

**DIVING DOGS**

Teaching your dog to swim can provide an array of benefits, including relief from arthritis and greater agility along with pure doggy joy.

Dog Paddle

A WILTON DOG SHARES HIS SWIMMING STORY // **BY DUNCAN HARRIS**

» MY NAME is Duncan aka Dunkie-doo. I'm a dog. A yellow Labrador, to be precise. Okay, full disclosure, I'm really a Labrador mix from a shelter in South Carolina. My human mom, fell in love with my picture online seven years ago and filled out the adoption paperwork for me on the spot. Along with my human dad, and my human brother, the four of us have been a pack ever since. We're family.

They feed me, sneak me treats, and take me for long walks and on trips to the dog park. I've been on vacations

with them and at home, I enjoy chasing wild turkeys, crows, and deer on our property. I sleep a lot—easily more than half the day—and can be found snoozing on my parents' or brother's bed, in the guest room (I like the late afternoon sun there), or reclining on one of the couches. It's a dog's life! My family also has a swimming pool where I love to do my laps.

Recently, during an outing to Cranberry Park, I was surprised to learn many of my buddies don't, or can't, swim. So I grabbed my leash and my Dad and I and headed over

Dog Gone Smart—a canine training, agility, and boarding facility in Norwalk, which also has a pool for pups—to learn more.

"We have group swims for doggie daycare, introductory puppy swims, and private lessons for dogs needing more specific exercise or training," says DGS Director, Jaimee Kelsey. "It is the most fun in the world to see 20 dogs running, jumping, splashing, and swimming in the pool like a bunch of kids."

Indeed, DGS lead swim instructor, Pierce Onthank, says his work with dogs really

focuses on the same issues as the ones you humans face when getting in the water: anxiety, comfort, and practice. "Just like people, almost all dogs can swim—physically speaking, some more naturally than others—but just because a breed might be called a 'water dog' doesn't mean they can swim, or even like the water. You have to acclimate them and encourage them to enjoy the water before they become comfortable swimmers."

Jackson, a compact Border Terrier who has been swimming here for three years,

is a testament to that. His adopted mom, Diane De-Nardo, drives him over from Greenwich every week to make sure Jackson not only gets the exercise he needs, but also stays safe around the water, since he spends his days with her at the marina where she works.

"He's my life," says Diane. "He follows me around the docks, and it's really easy for a dog to get distracted or fall in, so I want to make sure he is okay at all times. Some people are amazed when I say he takes swimming lessons, but he's also very high energy and this really conks him out. He's bouncing around in the car

when we come to swim class, but afterwards, he sleeps all the way home."

Jackson explains that he started out wearing a puppy life vest to help him float and then practiced his jumps and dog paddle before graduating to become an accomplished diver and retriever. He also says he's never happier than when he's in the water.

I also met a striking 12-year-old Bouvier des Flanders, appropriately named Jackie. Over the years, Jackie has developed debilitating arthritis. Her vet suggested that gentle, non-weight-bearing exercise could help her condition, so Ellen Valente, her

mom, regularly brings Jackie to Norwalk to get in some therapeutic pool time.

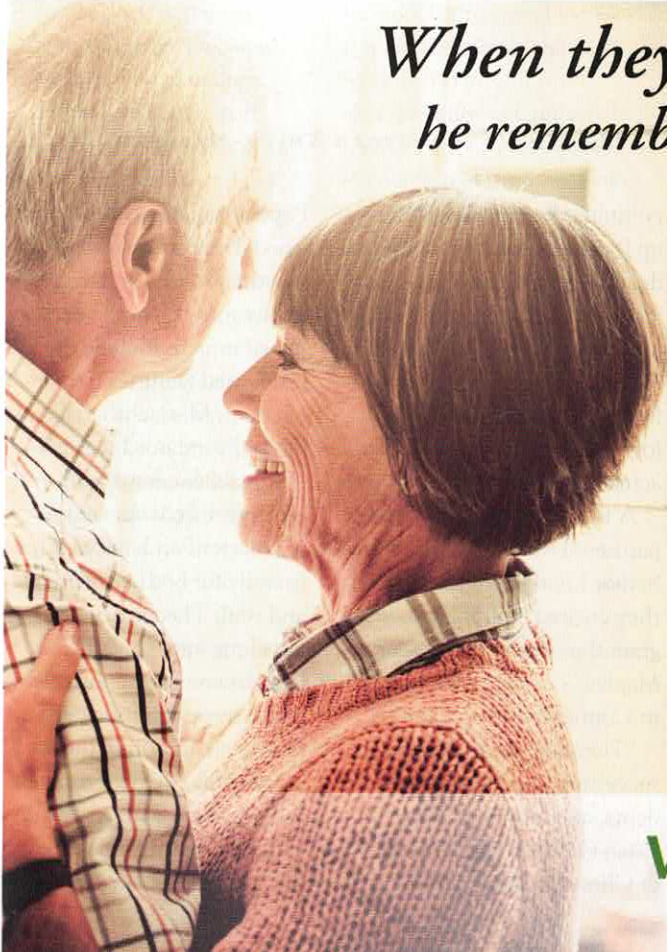
"This is the best place ever," says Valente. "They are lifesavers, and it's made all the difference for Jackie. Six months ago, it was so bad that I was worried she would have to be put down, but now she has a new lease on life."

Jackie tells me, dog-to-dog, that she doesn't always enjoy the water, and that it's still a bother going through all of the exercises, but she does like her instructor, Pierce, and admits it's worth the trouble, since she's not quite as achy as she used to be and can now go up and down

steps more easily than before.

"While we're not certified as a therapeutic post-surgery facility—dogs must be cleared and approved by their vets—" says Kelsey, "we do find many of our clients, and their owners, benefit greatly from our swim program. And it's really become an important part of our mission to provide a whole host of beneficial canine services."

So take it from me, if you have a high energy pup, a dog who could stand to lose a bit of weight, or an older canine family member who might struggle with aches and pains, consider teaching them to swim.



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