrier, Ella, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

RESOURCES

- ❖ **THE CANINE THYROID EPIDEMIC: ANSWERS YOU NEED FOR YOUR DOG,** by W. Jean Dodds, DVM, and Diana Laverdure. Dogwise Publishing, 2011, \$20
- ❖ **W. JEAN DODDS, DVM, HEMOLIFE THYROID TESTING & CONSULTATION** (714) 891-2022; hemopet.org
- ❖ **NATURAL THYROID PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS**
Nature-Throid and Westroid: (877) 797-7997; r1clabs.com

Armour Thyroid: (866) 927-3260; armourthyroid.com

ERFA (in Canada): (888) 922-3133; thyroid.erfa.net
- ❖ **THYROID NON-PRESCRIPTION GLANDULAR SUPPORT SUPPLEMENTS**
Standard Process Thyrophin PMG & Standard Process Canine Thyroid Support: (800) 558-8740; standardprocess.com

Enzymatic Therapy Metabolic Advantage Thyroid Formula: (800) 783-2286; go to enzy.com and then search for "Metabolic Advantage"

Premier Labs Thyroid Glandular: (888) 498-7485; premierlabsllc.com

American Biologics Thyroid Glandular Supplement: (800) 277-4473; americanbiologics.com

Nutri-Meds Bovine and Porcine Thyroid Glandulars: (888) 265-3353; nutri-meds.com

Integrative Therapeutics Thyrosine Complex: (800) 931-1709; integrativeinc.com

What you can do . . .

- **Help prevent hypothyroidism. Vaccinate only when necessary, feed a high-quality diet, and avoid exposure to environmental toxins.**
- **Learn the usual and unusual symptoms of hypothyroidism.**
- **Work with a veterinarian who will run thyroid tests even if your dog does not display classic symptoms.**
- **Don't rely on a T4 screening test to diagnose or rule out hypothyroidism. Ideally, ask for a complete thyroid panel test.**





PAW PRODUCT REVIEW PAW

Of Dogs and Discs

We asked disc-throwing and -catching experts for their top picks in flying toys for dogs.

BY NANCY KERNS

I used to live with a Frisbee-addicted dog (a Border Collie named Rupert), and a disc-addicted son, who is now off at college (and still addicted). So how is it that WDJ has never before reviewed flying disc toys for dogs?

There is a wide variety of flying toys made for dogs, with different key features for different applications. The overarching concept is to create a disc that flies well enough to inspire a dog to chase it, catch it, and return with it uninjured. Most of us owners want a toy that won't be ruined within three catches between a dog's teeth, but you don't want it to be so tough that it can hurt a dog's teeth or mouth if he doesn't catch it perfectly.

We enlisted three types of product

testing "dogs" to help with the review. The first are disc-throwing experts, including my son; he's co-captain of a college Ultimate team called (get this) the



We included a number of different types of flying toys in our review. From left to right: Lightweight, rigid discs; light- to medium-weight, chew-resistant discs; completely rubbery discs; unique flying toys; and soft, fabric discs.

(University of California) Davis Dogs. He enlisted some of his teammates to test-throw a number of dog discs and report on the products' flying abilities. The second set of reviewers are professional disc dog competitors (canine/human teams). Our third set of reviewers are backyard dogs who love fetching flying things.

THROWABILITY V. SAFETY

Engaging the services of an Ultimate team to test flying discs for dogs is not as bizarre as it sounds. This spring, the Davis Dogs were one of 20 teams nationally that qualified for and competed in the USA Ultimate (USAU) College National Championships (for the first time in the Dogs' 31-year history!).

A special disc is used in the game of

Ultimate – and even though the sport is often informally called “Ultimate Frisbee,” discs made by Frisbee haven’t been used in the game for more than 20 years. Discraft is maker of the official disc of USAU, the sport’s governing body in this country, and its 175-gram “UltraStar” is the only disc used in official tournaments of all levels. It’s far heavier than grocery-store Frisbees, with a thick, weighty rim that helps it fly farther than a lighter disc – and that can bruise your knuckles and crush your fingernails if you don’t catch it just so.

Discs made for playing with dogs are usually much lighter than the discs made for Ultimate. It’s one thing when an Ultimate player hurts his or her hand (or accidentally takes a disc in the face when trying to block a competitor’s throw) in their favorite game, but it’s unconscionable to ask your dog to play a game that can hurt him (even if it’s his favorite, too). If a disc gets blown by the wind or a dog slips as he is leaping for the disc, or he simply miss-times his jump, a heavy or too-rigid disc can break a tooth, or knock him in the gums, jaw, or head hard enough to really hurt. So, most discs for dogs are either very light or made out of a soft material.

That’s *great* for safety, but discs made of light weight or soft materials don’t fly nearly as far as harder, heavier discs – and gummy discs are *really* difficult to throw accurately. This isn’t a problem if you’re playing in the middle of a great big field, but if you are trying to throw the disc in competition so that your dog catches it in a certain spot, accuracy is important.

And if you use fetch games as a primary method for tiring (or conditioning) your dog, you want a disc that can be thrown as far as possible. Also, if you’re like me, with a compromised shoulder that limits how far

I can throw *anything*, you appreciate a disc that can be flung a long distance with a minimum of effort.

In the Davis Dogs’ throwing tests, they found that the ability to fly far was almost always paired with an increased potential to hurt dogs. And, in general, the discs that flew poorly are the soft or floppy ones made with safety for dogs foremost in mind. Fortunately, we found a happy medium.

WHAT DISC DOGS NEED

I was lucky in having the Davis Dogs nearby to test-throw discs; I was even luckier in having disc dog expert Steve Teer nearby, to offer his feedback on various discs. Steve and his wife, Jill, live in Vacaville, California. Steve has been a disc dog fanatic ever since he first saw a disc dog competition on TV in 1998. “I was hooked,” says Steve. “I had an Australian Shepherd, Guinness, who was about 18 months at the time. I decided to see if I could teach him some of the tricks I saw on TV.” Steve found a disc dog club in his area and entered his first competition with Guinness the following month.

Since then, Steve has won numerous championships in every type of disc dog competition with his dogs, starting with Guinness (who passed away in 2011), continuing through Irish (born in 2004 and recently retired from competition), and including Steve’s newest Aussie superstar, Whiskey. His youngest dog, Whiskey recently qualified for the 2012 Ashley Whippet Invitational World Championships at the tender age of 22 months old (the competition will be held in September in St. Louis). Whiskey also won the Freestyle Flying Disc competition at the Purina Pro Plan Incredible Dog Challenge in Del Mar, California, in June.

Further, Steve is just a hell of a nice guy, welcoming to newcomers and long-time disc dog enthusiasts alike, and generous with his time and expertise. He seems to get a special enjoyment from introducing newbies to the sport; it’s a good way to share some of his dog-friendly training tips and philosophy, and his passion for keeping his dogs safe and happy. “These dogs sleep with me and my wife every night; they are our family members,” he told me. “I would never do anything to hurt or scare my dogs, and if they ever show me that they are not having fun, we stop what we’re doing.”

Teer starts his disc dogs as puppies on floppy fabric flying discs, which can be thrown for short distances *and* safely used as tug toys. Short sessions of tug-of-war increase a dog’s interest in and

enthusiasm for discs, so he keeps some of the floppy discs around for tug and for novelty, but graduates a pup to very lightweight plastic flying discs. Like the Davis Dogs, Teer is not a big fan of the floppy rubberized discs often sold in chain pet supply stores; while they have a low po-

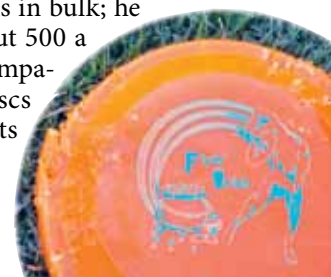


Steve Teer and his recently retired star disc dog, Irish, demonstrate how disc dog sports are done.

tential for hurting a dog, they don’t fly far or accurately. Once a pup or young dog shows enthusiasm for flying discs, Teer introduces them to very lightweight but rigid discs, which are easy to throw accurately and have a low potential for hitting a dog hard enough to hurt him or make him lose interest in the game.

These lightweight, rigid discs are particularly susceptible to being punctured by enthusiastic dog teeth, however – and once a disc has been punctured, it has great potential for cutting a dog’s mouth and a thrower’s hand. You definitely don’t want your dog to catch rigid plastic discs that have been badly chewed – and they are not much fun to throw, either. When a dog bites a rigid disc – especially one of the lightweight discs – it punches raised, sharp cones of plastic on one side of the disc. Catching a spinning disc covered with these sharp projections is like trying to clasp a thorn-covered rose stem; it’s almost impossible to make a secure catch without getting hurt.

When a disc gets too chewed or pierced to work with safely, Teer discards it. That’s why, like many disc dog devotees, Teer buys the lightweight (105 or 110 grams) discs in bulk; he goes through about 500 a year! (Plus, the companies that make discs for disc-dogs events



offer custom imprinting, so when Teer places those orders, the discs arrive with his “team” logo, “Flyin’ Irish.”)

There are alternatives in the form of slightly softer (though still rigid), bite-resistant discs. Companies that specialize in products especially for dog sports have developed some discs that are, in our opinion, *juuuust* right for the average dog owner with a moderately disc-obsessed dog. The rubberized discs resist punctures, but are rigid enough to fly well and light enough to reduce hard knocks.

Of course, dog owners can be fussy and opinionated about gear for their preferred sports, and disc dog people are no different. Some competitors prefer the rigid discs, even if they have to go through a lot of them. Some want to use only the discs used in competition, so both they (the thrower) and their dogs have a consistent experience with the discs. For his part, Teer worries that it’s harder on the dogs’ jaws to repeatedly bite a resistant material. “This is my own theory, and it’s not at *all* scientific: I just worry where all that biting and chewing

energy goes. I’m concerned that the dog’s jaws end up absorbing a lot of the energy of the bite, potentially harming the dog’s teeth and the muscles in the jaw,” he explains. He also hastens to explain that he has no data to support his concerns; it’s pure speculation on his part.

Then again, his dogs chomp on discs *every single day*. For the average backyard disc chaser, the more durable discs are a blessing, since they last a long time without sprouting the sharp plastic “thorns” caused by canine punctures.

WDJ’S WINNER

So, while we recognize that some of these discs excel in certain applications (noted in the individual disc reviews, below), our top pick in flying discs for a puncture-resistant, excellent-flying disc that will best serve to thoroughly exercise a dog without knocking out his teeth or consciousness, is the 145-gram, bite-resistant “Jawz” disc made by Hyperflite, a company that specializes in equipment for disc dog sports. You won’t find them in grocery stores or even pet

supply discount chains, but they can be found in select independent pet supply stores and online retailers of disc dog equipment, such as skyhoundz.com.

The Jawz disc is heavier than the most popular disc dog discs, but lighter by far and more rigid than most of the discs meant for casual dog play and designed to prevent injuries to the dog. Of course – surprise! – it costs a lot more than the lightweight (practically disposable) discs made by the same company. We paid \$16.95 for a Jawz disc, whereas the Hyperflite “Competition Standard” model was just \$3.58 from skyhoundz.com. But then, we expect to be able to use it for a long, long time.

Prices for the “amateur” flying toys varied quite a bit, too. We paid from \$9 to \$25 for the various toys and discs we found in retail pet supply stores, but didn’t find any that really suited either our dogs *or* the Davis Dogs.

One final note: *None* of these flying fetch toys are meant to resist a serious chewing session; do not leave your dog unsupervised with any of them. 🐾



TOP PICK

❖ **JAWZ** (Hyperflite, Inc. \$17. Purchased from skyhoundz.com)

This 145-gram, puncture-resistant disc is WDJ’s top pick for a flying toy that can be thrown far and accurately, survive lots of enthusiastic chomping without developing sharp “thorns,” and won’t knock your dog’s teeth out of their sockets if he doesn’t catch it just so. Used by many disc dog professionals; enjoyed by amateurs, too.

GOOD FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

The following discs are all useful for certain situations, and with a very low potential for hurting your dog. From left to right (photo below):

❖ **SPIN FLYER** (Daskocil Mfg., \$18)

❖ **SOFT BITE FLOPPY DISK** (Aspen Pet Products, Inc., \$26)

These floppy, fabric discs resist punctures, couldn’t possibly hurt a dog, and are great for playing tug. However, they won’t fly far or accurately.

❖ **SOFFLITE** (Hyperflite, Inc., \$6. Purchased from skyhoundz.com)

❖ **COMPETITION STANDARD (CS)** (Hyperflite, Inc., \$4.)

SoffLite is softer and more puncture-resistant than the CS. Both are lightweight (105 grams), but rigid enough to be thrown reasonably far and very accurately. Great for competition; not durable enough for long-term backyard play.

❖ **FASTBACK** (Frisbee by Wham-O., \$4. Purchased from dtworld.com)

The Fastback is the original disc for disc dog sports. At 110 grams, it’s light and rigid. While it takes an experienced thrower to throw it far, it is easy to throw accurately. But the thin, rigid plastic makes them irresistible to most dogs, who quickly learn to chomp right through them, creating sharp edges *fast*.



PASS ON THESE

Too flexible to throw or fly well:

K-9 Flyer, RuffDawg, \$9

Orka Flyer, Petstages, \$12

Kong Flyer, Kong Co., \$12



Various issues:

Frisbee Flying Disc, Nylabone, \$15 (Crazily rigid, likely harmful to dog during catching)



Bionic Toss-N-Tug, Bionic, \$12 (Hard, heavy, potentially harmful)

Flying Squirrel, Chuckit!, \$11 (Difficult to throw far or accurately; irregular shape increases difficulty of catching for dog)

EasyGlide Durafoam Disc, Starmark, \$12 (Durable foam *does* resist punctures, but light disc can’t be thrown far or accurately)



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SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY

- ❖ **Jules Benson, DVM**, Petplan Pet Insurance, gopetplan.com
- ❖ **Cynthia Jones, DVM**, Humane Society of North Texas, hsnt.org
- ❖ **Lisa Maldonado**, AZ Pool DoGS (602) 881-1018; azpooldogs.com
- ❖ **Waterdog Adventure Gear Boating Steps for Dogs**, (877) WAG-2272; getwag.com

TRAINING AND INSTRUCTION

- ❖ **Stephanie Colman**, Caninestein Dog Training, Los Angeles, CA. Caninestein Dog Training offers training for basic-advanced obedience, competition dog sports, problem-solving, and much more! Private lessons and group classes. (818) 989-7996; caninesteintraining.com
- ❖ **Pat Miller**, CBCG-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC, Peaceable Paws Dog and Puppy Training, Fairplay, MD. Train with modern, dog-friendly positive methods. Group and private training,

rally, behavior modification, workshops, intern and apprentice programs. Trainers can become "Pat Miller Certified Trainers" (PMCT) by successfully completing Pat's Level 1 (Basic Dog Training and Behavior) and both Level 2 Academies (Behavior Modification and Instructors Course). (301) 582-9420; peaceablepaws.com

BOOKS AND DVDS

- ❖ WDJ Training Editor Pat Miller is author of *Positive Perspectives: Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog; Positive Perspectives 2: Know Your Dog, Train Your Dog; Power of Positive Dog Training; Play With Your Dog;* and *Do Over Dogs: Give Your Dog a Second Chance at a First Class Life*. Available from dogwise.com or wholedogjournal.com.
- ❖ *The Encyclopedia of Natural Pet Care* and *Natural Remedies for Dogs and Cats*, by WDJ contributor CJ Puotinen, are available from dogwise.com or wholedogjournal.com.

WHAT'S AHEAD ...

❖ TRICKS FOR GIVING PILLS

Five new techniques for sneaking pills into your medication-dependant dog.

❖ FATTY TUMORS

Can anything be done to prevent or treat these unsightly lumps – without surgery?

❖ WALKING HARNESSSES

WDJ reviews the best no-pull walking harnesses for variously shaped dogs.

❖ TOPS IN TREATS

How to find the best treats for your dog.

Steve Teer and two-year-old Whiskey, the latest member of his disc dog team, Flyin' Irish.

