

Celebrating life and living with Dog in the Pacific Northwest

CityDog

magazine

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NORTHWEST UNLEASHED:

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THERAPY

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WORKING DOGS

COOL PRODUCTS

DESIGNER DOG
OR MUTT?



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In the Swim of Things

Until I experienced it, I figured hydrotherapy was more for a dog's entertainment value than health. It's just swimming, right? Wrong. Hydrotherapy changed our George's life. Before you write me off as another easily excited dog mom, read on...

George was diagnosed with Cushing's disease. In the later stages of this disease, a dog's body starts losing muscle tissue rapidly. George went from occasional stumbling, to being unable to climb the stairs into our backyard, all within a few short months.

It was our dog walker who first suggested we investigate hydrotherapy. She even brought us articles on the subject—articles just like this one. I read them, they sounded intriguing... maybe even a little fun, but... what could swimming possibly do for a dog with little or no muscle left in his legs?

By the time George reached the point where he couldn't lift himself off the floor, we didn't care if it was hydrotherapy or jello therapy, we were ready to try anything.

Back then, there were only two hydrotherapy pools specifically for dogs in the greater Seattle area—one on the east side of Puget Sound, the other just south of downtown Seattle. Since then, several others have sprung up around the area.

George and I ended up using the one closest to our home (near downtown Seattle). Here's what we learned:

Imagine three hot tubs placed end to end, filled with warm, gently circulating water. Your muscles start relaxing just thinking about it. Place a dog in the water, and they too begin to relax their muscles, while blood begins to circulate through their extremities more freely.

Then think about the natural buoyancy that water gives your body. This "lightness" enables dogs to move with far more ease than on dry land, which can be a real benefit for dogs unwilling to use a painful area due to the weight of the dog's body against gravity (or dogs like George who had little muscle tone left).

Finally, there's the gentle resistance you feel when moving through the water—just enough to make the muscles work, but in a warm, relaxed, buoyant state.

Hydrotherapy is rehabilitative exercise, plain and simple. And it's not just for dogs like George who need to re-build



Photo courtesy of Wellsprings.

Sheila Wells of Wellsprings gently massages Tahoma between swim sessions to speed recovery.

muscle tissue—hydrotherapy has success stories spanning the health spectrum, including:

- Dogs who were injured beyond a vet's expectation for healing
- Dogs crippled by arthritis
- Dogs with damaged vertebrae or limbs
- Dogs who have experienced neurological difficulties
- Dogs undergoing ACL (knee) surgery that would require far longer recuperation time without hydrotherapy
- Dogs with weight problems that experience difficulty exercising on land

Hydrotherapy is also used for maintenance exercise. Not every dog that George met on his way into and out of the pool had a limp or an ambulatory problem. Some looked like weight lifting champions—the perfect picture of health and vitality. These dogs and their people were using hydrotherapy to:

- Increase physical fitness
- Build up chest and overall muscle tone for the show ring
- Keep in top performance shape for conformation, agility, cart pulling, etc.
- Good old-fashioned fun

WHAT TO EXPECT

Working with a trained hydrotherapy expert who has a gentle way with animals is key to your dog's acceptance of hydrotherapy and success in the pool. In

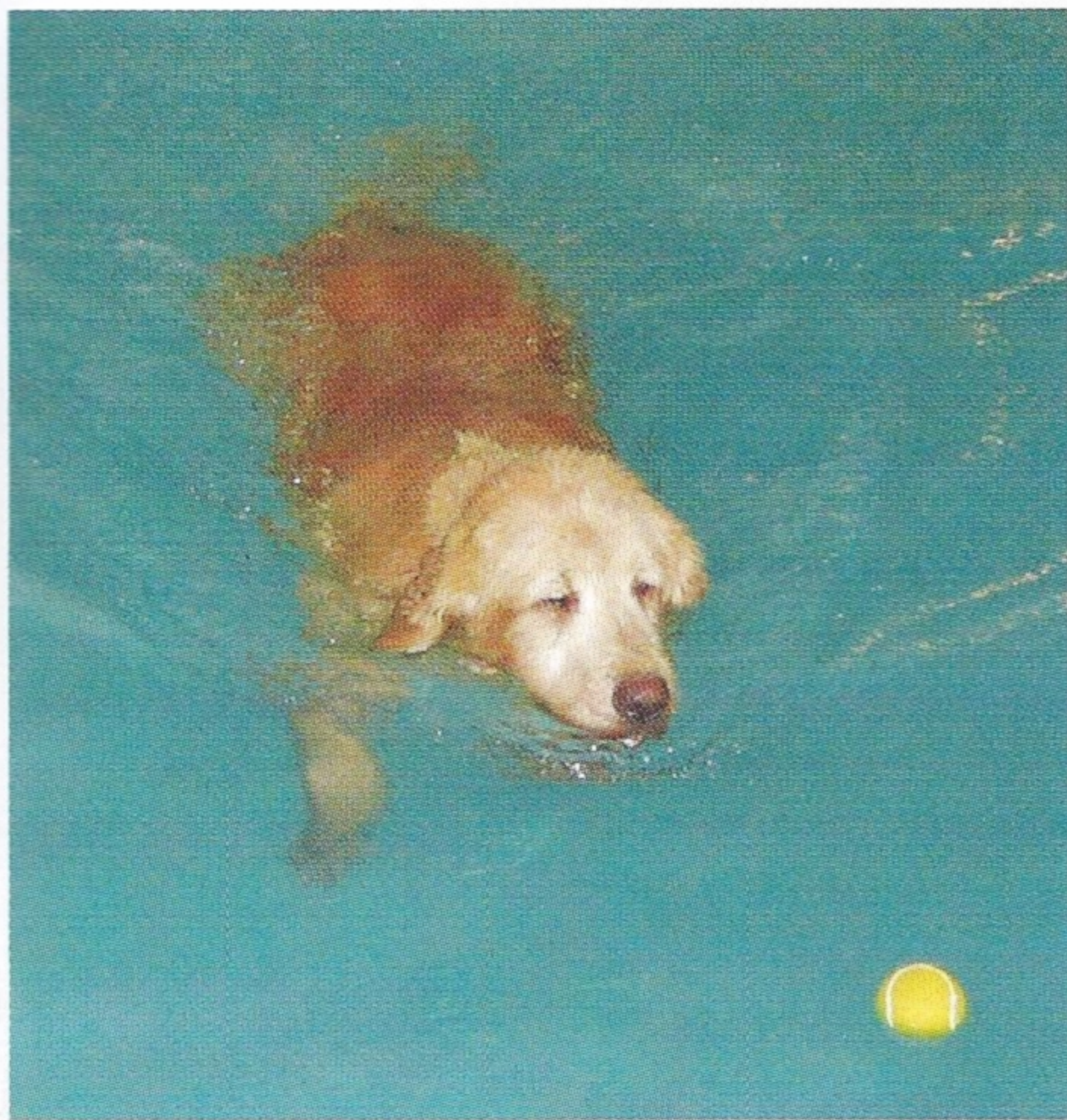


Photo courtesy of Heavenly Spa.

With the aid of hydrotherapy, Chase is a hip surgery and cancer survivor.

Washington State, hydrotherapists are required to be licensed as both a human and animal massage practitioner. The owner of the hydrotherapy location I chose has also been a nurse and veterinary technician in her previous careers.

No matter who you choose, the first step is to introduce the dog to the water as comfortably and gently as possible. Not all dogs are born loving the stuff, some require a reassuring touch to get them to recognize just how wonderful it feels to be held in warm water. Some are unable to get into the pool because of their physical disabilities, and require a helping hand. Some hydrotherapy locations have a sling and pulley system for just that purpose—especially helpful for large dogs that can't be lifted easily.

Once the dog is accustomed to the water, the hydrotherapist assesses the dog's range of movement. With George, this involved noting where his tendons and muscles had shrunk and how tight they had become, all of which were preventing normal movement.

Next, the dog is gently guided through some initial stretching movements, much the way an athlete prepares to exercise. If the dog has progressed comfortably to this point, swimming therapy can begin.

Some dogs love toys, and will do a full hour session paddling after a ball. Then there was George, who would sooner eat a toy than play with it. Fortunately, treats are always in abundance at the pool, which was all the motivation for exercise George needed.

For dogs that are ready to begin a more vigorous workout, the hydrotherapy pool has two optional jets, which can be turned on individually to create more resistance for swimming. Some pools provide an optional harness that allows you to position your dog where the jets can be most effective for a workout.

At key resting points during and after the swim, a good hydrotherapist will perform massage to encourage muscle recovery, blood circulation, and to treat any mild muscle spasms that may arise from exercising.

SELF-SWIMMING OPTION

All hydrotherapy locations encourage dog parents to “self-swim” with their dogs. If this option is convenient for you, the hydrotherapist will take time during the “swim” portion of the session to teach you what to do, where to support your dog to allow for best movement during exercise, as well as various tips and tricks to keep your dog's workout comfortable and productive.

The result? A once disabled, lethargic George regained all of his old enthusiasm for life (and then some). After only a few hydrotherapy sessions, George was moving better than he had in months, and within weeks he was once again climbing stairs and getting into mischief as much as he pleased.

In summary, most dogs can benefit from some form of hydrotherapy. It's a surprisingly effective approach to improve your dog's health and happiness. 🐾