

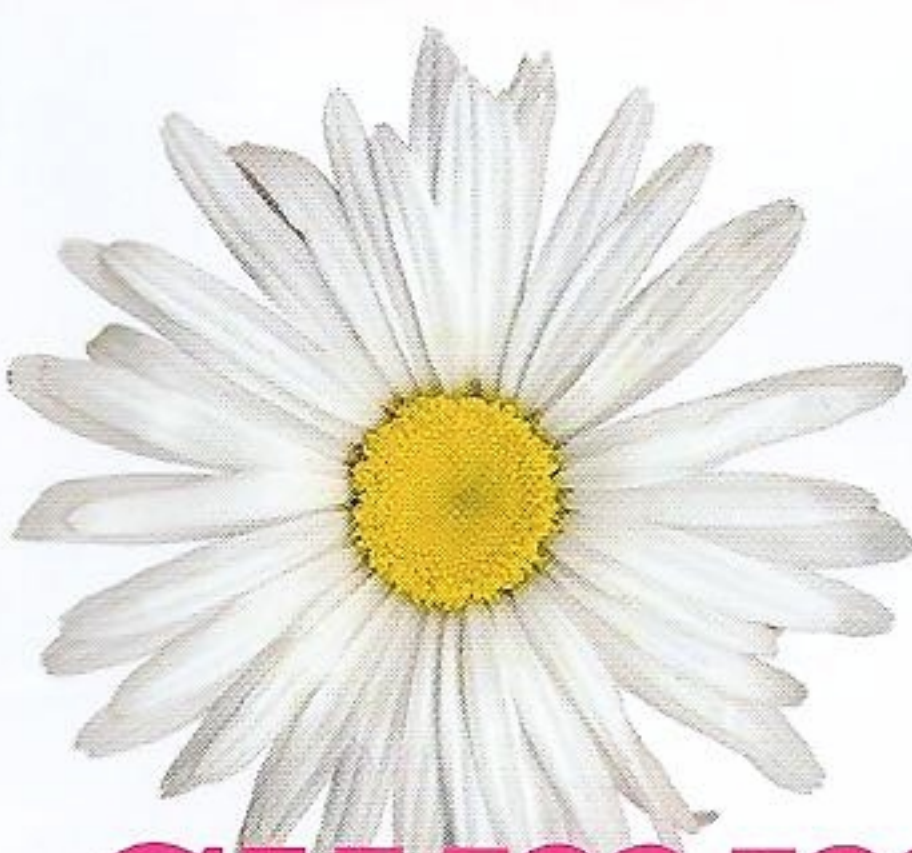
the modern dog culture magazine

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THE BARK

JULY/AUG 2006



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Harvey walked up the stairs after his surgery... and he never missed a beat.

He maintains a wicked Frisbee schedule at the dog park and does everything a four-legged dog does, 'cept he can't scratch his ear.

Lindsey Votava with Harvey



Three Legs to Stand On

Losing a limb doesn't mean losing a life—in most cases, three-legged dogs get around as well as their four-legged counterparts.

By Dana Standish

A really expensive car can go from zero to 60 in less than six seconds, but that car would have nothing on Harvey, a seven-month-old Mastiff/Husky mix who went from an \$85 dog to a \$2,000 dog in less than four hours. That's how long it took Harvey to be adopted from the Tacoma Humane Society, perform a cursory inspection of his new

home on the fourth floor of an apartment building in Seattle, race onto the outside terrace to check out the doghouse and vault over the surrounding hip wall. Harvey hit an awning, landed on the sidewalk and ended up in the emergency room with a badly broken right rear leg that later had to

be amputated. "The vet said they usually try to pin the leg first," says Lindsey Votava, who had fallen in love with Harvey on Petfinder.com, "but with the extent of Harvey's injury it would have been like trying to put together a bag of potato chips."

Votava and her husband, Leif Dalan,

© Martin Kaufmann



Gabe wears a prosthetic device made by Martin Kaufmann of OrthoPets.com.

were clear that having Harvey's leg amputated would give him the best chance of recovery. Trying to save the leg would have doubled their vet bill and meant immobilizing Harvey for up to eight weeks, which would have violated several of the laws of physics. "Harvey walked up the stairs after his surgery," recalls Votava, and he never missed a beat. He maintains a wicked Frisbee schedule at the dog park and does everything a four-legged dog does, except "he can't scratch his ear." They give him glucosamine for his joints and try to keep him from overexercising so that he doesn't injure his remaining limbs. "We have to think for him," Votava says. "That jumping off the roof was how he is. He's a totally go, go, go kind of dog."

It's not unusual these days for a dog to lose a leg, generally for one of two reasons: they suffer some sort of accident or trauma, like Harvey's, or they develop bone cancer or other bone disease. The latter is what happened to Bernie, an eight-year-old Rottweiler whose left front leg was amputated in January. Bernie was recovering nicely from surgery to her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) when her guardian, Tom Tilden, noticed she was limping and not bouncing back as quickly as he had expected. An x-ray showed bone cancer. "The first vet we consulted suggested giving her painkillers until the pain got to be too bad and then having her put down," says Tilden. "We found another doctor."

Bernie's situation is completely different from Harvey's. Harvey is lean and lost a rear leg while he was still a puppy; he was able to adjust immediately. Bernie is a stockier breed and lost a front leg relatively late in her life. "The front leg accounts for approximately 70 percent of the dog's strength and balance," says Sheila Wells, a hydrotherapist in Seattle who works with Bernie several times per week. "That is why front-leg amputees often have a more difficult time adjusting to their new state. The rear can follow but the front has to lead."

Keeping the Tripod Dog Healthy

Wells, who has been operating her canine hydrotherapy studio, Wellsprings, since

1995, has a special fondness for three-legged dogs. When she was a child, her uncle had a Border Collie, Trixie, whose front leg had to be amputated after she got into a jam with a poisonous jellyfish in Sooke Harbour, British Columbia. "My uncle's veterinarian told me, 'Swim her,'" says Wells. Wells saw the benefits of this type of therapy, and a career was born. "Trixie lived another 10 years, during which she raced around like the wind."

Wells says that in her experience, most three-legged dogs are "very highly functioning." Some dogs do better than others, depending on their size (smaller dogs have an easier time), age and other physical problems. "The biggest challenge a dog faces when she loses a limb," says Wells, "is that she has to relearn proprioception, which means she needs to get a new idea of where her body is in space and how to balance; it's like the bubble in a level." The most important challenge for tripod-dog guardians, she says, is to protect the remaining limbs; often people will let the dog overdo it, and that ends up putting undue stress on the dog's joints, which can lead to injuries and arthritis. She recommends that guardians observe a checklist (see p. 48) to keep the three-legged dog healthy for as long as possible.

How Many Tripods Are There?

It would be impossible to determine how many tripod dogs there are in the United States, says Sally Wortman, hospital administrator of Pets Unlimited, a major veterinary hospital and shelter in San Francisco, though she estimates they do two or three amputations per month. Pets Unlimited treats approximately 50,000 animals per year. "We take in animals from other shelters, animals who don't have many other opportunities," says Wortman. One of those animals was Wortman's Clover [see cover], a two-year-old Pointer/Border Collie mix who arrived at the shelter with a badly broken right front leg that had to be amputated. "She was up and running the day after surgery," says Wortman. "She's a very athletic dog. She keeps up with the Greyhounds at the park.



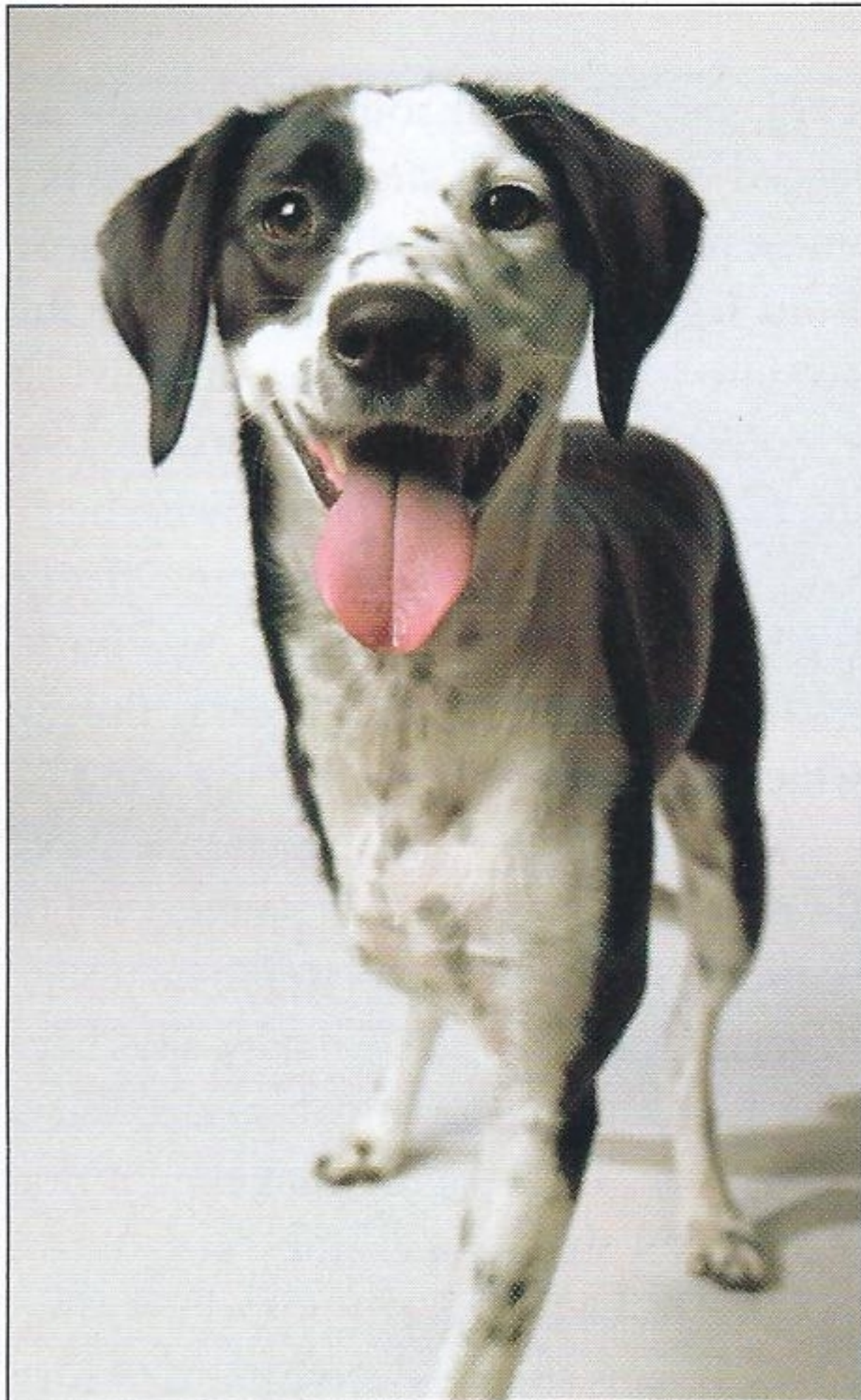
Sheila Wells doing hydrotherapy with Bernie.



Mailee wears a custom designed artificial leg enabling her complete access to her multi-level home.

© Sue Yim

Erik S. Lesser/Getty Images



A Checklist for Healthy Tripods

- Protect remaining limbs
- Put a sock/pad on the “elbow” of the remaining leg to prevent calluses and pressure sores
- Keep weight down
- Take care of skin and pads
- Exercise the dog regularly (walking is good, swimming is best)
- Assist or monitor on stairs
- Monitor activity level and don’t let him or her overdo it
- Give glucosamine, fish oils and other anti-inflammatory supplements
- Maintain a good diet and overall health
- For front-leg amputations, use a car seat harness with wide chest bands
- Invest in a “wheelchair,” if necessary, to help with mobility

She’s inspiring to everyone who sees her.” Wortman says that she has noticed that people’s acceptance of three-legged dogs is growing. “Before, people would have thought it sad that she was missing a limb. But that has changed. I recently met a couple at the dog park whose baby had a paralyzed right arm. They said to me, ‘I wish we could get a three-legged dog so our child could grow up to think it was okay to be missing a limb.’”


“We always try to save the limb first,” says Thomas Mason, director of veterinary services at Pets Unlimited, “though sometimes this is much more expensive and requires more rehabilitation.” An amputation typically costs \$1,200, while it may cost up to \$3,000 to try to salvage the limb.

Before doing an amputation, a vet must decide if the dog is a good candidate. “We assess the animal’s overall physical condition. If the dog has arthritis in the other legs, for instance, he wouldn’t be such a good candidate. Amputation causes wear and tear on the other joints.” Many times, says Mason, a vet will end up taking off a dog’s entire leg, even if the trauma or the cancer is low down on the “ankle” joint. “Because of the way dogs walk, you end up with a lot of problems if you leave

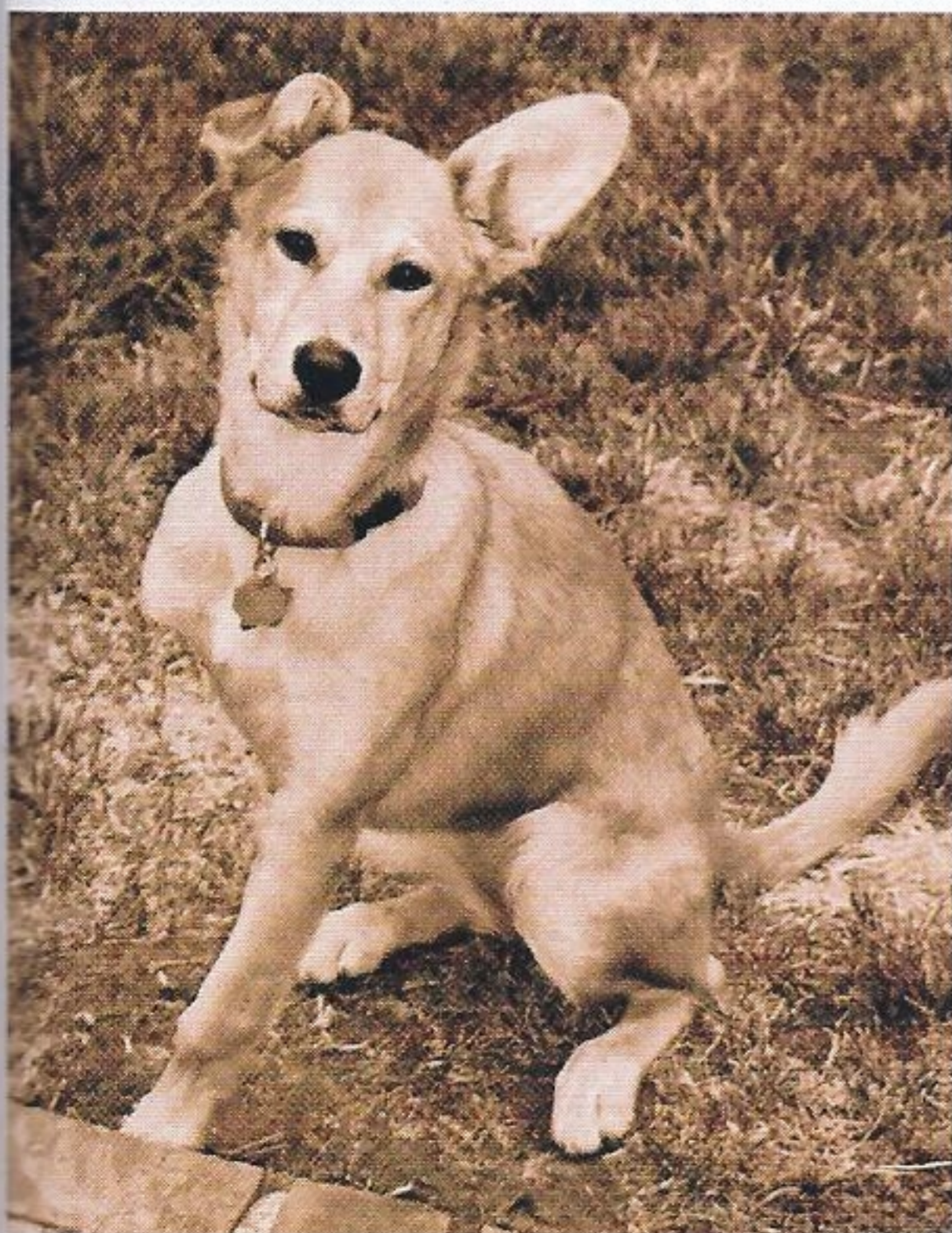
some of the limb. It would just get in the way. Most of the time, amputation is more cosmetically acceptable.”

Martin Kaufmann would like to see a change to this type of practice. Kaufmann, of OrthoPets, makes prosthetics and orthotics for “two-legged and four-legged animals and any variation in the middle.” His goal is “to get the animal world up to speed with what we’re doing with humans.” He began his practice with animals four years ago, after a cousin’s Schnauzer suffered a stroke and lost the function in her right front leg. Kaufmann began studying animal anatomy books and learned that the muscle and bone terminology in dogs is almost exactly what it is in humans. Now, 30 percent of his practice is making artificial limbs and braces for animals, mostly dogs. “When three-legged dogs are brought to me, they are amputated way up at the joint, there aren’t many options,” he says. Too often he sees animals who had cancer in the “wrist” joint. “The vets tend to think of it as a useless limb and amputate way up at the top. That makes it almost impossible to build a prosthesis. We need at least one joint in order for the animal to be able to operate” with a prosthetic limb. Kaufmann explains that since

this is a new field and he is one of only a few people doing this type of prosthetic work, not many vets know of this option. But he is trying to spread the word. "For limb preservation, it's important to salvage as much of the limb as possible, or as many joints as possible." If the limb has already been amputated at the top, he recommends having the dog use a cart to maintain the weight distribution on the leg that's left. "Compounding forces on the remaining leg can cause arthritis from overuse. If the animal loses the remaining leg, what does he have left?"

Whether a dog loses a leg due to trauma or to disease, most often he or she will bounce back and learn to adjust. As Sheila Wells points out, dogs don't have the same stigma that we would have about losing a limb. "Some don't ever notice their leg is missing," she says. "Usually a leg that has been taken off has been painful for a long time and the dog is already used to not using that leg. When they get it removed, their whole demeanor changes because they can run around without being in pain. There's no reason a three-legged dog has to be disabled." 

Dana Standish is a freelance writer; she lives in Seattle with three two-legged animals and three four-legged animals.



Winnie's adopters decided that there was no reason why they needed a four-legged dog.



© Natalia Martinez

Daisy hasn't slowed down much since her amputation.

Helping Your Three-Legged Dog

Depending on age, breed and general condition, most dogs will adjust to losing a leg and regain their pre-surgery activity level. As hydrotherapist Sheila Wells says, by the time a leg has been amputated, "it has been painful for a long time and the dog has been compensating for a long time." You can help with the recovery and adjustment process—see the following resources to find out how.

David Levine's Homepage

utc.edu/Faculty/David-Levine

This national referral site offers links and general information about rehabilitation and physical therapy for animals.

Wellsprings

Seattle, WA

206.935.8299

wellspringsk9.com

Swim therapy and massage promote rehabilitation, and Wellsprings provides both. Licensed massage practitioner Sheila Wells works to build the dog's confidence, increase range of motion, keep weight down and increase circulation to the injured area. This website is a fount of information.

Animal Wellness and Rehabilitation Center

Bellevue, WA

425.455.8900

holistic-pet-care.com

Tejinder Sodhi, DVM, CVC, offers holistic and naturopathic consultations for almost all disease conditions. Treatment options include acupuncture and chiropractic care, physical therapy, Ayurvedic medicine, homeopathy, herbs, nutrition and diet consultations.

Handicapped Pets

603.673.8854

handicappedpets.com

Handicapped Pets provides products, services and support for elderly, disabled and handicapped pets. The website

features links to veterinarians and rehabilitation centers, articles pertaining to disability, and a discussion board for people caring for handicapped pets.

OrthoPets

303.667.2991

orthopets.com

Martin Kaufmann makes custom-fitted orthotic and prosthetic devices for pets. A prosthetic device can help protect the three-legged dog's remaining limbs from arthritis and other conditions.

Doggon' Wheels

888.736.4466

doggon.com

Doggon' Wheels is a small company that makes custom wheelchairs for disabled pets.

Eddie's Wheels for Pets

888.211.2700

eddieswheels.com

Eddie's features custom-made carts that are designed and built to your dog's measurements and specific needs.

K-9 Carts

800.578.6960

k9carts.com

K-9 Carts has been designing and building pet wheelchairs for 40 years. The website includes links to related organizations and tips on nursing care.