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the movement issue



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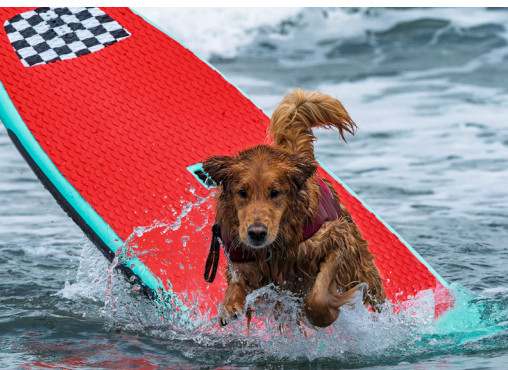
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Reality in Motion

Movement is part of being a dog—and part of being a dog owner. If you have a dog, you're going to move more than you would have otherwise.

Now that could be anything from a short walk to the corner to a sprint through an agility course to a long, steady hike. Movement can take many shapes and forms, and in this issue, we aim to cover as much ground as we can.

We've got stories on dogs moving in ways most don't consider—whether that's due to a dog's **history, breed,** or their involvement in a **different type of sport.**

We also look at how to **get into sports,** the **mental benefits of exercise,** and what to watch for if you're concerned your dog has suffered an **injury in action.**

Finally, the centerpiece of this issue is our annual **AKC Publications Photo Contest**—with this year's theme of "Go Dog Go!" These dogs can move, and our readers captured them beautifully.

Also, I'd like to shine a special light in this space on owners who are still moving with their dogs—even if their dogs are no longer fully capable of moving much themselves. I'm talking about the people you'll find pushing and pulling around strollers and wagons so their dogs can continue to experience the outside world. Now that's moving.

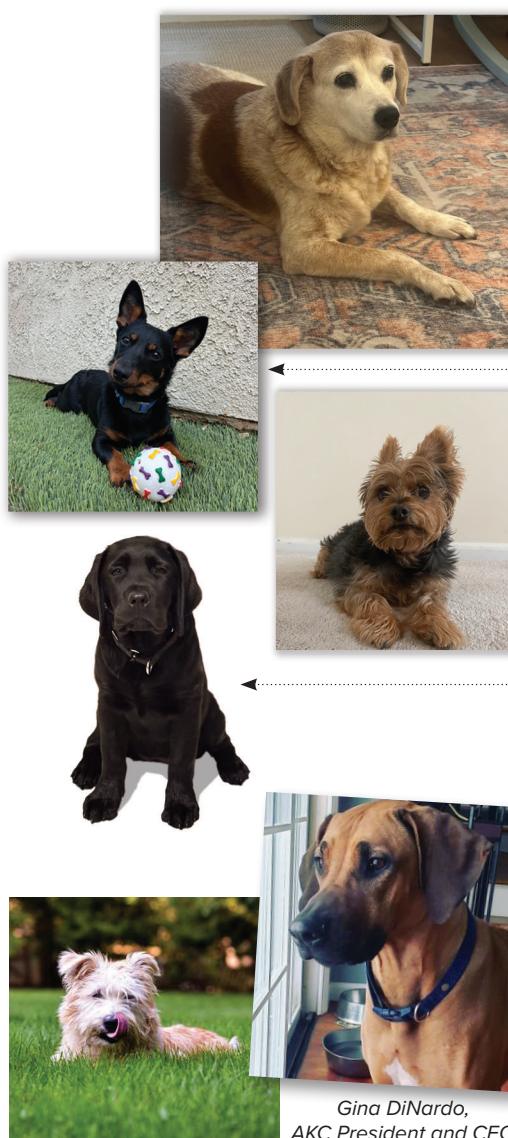


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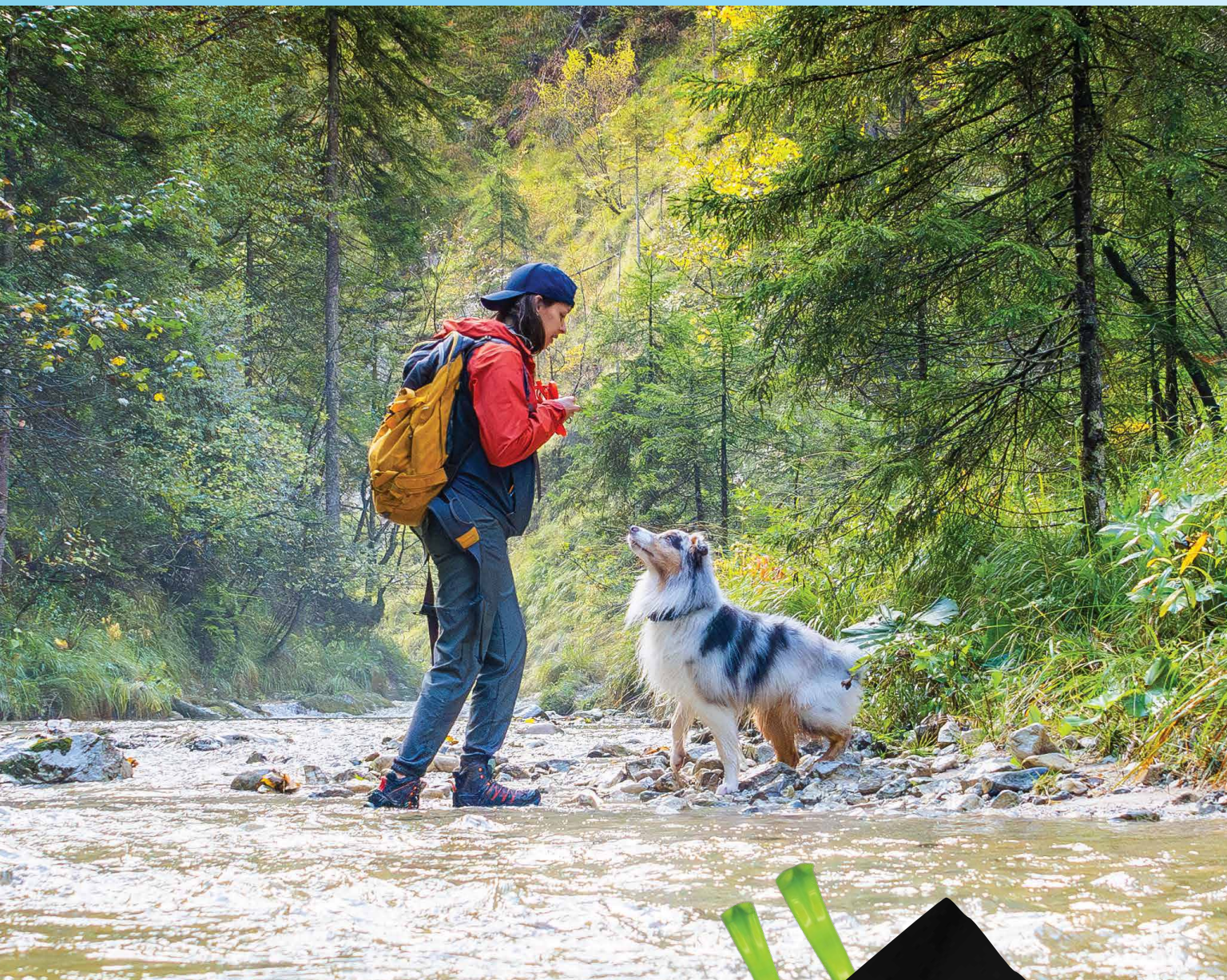
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6. DUNCAN AND DOUG, Schertz, Texas
7. MARTI, West Palm Beach, Fla.
8. AOIFE, Hatteras, N.C.
9. PIPPA, Libertyville, Ill.
10. ASPEN, Poulsbo, Wash.



SEND US YOUR SNAPSHOTS!

Want to see *your* family dog on these pages? Email your digital photos (high-resolution, please) to familydog@akc.org. Please include “Your Family Dog Photo” in the subject line, as well as your dog’s name and city and state of residence.

■ Only previously unpublished photos will be selected for publication.

■ All photos become the property of the American Kennel Club. The AKC reserves the right to use the photos for any other purpose without compensation.



Study offers promising findings for canine skin infections.

Skin in the Game

If you've ever had a dog that suffered from skin issues, you know how frustrating it can be. But results from a recent study may offer future hope for dogs who experience skin infections from common bacteria.

Staphylococcus pseudintermedius is the most common bacteria found on dogs' skin. While some dogs can harbor the bacteria without issue, other dogs are susceptible to developing pyoderma, a skin infection that can lead to sores, hair loss, pain, scabbing, and of course, intense itching.

This recent study on the bacteria, which was funded with support from the American Kennel Club Canine Health Foundation, collected skin and blood samples from 62 dogs over two years. During research, a team led by Dr. Felix Toka, a researcher at the Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine, found the immune systems of infected and healthy dogs reacted differently to the bacteria. Biological markers also differed between the infected and healthy dogs carrying the same bacteria.

The hope is to eventually find whether

antibodies can be produced against the bacteria, and if so, to ultimately make a vaccine to help dogs in the future.

"If we find out what antigens the antibodies bind to, it'll be easier to take those and make a vaccine for the dogs, because we know that the dogs respond to this specific antigen," Toka told the Canine Health Foundation. "And hopefully, that response can produce a protective immunity in the dogs."

For more on the Canine Health Foundation's study, check out the [CHF's blog post](#).

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Sign up for our new AKC Magazines Substack. It's free!

If you're looking for a new place to read more of your favorite dog stories—for free—AKC Magazines is now on Substack!

Once Upon a Dog—which shares a name with *Family Dog's* long-running historical spotlight—is now live on Substack. The official Substack of AKC Magazines features stories from both *AKC Family Dog* and the *AKC Gazette*.

Stories from recent and back issues of the magazine will be featured on the

Substack weekly, and subscribers can read those stories either through the Substack app or in their email inboxes.

Initial stories shared to our Substack include a recent feature on airport therapy dogs, a look at why dogs like to lick their owners, and a past End of the Leash featuring Lin-Manuel Miranda.

And did we mention it's free? Click [here to check out the Substack and subscribe](#), and let us know what you think!



The 'State' of Service Dogs

Service dog organization releases state report card for dog handler rights.

The Seeing Eye, the country's first guide dog school based in Morristown, N.J., released its first "State of Access Report Card" in May. The report ranked all 50 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico based on "how well they protect the rights of people who work with service dogs to travel independently and live without compromising their freedom." States and territories were evaluated across five categories:

- Strength and scope of state-level laws
- Complaint and enforcement process
- Public awareness and outreach
- Public data and transparency
- Lived experience

Only two states earned an A grade from The Seeing Eye—California and Alaska both got an A-. Rounding out the top ten were Colorado, Pennsylvania, Nebraska, Arizona, Kentucky (all B+ grades), Nevada, New Hampshire, and Maryland (those states received a B.)

Wyoming, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Puerto Rico all received F grades. The national grade was a C. The [full report card](#) includes an interactive map and a deeper dive into the methodology.



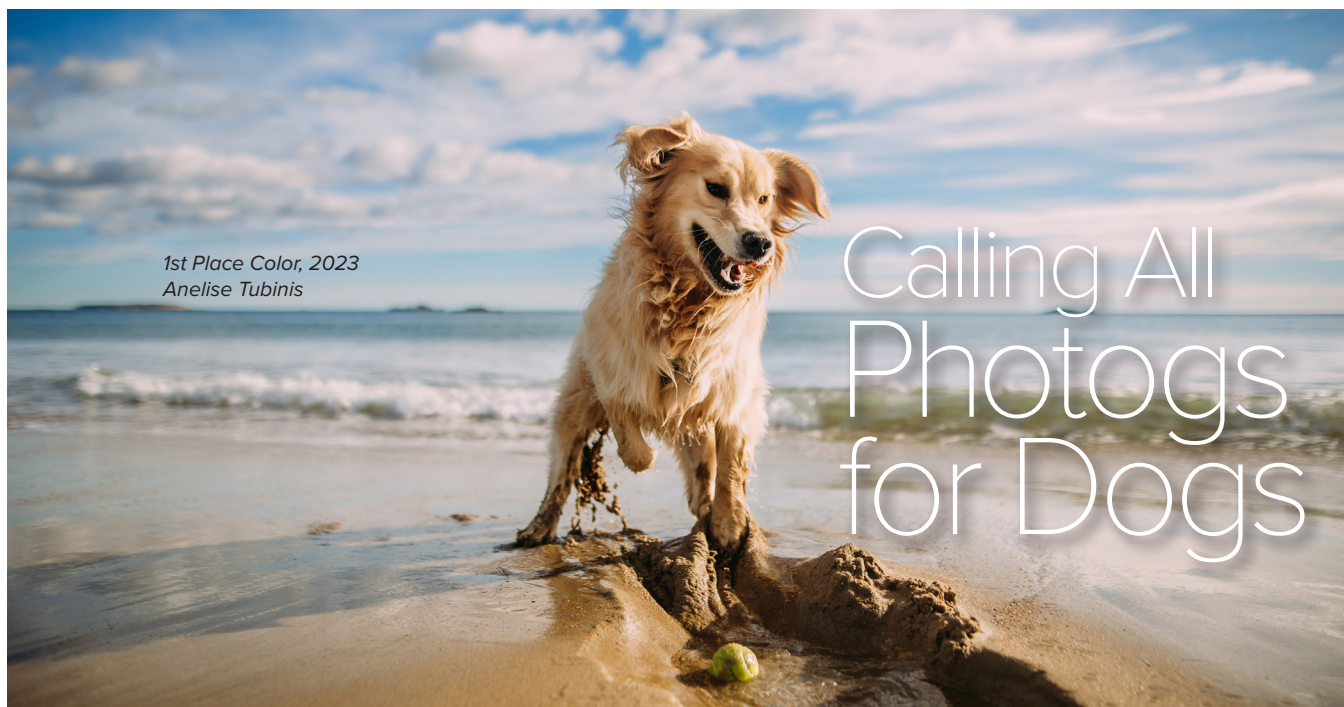
Labrador Retriever: Courtesy The Seeing Eye

To the **MOON**

AKC Humane Fund gets DOGE-nation

House of Doge Inc., MoonPay, and the Dogecoin Foundation have announced they are launching a fundraiser with the AKC® Humane Fund to support its programs dedicated to protecting and improving the lives of dogs across the United States.

To kick off the campaign, House of Doge, MoonPay, and the Dogecoin Foundation have collectively contributed 1 million \$DOGE, demonstrating a shared commitment to advancing canine welfare through community-driven innovation.



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Annual AKC Publications Photo Contest accepting new entries

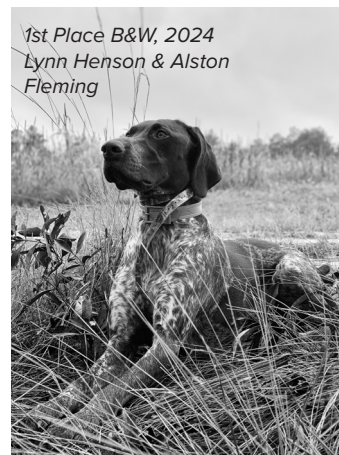
As you'll see, this issue features the most recent edition of the AKC Photo Contest. We hope you enjoy some of the best pictures our readers sent us this time around, with the theme "Go Dog Go!"

If you've got a knack for taking great pictures of your dog and want to get involved next time around—and maybe win some money—there's good news. The next edition of the contest is already open for submissions!

The 48th annual AKC Publications Photo Contest opened for submissions on April 15. Entries will be accepted until October 31, 2026, and the winners will be revealed in next year's January/February issue. This year's theme is "The Great Outdoors." For full contest rules, please check out the [photo contest website](#).

Even if you have no aspirations of being a "great" canine photographer, but you *do* want to see your dog in these pages, don't forget about our *Your Family Dog* section. We're always accepting photos for that section, all year round.

1st Place B&W, 2024
Lynn Henson & Alston
Fleming



©AKC



Active and Aware

Recognizing exercise-related injuries in your dog

A well-known orthopedic surgeon once told me, “Life is motion and motion is life.” Or in other, more familiar terms: Use it or lose it. We must keep moving to stay healthy, and more importantly, to remain vital. The same holds true for our dogs.

At our emergency clinic, we often got a lot of dogs in the early summer months presenting with soreness and eroded, blistered pads, reluctance to jump or go up the stairs, and lameness, after their first day jogging when the

owner decided to do a 2-mile run. What went wrong?

Well, a few things. Dogs, like people, must get acclimated to length and types of exercise and especially to working out in high temperatures. Here’s a list of what you should know before starting physical activity with your dog.

■ Before you start any activity with your dog, always have him examined by your veterinarian at the start of the season to make sure he is physically well enough to accompany you on activities such as long jogging sessions.

■ Be realistic. Is your dog physically or mentally able to do this type of activity?

■ Is your dog the breed or type of dog that would enjoy this type of activity? Your veterinarian can partially help answer these questions, but so could an experienced dog trainer.

■ Never start running or jogging long distances right away. Start with short distances, like a quarter of a mile. Even the most athletic dog needs to work up to a distance, and some types of dogs aren’t really meant for long distance running.



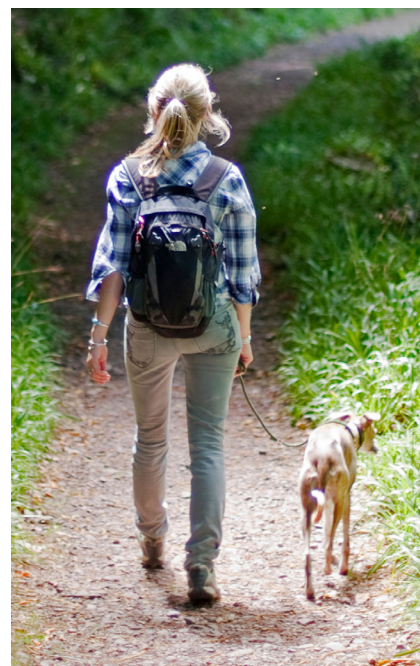
■ Remember the paws! The pads of all dog feet need to get accustomed to and hardened to withstand pavement. This is especially true of hot asphalt, and that takes time.

■ The smaller the dog, the closer to the pavement it is and the hotter it gets. Remember, smaller dogs take twice as many steps (or more) as you do.

■ Never force a dog to do a sustained percussive activity like long distance jogging on hard surfaces like concrete or asphalt until they are physically mature; i.e., when the growth plates of their long bones have fully fused. The long bones in a dog's body continue to grow in length until the growth plates fuse.

In small and medium-sized breeds, growth plates usually fuse around 12 months of age. But in some large or giant breeds, those plates may not fuse until the dog is well over 12 months old—sometimes nearly 18 months of

age. Forcing young dogs to do these types of activities could harm their developing joints, which could lead to crippling medical problems in their bones and joints earlier in their lives.



In other words, young puppies should jump, play, twist, and turn as they would in nature on surfaces of grass, dirt, or sand. Leave the long distances on hard surfaces for sustained periods to older dogs.

■ During very warm days, run or exercise in the early morning hours and late at night. Keep dogs in cool or shaded areas with plenty of access to cool, fresh water at all times. Remember that





the sun and shade will move throughout the day. An area that might have been cooler with shade may become hot and stifling in a couple of hours.

Watch your dog closely. If they seem slow or are panting excessively, stop, seek shade, and give them some water and time to recuperate.

WARNING SIGNS

Dogs that are playing, running, or exercising can experience an injury such as a fracture or soft tissue tear and will often yelp or cry immediately after the incident, although some dogs can behave that same way after experiencing more minor sprains as well. So how do you know if it warrants a trip to the vet or emergency clinic?

If a possible injury occurs near or in your home, stop all activity at once and confine your dog as soon as possible either in their crate or in a small, closed room with no stairs and do not disturb them for at least 15–30 minutes. Don't keep touching them or testing your dog, as tempting as that might be. Leave them alone.

After that time, get your dog slowly out on his leash and walk him a short distance to carefully assess his condition. If your dog is then still lame or in significant discomfort, an evaluation by a veterinarian that day is probably the best advice.

Some warning signs should prompt immediate veterinary care. If a limb appears visibly deformed, that's an obvious trip to the vet. Also, if your dog is experiencing significant distress—such as an inability to bear weight on a limb, or persistent whining or panting that persists longer than 15–30 minutes after activity is stopped—that's another sign to get to the veterinarian right away.

Dogs already living with chronic pain often have subtle changes in their behavior and mannerisms, making their injuries more difficult to determine. Dogs with bone or joint pain may present as limping or stiff; reluctant to move, climb stairs, or jump; or they may favor one limb. Behavioral clues include excessive panting, trembling, restlessness, hiding, reduced activity, or whining.

Another tip: Dogs that are reluctant to jump onto things or go up the stairs usually have pain in their rear limbs, hips, or lower backs. Dogs that are reluctant to go down the stairs usually have pain in their forequarters, shoulders or neck region.

Dog limb pain has its own key warning signs:

- Watch for mobility changes—limping, stiffness (especially after resting), slowness to rise, reluctance to jump or use stairs, or walking slower than usual.
- Other physical indicators include swollen joints, muscle loss, trembling or shaking, or dragging a paw.
- Behavioral clues include constant, intense, or uncharacteristic panting, licking or chewing a specific joint or leg, hiding, or acting out of character.

■ Some dogs may also cower, show irritability when touched, or show reluctance to bear weight on a leg. Watch for a shifting stance: standing with one rear limb further forward than the other rear limb.

Always check the bottom of a dog's paws, including the pads and the areas between the pads, for any tears, cuts, or foreign objects.

Lastly, never, under any circumstances, self-medicate your dog with human pain medication. Many of these drugs are toxic to dogs, including ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil) and naproxen (Aleve) among others. These medicines can cause serious gastrointestinal injuries, as well as kidney and liver damage.

It is better to give no medication than the wrong medication, which can harm your dog.

The smartest move of all is to see your veterinarian to get the proper diagnosis and most effective and safest treatment. **FD**

Dr. Jerry Klein is the Chief Veterinary Officer at the AKC. Dr. Klein practiced veterinary emergency medicine for more than 30 years. He's also a licensed dog show judge and breeder of champion Afghan Hounds.



*How
independence
builds
confidence*

Moving the Other Way



One of the most common things I see in training classes isn't disobedience. It's dependence.

After dogs pass through the “acquisition” (learning) stage with commands, they're typically able to perform *sit*, *down*, *stay*, and other commands, as long as their person is close by.

But when distance is added, even by one small step, that's when things can fall apart. The dog pops up, follows, or

checks out entirely. Owners are often surprised—and disappointed—by this. “But he knows it!” is a common refrain in beginner class.

They're 100 percent right. The dog likely does know it. But one of his (learned) criteria for performing correctly is that his owner is nearby. Teaching a dog that he can confidently perform at a distance is an important stage in the learning process and will prevent the emergence of what trainers call a “Velcro dog.”



Through no fault of their own, owners unintentionally create a dependency in their dogs, leading them to feel secure only when physically close to their humans.

And this misunderstanding from a dog's perspective makes sense because, in the early stages of training, we *reward* proximity. Obedience classes tell owners to make sure that they bring their dogs to class on a 6-foot leash. Owners are advised by trainers to "stay close" when dogs are learning stays and "go to place" so the owners can quickly step in to address errors and confusion.

In my classes, I often joke that "dogs go deaf after 6 feet" while I'm addressing the importance of transitioning to a much longer leash to build confidence and reliability at a distance. Your dog's recall cue must hold up no matter the distance, because most dogs run much farther away than just 6 feet from their owner.

The issue of depending on proximity can show up everywhere, including:

- The dog who can't stay in place when guests arrive and you're at the front door, but is perfect when you're

standing 6 feet away.

- The dog who struggles with off-leash commands.

- The dog who follows you constantly around the house instead of settling.

The issue of disobedience isn't rooted in stubbornness. It's a combination of missing (or delaying) the training stage where distance is taught, and a lack of confidence.

TEACHING TWILAH

One of my students has a young dog named Twilah. On a 6-foot leash in class, she looks amazing. Engaged, responsive, doing all the right things. As a matter of fact, other students in her class point to Twilah's behavior as the goal for their dog.

But at home, it's a completely different picture. When she's not on a leash, distance from her owner impacts her responses to even the most basic commands.

A few weeks ago, her owner sent me a long text explaining that Twilah is having a very hard time following commands at home. She also struggles to settle in her exercise pen and needs

constant interaction.

The family was working overtime to keep her entertained, busy, and calm. They used lick mats, chews, and enrichment toys, and frequent training sessions were scheduled throughout the day. They felt that they were doing everything right, but the more things they added, the more Twilah seemed to need.

In my opinion, her struggles didn't stem from a need for more stimulation. She was struggling because she hadn't learned how to be OK on her own without the constant interaction from others.

We started building small moments of independence by asking her to settle without constant input. Instead of rushing in to give her something (attention or a toy), I had them give her space by stepping away.

The first few days were a struggle. Twilah's demanding behavior increased, and her owner's confidence in our plan decreased. But after a week (and a few calls and emails), her owner reported a breakthrough. She could see Twilah start to settle on her own.

Once that piece of the puzzle was in place, we started working on creating distance between the dog and her owner. Putting Twilah on a bed while tethered was a great first step, because when she tried to leave, she wasn't rewarded with reaching her owner. Their practice sessions included being farther apart and brief departures from the room (literally just seconds at first). Getting guests to schedule their visits was also a huge help, so Twilah's owner could practice having Twilah stay on place at a distance.

DISTANCE BUILDS CONFIDENCE

My dog competes in AKC obedience and scent work, two sports that require a dog to work independently and at a distance. The biggest factor in whether you succeed is if your dog is confident enough to move away from you in response to a cue.



Because at the end of the day, most dogs can learn to stay or find a specific odor when you're a few feet away. But distance separates them from the physical and emotional support we provide, reducing their performance reliability. Sometimes owners don't even

realize they've created a dependence on proximity for the dog to succeed until they try to advance a command—as in Twilah's inability to stay on place.

Teaching independence doesn't mean losing connection. It means expanding it. It can be as simple as:

- Sending your dog to a place bed, taking a few steps away, and throwing the treat onto the bed instead of returning and hand-feeding. The message here is that you, the owner, don't need to be close for the dog to receive the reward.

- Practicing recalls where your dog moves away before coming back. One of my favorite games is throwing a treat and telling my dog to get it! As soon as she's eaten it, I call her back, and when she's a few feet away from me, I immediately throw another treat and give her the same cue again. After a few reps of going back and forth, I call her to me. This game builds value for moving away from you and progressing to greater distances can be achieved by throwing the treat farther away.

- Allowing your dog to work through a task without immediately stepping in. An example I see in class is when an owner throws a toy or a treat, and the dog can't find it. Instead of letting the dog search independently, they move



Top: Rodimovpavel / Adobe Stock; Treats: Jason / Alamy Stock Photo



right in and point it out. This increases the dog's dependence on the owner and

robs the dog of the accomplishment of finding it himself. Instead, take one step

toward the item and let the dog work through the problem on his own.

What we want to create are dogs who are well-trained and enjoy being with us but aren't reliant on us for every decision. A confident dog can:

- Stay when you walk away.
- Move away from you and explore—or perform a behavior at a distance—without fear while keeping a connection with you.
- Return to you when called the first time, no matter what.

Whether you want to compete in dog sports or just have a great companion, you need that balance to have a dog who is both connected and capable.

So, if your dog works only when you're right next to them, it's time to move to the next step of training. Give them opportunities to move away, to think, and to succeed on their own! **FD**

Kathy Santo has trained dogs and their families for over 35 years and competed in AKC obedience and agility. She has a training school in Waldwick, N.J., and online courses. For more information, visit kathysantodogtraining.com.





Move It or Lose It

The many benefits of canine exercise

It's no secret that movement and regular exercise are beneficial for both dogs and their people. Movement that strengthens muscles and provides cardiovascular exercise prevents the dangerous obesity that can result in diabetes, heart disease, pancreatitis, osteoarthritis, cancer, and many other diseases and ailments. Every one of these dreaded afflictions can shorten the lifespans of the dogs we love.

"As a veterinarian, I am concerned with all aspects of a dog's health," says Lee Cera, DVM, Ph.D., a veterinarian and head of the Department of One Health at Loyola University Chicago's Stritch School of Medicine. "Diseases and injuries aren't the only areas on which veterinarians focus. According to the AVMA, 60 percent of American dogs are overweight and out of shape, and for them, regular exercise combined with an

appropriate diet is the key to treatment."

Of course, the benefits of exercise go beyond the physical realm. Years ago, researchers at both Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine

and Purdue University's Canine Welfare Science department reported that dogs that do not exercise are more susceptible to behavioral and emotional issues.

These issues may include stress, anxiety, and behaviors that are often called "behavior problems" but are simply the result of a lack of movement and exercise.

Currently, there is a body of science related to canine movement and exercise. Exercise triggers the release of a protein—the brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF)—and this results in the growth of new brain cells.

At the Dog Aging Project at the University of Washington, researcher Matt Kaerberlin has studied dogs with canine cognitive dysfunction, also known as dog dementia. His research showed that inactive dogs were 6.5 times more likely to develop canine



Joan Nelson and Lily



Nancy Vollmer and River



Pam Hernandez and Finn

cognitive dysfunction than active dogs of the same age.

GETTING FIT

While everyone should know the obvious benefits of exercise by now, sometimes getting active can have surprising advantages.

Barbara Everett, an instructor and team leader for the Hidden Valley Obedience Club (HVOC) in Southern California's AKC FIT DOG program, has seen the science in action. One example involves a Border Collie who came out of her shell.

"Lily was an anxious Border Collie, and by getting her moving and involved in exercise, Lily's owner, Joan Nelson, saw tremendous differences," Everett says.

Nelson agrees, saying the difference was remarkable. "In the beginning, Lily was fearful and reactive every time she left the house, but between the regular exercise and exposure to other dogs and people, she has turned into a confident, happy dog."

Another success case in HVOC's FIT DOG program is River, a Shetland Sheepdog. "It was clear to me that I needed to find an outlet for River's boundless energy," River's owner, Nancy Vollmer says.

"Hiking and walking helped so much that we started taking AKC FIT DOG canine conditioning classes. River is in level two of the class, and the exercises—such as push-ups, walking backwards to a target, and pivoting—have helped her so much. For River, systematic, planned movement has helped her gain physical strength and mental focus."

AKC's comprehensive AKC FIT DOG program offers a variety of activities to keep dogs and their owners on the move.

1. Get your free AKC FIT DOG car or refrigerator magnet by walking the American Heart Association's recommended 150 minutes a week.

2. Join an AKC FIT DOG club near you to participate in group walks, or you can do virtual runs or walks with your dog.

3. Earn AKC FIT DOG titles. There are Bronze, Silver, and Gold levels, and each level has a menu of fitness activities for earning points toward the title.

For more info, check out the [AKC FIT DOG](#) page.

Pam Hernandez and her Golden Retriever, Finn, also participate in HVOC's FIT DOG program. But Hernandez had a different reason for getting her dog involved.

"Many dogs join our group walks to learn how to socialize with other dogs and people," Hernandez says. "But this wasn't the case with Finn. He is everybody's friend, maybe to the point of being overly social. FIT DOG walks have helped him become calmer and more self-regulated around other dogs."

"Finn's social skills weren't the only change resulting from a regular exercise program. By the time he earned his Gold AKC FIT DOG title, I could see dramatic improvements in his physical soundness, balance, and flexibility."

"Remember that movement is important for humans too. Walking is the number one recommended exercise, and I found myself having a great sense of calmness and gradually feeling stronger after exercising over a number of weeks with Finn. I believe the saying is true: 'Move it or lose it.'" **FD**

Mary R. Burch, Ph.D., is a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist through the Animal Behavior Society. She is the director of the [AKC Family Dog](#) program.



Club officials surround President Gerald Ford, handler Jerry Rigdon, and Fizz in this historic photo.

Ford, Fizz,
and the

Spirit of '76

Gerald R. Ford, 38th president of the United States, was a dog lover and the devoted owner of a Golden Retriever named Liberty. One day Liberty committed an indiscretion on the Oval Office rug. A Navy steward rushed to clean it up. “I’ll do that,” Ford said. “No man should have to clean up after another man’s dog.”

It came as no surprise, then, that during the presidential campaign of 1976, as America was celebrating its bicentennial year, the decidedly doggy Ford scheduled a stop at the North-

eastern Indiana Kennel Club show.

It was equally unsurprising that the event’s Best in Show winner would be miniature wirehaired Dachshund Ch. Spartan’s Sloe Gin Fizz. *The New York Times* proclaimed that Fizz was “destined to go down as one of the greats in the history of American champions.” *Showsight* magazine gushed, “The crowd reaction to this dog is comparable not only to great dogs of the past but to any athletic idols of the present such as Jimmy Connors, Catfish Hunter or Secretariat.”

When Fizz met Ford in the summer of

'76, the charismatic little champion was on the road to 28 Bests in Show for the year. He would retire in 1979 with 68 career Bests, the all-time record for his breed.

But Fizz’s most singular honor came at Northeastern Indiana, when he received the BIS trophy from President Ford. To our knowledge, it remains the only time a sitting U.S. president appeared in a dog-show win photo.

In the end, Fizz had a much better bicentennial year than Ford, who in November lost the presidency to Jimmy Carter. **FD**



familydog



THE 2026 AKC PHOTO CONTEST — NOW OPEN TO ALL!

Are you an accomplished shutterbug (or aspiring to be one)? Then we invite you to enter the 2026 AKC Photo Contest! Our theme this year is **"The Great Outdoors."** As always, the entries are based solely on creativity, quality, and originality. The top winners will take home cash prizes! For more on that and other details, check out the [contest rules](#).

The 2026 AKC Photo Contest starts April 27, 2026. Entries must be sent via email or postmarked no later than Oct. 31, 2026. Email your high-resolution photos to photocontest@akc.org — please include your name and the breed of the dog (if applicable).

Start snapping!

A husky dog with white and grey fur and blue eyes stands alert on a large, flat rock. The dog is wearing a green collar with a silver tag. In the background, a calm lake reflects the sky and the surrounding trees. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow and long shadows. The sky is filled with scattered white clouds.

1ST PLACE
COLOR

Melissa Hachkowski
Alaskan Klee Kai
Wasaga Beach,
Ontario, Canada

LET'S GO!



Our 2025 AKC Photo Contest winners are on the go. Chosen from hundreds of entries, many of these dogs have been captured in action, with some caught during a still moment between movements. Their actions—and these beautiful photographs—invite us all to take a long look.

Want to get involved next time? Check out more information about the [2026 AKC Photo Contest here](#).



2ND PLACE
COLOR

Will Adams
Mixed breed
Austin, Texas



3RD PLACE COLOR

Michael Derek Williams
Golden Retriever
Austin, Texas



1ST PLACE
B&W

Jenna Martin
Mixed breed
Ramsey, Minn.



2ND PLACE
B&W

Bob Ward
Border Collie
Tahoe, Calif.



3RD PLACE
B&W

Alisha Bibireata
Labrador Retriever
Santa Barbara, Calif.

HONORABLE MENTIONS



Clockwise from top left:

Zachary Kuck, Labrador Retriever, Courtland, Minn.; Kiara Linhares, Mixed breed, Nashville, Tenn.; Margot Penner, German Shorthaired Pointer, Niceville, Fla.; Sara Hams, Labrador Retriever, Taylor, N.D.; David James, Dachshund, Morehead, Ky.



Clockwise from top left:

Hannah Knight, Labrador Retriever, Channahon, Ill.; Deanna McCammon, Boxers, Waddell, Ariz.; Mary Durbrow, Mixed breed, Sacramento, Calif.; Sean John, Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Vineland, N.J.; Mark Schmidt, English Springer Spaniel, Rhinelander, Wis.



MORE THAN

A PRETTY FACE

Pomeranians in sport

By Sassafra Patterdale CPDT-KA

3-year-old Boots
loves dog sports
and obedience
events.

Courtesy Jennifer Luce



When people think of toy breeds like the Pomeranian, “sporty” isn’t generally the first word that comes to mind. Pomeranians are often categorized as fragile lap dogs, but like many other toy breeds, these little dogs thrive when given opportunities to get involved in sports. Pomeranians are confident dogs that pack a big personality into their tiny, fluffy bodies.

Bred to be a companion, the Pomeranian has a reputation as a wonderful pet, making them a popular toy breed around the world. Stacy Dickinson of Portland, Oregon, is active in agility, obedience, AKC Rally, Fast CAT, and Trick Dog with her Pomeranians, Gibson and Chaos.

“Poms are very intelligent and love to please. They are energetic and love to be



with their people ... they’re always up for trying anything.” The breed standard allows for more than a dozen coat colors and patterns, making them a visually striking breed.

“Just be prepared, if you’re competing

with a Pom, you’re liable to get attention,” Dickinson warns, noting, “because they’re so tiny and cute, they are often attention-getters because the general public doesn’t realize how biddable and smart these little guys are.”

For Jenna Miller of Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, who competes in agility, freestyle, tricks, and is part of the SuperDogs Canine Performance Team with her 7-year-old Pomeranian Epic, there has always been something special about the breed.

“A friend of the family had a litter of Pomeranian puppies when I was growing up. Every day after school I would visit them and eventually convinced my parents to let me have one,” Miller says.

To date, she’s had three Pomeranians, all of whom have competed in agility and other sports. Thinking fondly about her second Pomeranian, Spirit, who was active in freestyle, tricks, and Disc Dog, she recalls, “He wanted to do everything the big dogs did, so we let him.”

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE LITTLE FLUFFY DOG

Pomeranians might come in a small, fluffy package, but they are also dogs who thrive when given opportunities to use their brains and bodies. Jayne Hoemke of Minnesota is involved in scent work, as well as conformation, Barn Hunt, obedience, rally, coursing, and agility with her Poms Gypsy and Mo, and notes that her dogs aren’t just a



Boots with some of his competition ribbons

pretty face.

“My three scent work dogs are also



Chaos

Grand Champion conformation dogs. Pomeranians can have both beauty and brains,” Hoemke says. She explains that her dogs are always ready to work, and there is a lot more to Poms than what meets the eye.

“People tend to think of Poms as foo-foo dogs. My Poms have always been eager to get in there and work like a big dog, but everything on a small scale.” Hoemke says that while Pomeranians might not be the breed that comes to mind when it comes to athleticism and sports success, they can be very successful little athletic dogs.

“They aren’t your typical sport dog, but they do have an abundance of energy that can be focused with some effort,” Miller says. “They want to be included and not just a cute little floofy dog that sits on the couch. They are truly a big dog in a little dog body.”



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Keeshonden Nox and Swayze, with Pomeranians Chaos and Gibson

Unfortunately, sometimes people mistakenly assume that Pomeranians are more accessory than dog, which couldn't be further from the case. For Miller, this was an inspiration to add another Pomeranian to her family.

"I love walking out on the start line or on stage and having people expect him to be a slow, cutesy little dog. Then when we start, he's off like a rocket. It's fun showing the world that these little balls of fluff can do everything just as well as a big dog or performance dog."

The close connection the breed forms with their people, and a desire to do things together, is part of what makes Pomeranians such shining stars in sports.

"I love their sass, biddability, and loyalty to their people," explains Madeline Luce of Portland, who is involved in Barn Hunt, rally, obedience, and Fast CAT with her Pomeranian, Boots.

Despite their great temperament and desire to work with their people, the athleticism and skills of Pomeranians are still often dismissed. Dickinson says what she's found in the sports world is

that "Pomeranians aren't taken seriously like some other small dogs, like Papillons."

Sometimes judges are even taken by surprise seeing a Pomeranian in the ring, she says. "I've had judges comment multiple times as I enter the ring, saying things like, 'Is that a dog? I thought it was a dust bunny.'"

As frustrating as this can be, Dick-

inson is committed to not letting comments like this get her down or stop her from pursuing sports with her dogs, noting that even if they might not match the proven athleticism of a Papillon, they are still, as a breed, "smart and very capable."

JUMPING IN

For any Pomeranian owner thinking about getting involved in dog sports, Miller encourages building a dog's drive and desire to work by keeping training sessions short and not repeating the same thing.

This was a shift for Miller, who notes that her "Malinois will work for days, but my Pomeranian runs out of steam." This is where short training sessions are so important.

"Stop when you're ahead and keep them wanting more," she says. "I also think confidence-building matters, big time. Don't overwhelm them, and don't expect them to get everything right off the bat."

She advises that with Pomeranians, the most important thing is to focus on the big picture, not trying to get perfection right away.

"When you first start, if they miss a jump, it's no big deal. Keep going and



Top: Courtesy Stacy Dickinson. Bottom: Courtesy Ayr/K Photography Pet

reward them after they do something right instead of going back and trying to get everything perfect, which can be demotivating,” she says.

No matter what sport you’re involved in, or what breed you have, safety is always the top priority. Dickinson cautions that for Pomeranians involved in sports, there are specific safety considerations to keep in mind.

“One of the challenges for Pomeranians in sports is how tiny and delicate they are,” she says. “They can get hurt very easily and sometimes, no matter how hard they try, they can’t physically do certain things.”

She recalls that her 4-pound Pomeranian Gavin loved dog agility, but that when he reached the Excellent level in agility, he couldn’t move those little legs fast enough to make course time requirements.

“He would run clean and as fast as he could, but he was always just a second or two over what he needed to be. He was also unable to get his Farm Dog certification because he couldn’t jump on a hay bale. It was simply too high for him,” Dickinson says.

Luce also admits that while these

little dogs can do great in virtually any sport, sometimes their small size can be a liability.

“His smaller size does leave him at a disadvantage compared to equally smart and well-trained but larger dogs in sports like scent work and Barn Hunt. For example, my Labrador can lean over and sniff a hide that my Pom would need to climb to reach. He still does bring home a lot of ribbons!”

Because they were initially bred as companion animals, this is a breed that doesn’t necessarily have a lot of innate

working drive.

“They are not natural retrievers. I have struggled to teach dumbbell retrieves, but my Chaos is going to be a superstar. He loves to retrieve and is learning to hold when he brings it back,” Dickinson says.

Though the breed is very playful, if not well-bred or properly socialized, they tend to be shy at times. Dickinson recommends finding a “breeder and being selective about temperament to ensure they will enjoy the bustle and energy of sport competitions.”

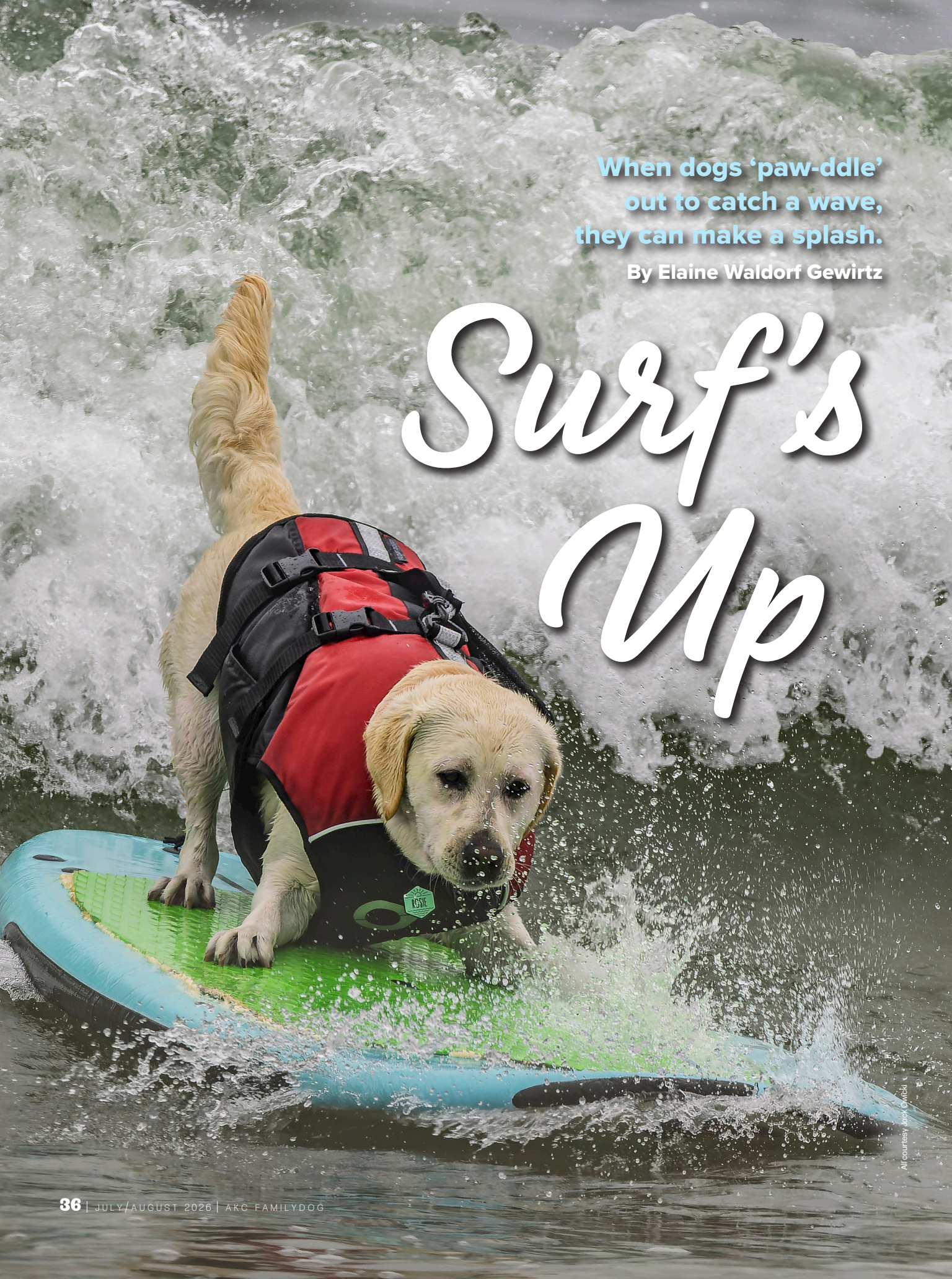
Even though Pomeranians might not have been originally bred to work, these little dogs thrive when given the opportunity. For anyone with a Pomeranian at home, Miller says, “Don’t underestimate them because they are cute balls of fluff. They love learning and trying things.”

Pomeranians might not be the top breed people think of when they look at dog sports like agility or obedience, but Miller says, “We’re starting to see more and more little dogs in dog sports, which is great.” **FD**

Sassafras Patterdale CPDT-KA is a professional dog trainer and award-winning author whose books have been honored by organizations ranging from the American Library Association to the Dog Writers Association of America.



Courtesy Stacy Dickinson



When dogs 'paw-dle'
out to catch a wave,
they can make a splash.

By Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz

Surf's Up

Charlie at the 100 Wave Challenge



Come summertime, dog-friendly California beaches set the scene for canine celebrations of fun, foam, and frolic. That's when dogs dip their paws into the bright blue Pacific Ocean and "hang 20"—they go surfing.

Although dogs don't shoot the curl or straddle the 12-foot swells at the famous Banzai Pipeline in Oahu, Hawaii, they can surf the water after the wave breaks on its way to the shore. Owners accompany their dogs either alongside the board or ride the board in tandem.

Canine-O-Bunga

But while most dogs prefer couch surfing, Charlie, a Labrador Retriever, chooses to ride the West Coast waves.

The 11-year-old is one of many water-loving, adventure-seeking dogs who like the active beach scene, and despite the occasional wipeout, these

canines don't seem to mind getting covered in wet sand in the process. Mostly, they like spending time with their people and other dogs while lapping up spectators' *oohs* and *aahs*.

"When we take Charlie to the beach, we can't keep him out of the water," says Charlie's owner, Maria Nieboer of San Diego.

Nieboer and her husband, Jeff, make frequent ocean trips with Charlie and Barney, their 7-year-old Labrador.

"Organizations sponsor canine surfing exhibitions and fundraising events for dogs in Pacifica, Pismo Beach, Huntington Beach, and San Diego, and we go to as many as we can," Nieboer says. "They're so much fun and we have surf dog friends and enjoy our road trips."

Charlie likes his beach trips so much that he grabs the end of the board and drags it out to the beach himself. "We had to give him another job, so we let

him carry the cooler so he'd leave the board alone," Nieboer says.

The Nieboers began taking Charlie to the beach when the Lab was about 2 years old. Their daughter followed a dog who surfed and bought the dog some surf lessons from an organization raising money.

"We went out to a flat bay on Fiesta Island in San Diego and took one or two lessons," Nieboer says. When they heard about a competition in San Diego two months later, they entered. "We didn't know what we were doing, but Charlie won his heat, and we were hooked."

Surf Dog Culture

Whether alongside their owners on the occasional seaside visit or at organized competitions, all breeds, mixed breeds, sizes, and shapes hop on boards and coast the breakwater.



Although water-loving Labrador Retrievers seem to rule the waves, there's no shortage of other breeds such as French Bulldogs, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Miniature Pinschers, and West

Highland White Terriers who command a few feet of water. It's not unusual to see large breeds like Newfoundlands acting like big kahunas, too.

Unlike any top-tier athlete, surfing

dogs may not compete solely for bragging rights, but they won't turn away from getting a few sand-soaked belly rubs.

Iza, a French Bulldog, began her fascination with the water when her owner threw a ball in the breakwater to let her get accustomed to the waves.

Jager, a Vizsla, is a frequent oceangoer on the surfing scene. His owner is a surfer, and the dog would rather accompany him than stay home.

"Rocket, my French Bulldog, always does well on the board because his low center of gravity helps him to stay on the board," says owner Dan Nikolicco.

The canine surf community has even



All courtesy Jack Owicki

sent a dog to the Surfers' Hall of Fame: Sugar, a Labrador Retriever and five-time world champion, was inducted in 2024.

Sizing Up The Competition

"Dogs who love the water, love to swim, and love running around with other dogs on the beach make perfect surf dogs," says A.K. Crump, founder of the World Dog Surfing Championships.

The World Dog Surfing Championships, which started in 2016, will take place this year on August 1 in Pacifica, California. Dogs are divided into weight classes—from small dog to very large dog—with awards given in several surfing categories, including tandem awards with multiple dogs or dogs and humans surfing together. There's even a fashion contest.

The nonprofit Helen Woodward Animal Center in San Diego also sponsors an annual fundraising event known as the Surf Dog Surf-A-Thon. This year's competition, set for September 21, will

be the 21st edition.

Sun-drenched California beaches aren't the only places where dog surfing competitions are held. Hawaii, Florida, Australia, and Costa Rica are a few other places that welcome four-legged competitors.

How to Catch a Wave

"To introduce your dog to surfing, start at home on a hard surface and work on your dog's sense of balance," Nieboer says. "Put a pillow under a board and encourage your dog to stand and take a few steps on it."

To achieve the best balance, position a dog about two-thirds back on the board. Once your dog is stable on the board, take your dog to a pool or a flat lake, put him on the board and gently slowly push your board back and forth around the water. When your dog seems confident, move to the ocean.

"Start slow and easy without scaring your dog and using lots of treats helps,"



Nieboer says. "Choose small, gentle waves in the breakwater and go out with your dog before a wave breaks."

Safety First

In competitive events, dogs must wear properly fitting canine life jackets. These vests make it easier for dogs to stay afloat. They include handles for owners to pull their dogs out of the water.

Float coats include buoyant foam panels, and although form-fitting neoprene suits aren't lined with much buoyancy, they help keep dogs warm in cold water. On cold days, some owners prefer using a water jacket under their dogs' life vest.

To avoid entanglement, leashes are forbidden while dogs are on their boards in the water. Dogs should never be leashed to the surfboard.

Foam or soft-top boards are recommended, although short fiberglass can be used. In competitions, owners can launch the board, but the dog must ride freely (although owners accompany them closely).

"The way dog surfing has taken off is crazy, but we love it," Nieboer says. "Our kids are grown, and Charlie has filled our lives with meeting people and their dogs who share this surfing thing and all of us couldn't be happier." **FD**

Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz is an award-winning writer in Southern California who specializes in canine topics.

Tidal Tips

If you're looking to get your dog involved in surfing, there are some other things you should know if you're just starting out for a day at the beach—and in the waves:

- Never force a dog to surf if he appears scared or unwilling.
- On hot days, keep a dog cool. Avoid the midday sun. Choose morning or evening times to visit the beach.
- Make sure the sand isn't too hot. The pads on a dog's feet are sensitive. Test the temperature of the sand with your hand. If you can't keep your hand on the sand for 10 seconds, the sand is too hot for your dog.
- Provide shade for your dog, and take breaks to help cool your dog down.
- Bring fresh water. Pack a water bowl and plenty of fresh, cool water to keep your dog well-hydrated. Don't let dogs drink saltwater as it can make them ill.
- Use sunscreen. Like people, dogs need sunscreen on their noses, ears, and any exposed areas of skin to avoid sunburn. Light, short-coated, or hairless dogs especially need it applied on their bodies, too. Use it 30 minutes before beach time and reapply it throughout the visit.
- Limit your dog's exercise. Too much activity can cause heatstroke or dehydration. When your dog looks tired or begins panting, give him a rest in a tent or take him home.
- Rinse or bathe your dog after a visit. This removes sand, saltwater, or debris that can irritate the skin.



Do you have a dog who seems to live life in the fast lane, racing around with a perpetual case of the zoomies? Or maybe your attentive pup has supersonic listening skills and hangs on your every word. If so, you might have a hidden athlete under your roof!

Opening the door to dog sports is a rewarding way to channel your dog's energy and unique skills while deepening your bond. Most AKC sports welcome both mixed breed and purebred dogs—however, there are a few exceptions to this. Mixed-breed dogs cannot participate in conformation since this event judges how well a breed meets its standard. They also cannot participate in earthdog, herding, lure coursing, and breed-specific field trials and hunt tests.

Dog sports are open to a variety of ages. Children as young as 5 can participate in the Pee Wee Special Attraction, where they learn the basics of showing a dog. Older kids, from ages 9 to 17, can join Juniors and take part in activities like Junior Showmanship, agility, obedience, and AKC Rally.



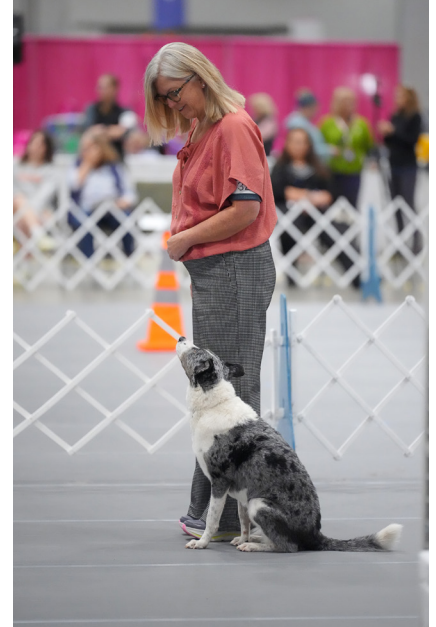
With so many dog sports to choose from, getting started can feel a little intimidating. There are a few things to consider—the first being the type of experience you're seeking. Are you interested in a performance sport where your dog works more independently, or a companion event where you and your dog operate closely as a team?

Next, think about who your dog is as an individual. What do they love doing? What motivates them? Just like people, dogs are more likely to perform well in ac-

tivities that feel purposeful and enjoyable. Other factors to consider are their energy level, instincts, build, and overall health. Everyday behaviors can often point you in the right direction, too. For example, a dog who loves to chase may enjoy Fast CAT, while one who is always sniffing the ground might excel in scent work.

If you're feeling unsure, you're not alone. Many people assume dog sports are for only highly trained dogs or seasoned handlers, but that's not true!

Penny Leigh, director of the AKC



Agility League, explains, “Many people first see agility on television where they are seeing the tops in the sport—dogs with years of experience—and I think many think, ‘My dog could never do all that.’ But when people enter a beginning agility class, they may be surprised how much their dogs enjoy it and love the exercises. Dogs naturally like to jump, climb, and tunnel, plus it is a

positive sport in which dogs get lots of praise, treats, and toys as rewards.”

With your dog in mind, explore just a few of the many sports below. If you don’t see anything that stands out, click [here](#) to visit the AKC website and view the full list of dog sports. You can even take a quiz to see which ones may be a good fit!

■ **Obedience:** If your dog is eager to learn and quick to pick up on routines,

obedience highlights their focus and listening skills.

■ **Lure coursing and Fast CAT:** Dogs who can’t resist the urge to chase and love to run at top speed thrive in these sports that harness those instincts.

■ **Agility:** Energetic dogs who enjoy jumping, darting, and weaving through their surroundings might excel at maneuvering through obstacle courses in agility.

■ **Diving Dogs:** For dogs who love the water and never miss a chance to make a splash, this sport channels their swimming enthusiasm.

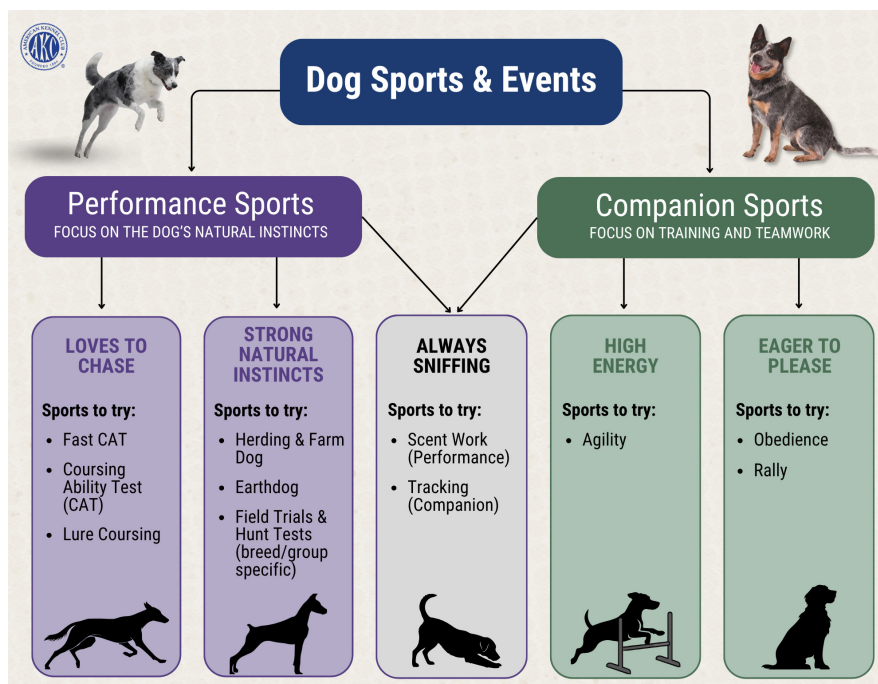
■ **AKC Rally:** Dogs who sync with their handlers excel in AKC Rally, where teamwork and communication take center stage.

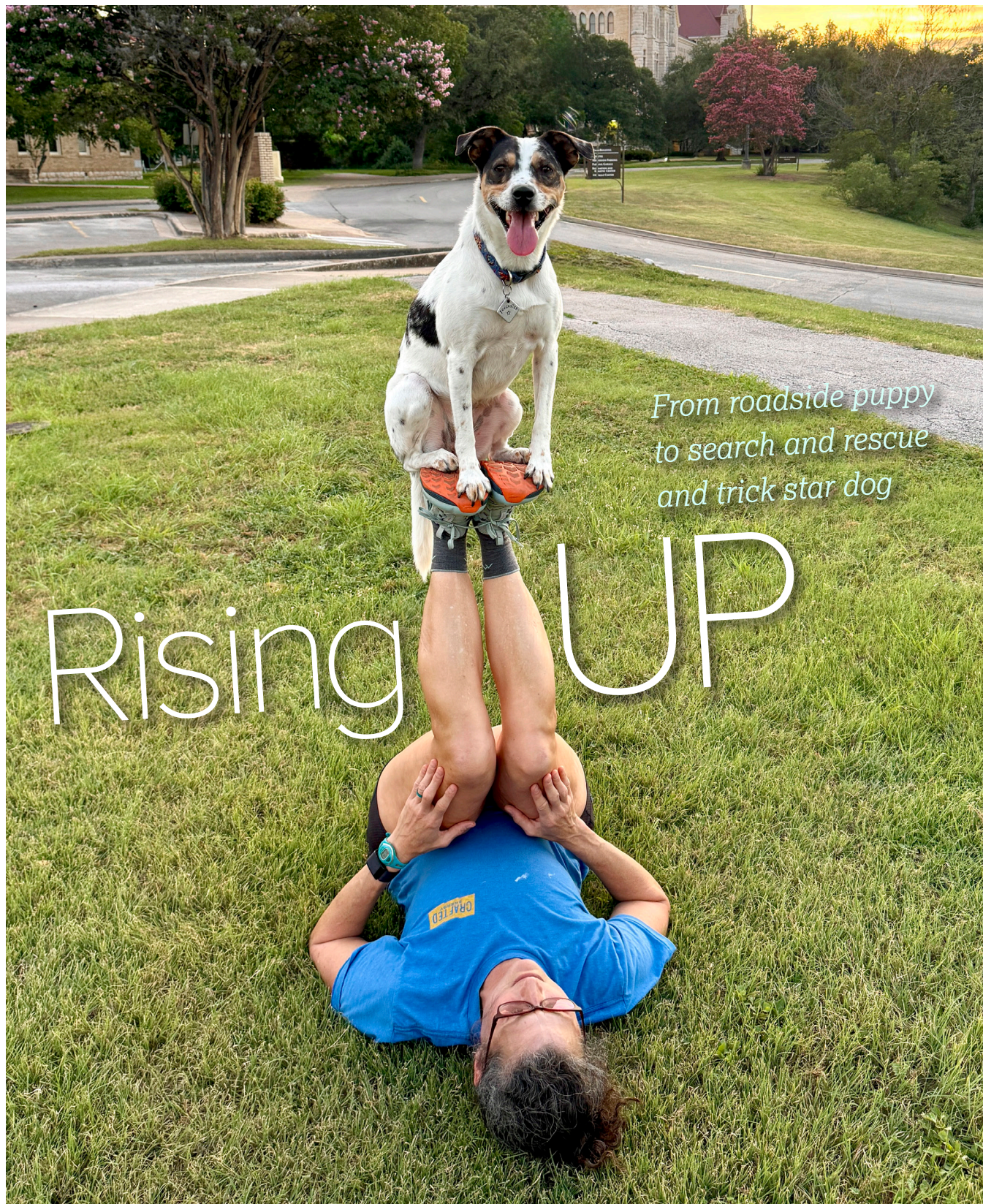
■ **Scent work:** For dogs who have a nose for adventure and love sniffing everything in sight, scent work puts those skills to the test.

If you’d like more guidance, AKC Education offers a free “[Getting Started](#)” webinar series that walks through different sports, what to expect, and how to begin. Attending an event as a spectator is another great way to learn. You can explore upcoming opportunities by visiting the [AKC Events Calendar](#) and searching by event type and location.

Dog sports are about more than just earning ribbons or titles. They’re a chance to spend quality time with your dog, try something new, and celebrate what makes them unique! **FD**

Meghan Cutler and Jessica Vasallo are the AKC Public Education team.





*From roadside puppy
to search and rescue
and trick star dog*

Rising UP

All photos courtesy Heidi Armstrong



Heidi and Dan
Armstrong with Cheza
on the summit of
Grace Peak in the
Adirondacks

While driving on a back road, Laura Jackson suddenly decided to take a shortcut home. She turned onto a Texas highway and saw a car on the side of the road. Sitting beside it was a woman holding a cardboard box.

Two puppies popped their heads out of the box, and Jackson hit the brakes.

"I quickly got out of my car to ask if I could have the pups—and the mother dog. The woman said the momma had been hit by a car, common for loose dogs in the country," Jackson says. "She explained she'd given away the other pups. Free dogs have no value, so I was grateful to rescue the remaining two."

The pups came home with Jackson, who runs a "one-woman rescue group" and has saved many dogs. The two-some—a brother and sister—appeared

to be cattle dog mixes.

"They were loaded with fleas and parasites. Fleas and worms cause anemia, so the pups were docile at first," Jackson says. "They began to perk up that night, and both seemed very grateful for a good meal and soft bed."

The pups were attentive and intelligent. Following medical care and lots of TLC, Jackson drafted a plea for good homes and posted the pups on Craigslist with their photos.

One person who took notice was Heidi Armstrong. Her friend emailed her the posting because Heidi and her husband, Dan, lost their beloved dog, Bella, earlier that year.

"Before Bella took her last breath, I asked her to send us a very special puppy. As always, Bella delivered," Armstrong says. "When I saw the female pup's photo in the ad, I saw a deeply

present, wise, clever, joyful, and intelligent puppy I somehow already knew."

The Armstrongs met the girl pup at Jackson's place on June 24, 2020. "She fetched cheerfully and with more coordination than I'd expect in a puppy that young. She explored and took in the world with confidence and curiosity," Armstrong says.

They brought her home two days later, without a name. That came two weeks later after a visit to a neighbor.

"I noticed him calling her Cheza ('ch' like in church, with a short 'e'). Thinking it sounded beautiful, I asked him what it meant. 'Play in Swahili,' he said. Her name suits her perfectly."

From the start, Cheza lived up to what Armstrong felt when she first saw her picture.

"Cheza skipped the puppy chaos phase. She was trustworthy from the



Dan and Heidi Armstrong with Cheza and their AKC Trick Dog Competition trophy and ribbon

beginning and, unbelievably, never had an accident in the house. ... Cheza made it unmistakably clear that she was extraordinary."

CHEZA CHOOSES

Armstrong's former dog, Bella, was a decorated therapy dog and excelled in the sports of agility and rally. While Cheza was athletic and quick to learn, Armstrong did not want to push her toward any specific sport or activity. She watched the dog closely to see what interested her.

"When we rescued Cheza, I was very intentional not to burden her with expectations of what I wanted to do with her," Armstrong says. "I did not label her or think about her as a search and rescue prospect or a future agility star or an award-winning trick dog."

Her house became part playground, part jungle gym for the young dog. Features included a balance ball, milk jugs, platforms, and various surfaces. "I rewarded effort and curiosity, and she started creating her own challenges—and occasionally redecorating my living room."

Tricks became a natural extension of Cheza's athletic stunts. A favorite is the

foot stall, in which Armstrong lies on her back with her legs extended while Cheza balances on top of her feet.

Soon, Cheza had a repertoire of dozens of tricks, including some the young dog created herself.

"She taught herself to interlock two of her ring toys and parade around with them to get my attention. When I didn't respond quickly enough one day, she came back with three ring toys linked together."

Most trick dogs work for treats, but Cheza again proved how different she was by often turning up her nose at cookies.

"To this day, praise is her favorite reward. She'll turn down food or toys, but she will absolutely work for a genuine reaction of surprise or delight. She especially loves an audience of clapping friends."

GETTING TO WORK

Armstrong had long had an interest in search and rescue (SAR) work. The Austin, Texas, resident is a retired professional mountain bike racer and lifelong endurance athlete. Her love of the outdoors gave her an appreciation for the volunteers who help those who are injured or lost in wilderness areas.

She believed Cheza's intelligence,



Armstrong and Cheza on the agility course



Armstrong and Cheza searching after the deadly July 4, 2025, flood on the Guadalupe River

trainability, and athleticism could make for an outstanding SAR dog, even though she was a medium-sized rescue and not a traditional working breed popular for SAR work.

"Cheza didn't get the memo that she's not a shepherd or a Lab," Armstrong says. "She simply does the job."

Becoming a SAR team requires training for both handler and dog. Armstrong completed extensive training on FEMA's Incident Command System,

wilderness first aid, rescue techniques, fitness standards, and work with law enforcement, followed by a written test.

"At the same time, Cheza and I built our partnership," she says. "We worked on engagement, environmental exposure, obedience, and body awareness so we could function as a true team under pressure."

Dog trainer and SAR handler Ken Bain has helped with Cheza's progress since she was a puppy. "I taught Heidi

how to do operant conditioning using a clicker shortly after she got Cheza. They both took to it quickly, which created a wonderful foundation for all of Cheza's training," Bain says.

"Later, when we imprinted Cheza on cadaver scent, she accelerated quickly because she knew how to learn, and she loved working. Therefore, she was a very quick start."

Her size—standing just 17 inches tall—might make some doubt her



*Armstrong and Cheza
searching after the flood*

strength, but Bain says smaller dogs can be an asset in the field.

"If the dog gets hurt, smaller is easier to extract. They are lighter on their feet in rubble piles. I run a 30-pound Border Collie, and when working the Kerrville floods, I had to pull my dog out of trouble on three occasions, and it was easily done with one hand lifting him by his harness," Bain says. "A large dog would have been more difficult and

stressful. So, I had zero hesitation to work with a Cheza-sized dog."

Some dogs find the odor of human remains overwhelming, but Cheza was immediately attracted to it. It seemed Cheza had selected her calling—as a human remains-detection dog.

Training progressed to complex scent problems, both buried and elevated; large search areas; and distractions like sirens, helicopters, heavy equipment,

Watch Cheza and Heidi Armstrong's winning routine:

Semifinalist: "Cheza" (All-American Dog)

Trick Dog Titles: Get involved in the AKC Trick Dog program that offers titles for levels starting with Novice and running up through Elite Performer. And stay tuned for information on the 2026 AKC Trick Dog Contest.

Search and Rescue Recognition:

AKC recognizes the work of SAR dogs. Titles are offered for FEMA-certified urban search and rescue dogs and wilderness search and rescue dogs.

and extreme weather.

Cheza and Armstrong were ready to start work. But they could never imagine what awaited them. They were deployed after the catastrophic July 4, 2025, flooding on the Guadalupe River in Texas. A 30-foot wall of water engulfed the Guadalupe River Valley in the Texas Hill Country, killing more than 130 people, including the 25 children of Camp Mystic.

"We were deployed into arguably the most challenging search and rescue conditions—Texas summer heat and humidity, piles of broken glass, shrapnel, three-story piles of brush, and all the lives buried in the path of a furious river. We were working in a war zone, and the scent picture was incredibly complex.

"To Cheza, the smell of human remains was everywhere—in the water, in the air, in the earth. To watch her think and screen out the 'background noise' to locate the strongest odor source leaves me in awe to this day."



Cheza's early work in her home gym gave her the foundation to face the many physical challenges. Armstrong and Cheza had to navigate over and through brush as well as work under helicopters and near large equipment.

"Human remains detection search and rescue work is demanding, often heartbreaking work, but it's exactly where Cheza shines," Armstrong says.

TOP TRICKSTER

Not long after their work finding flood victims ended, an opportunity arrived to tell the story through the tricks that started Cheza's athletic career.

The 2025 AKC Trick Dog Competition was open to all dogs that have earned the top-level Trick Dog title of Elite Performer. Owners submit videos of a trick routine that tells a story with a script and uses multiple props.

"I knew I wanted our routine to honor our experience, including our work,

the grief, and the resilience of thousands of Texans, but I felt completely overwhelmed and didn't know where to begin," Armstrong says.

"I just starting writing, and my words naturally fell into a poem. That poem became my solace ... (a) place to feel, process, and grieve. I worked on it every day for a couple of hours over the course of several weeks."

The next steps were matching Cheza's tricks to the poem and finding a location to film.

"The oldest theater in Austin donated their space to us as a gift for our search and rescue work," Armstrong says. "I incorporated an elaborate tree that I built a staircase into. I hung a Texas flag off the tree and integrated a theme of water."

The final product, "When the River Rose," was one of more than 200 entries submitted for the contest, and only three would be selected as the best—one champion and two

semifinalists. "When the River Rose" received a semifinalist honor when the results were announced.

"Our performance is a tribute to the people we searched for, the Texans who showed up, and the work that has stayed with me long after our deployment ended."

Cheza and Armstrong also compete in agility and rally and enjoy long hikes for conditioning, but search and rescue is their job and it takes priority.

"Search and rescue is not a hobby. It's rigorous for both the handler and the K-9. It's also the most meaningful work I've done," Armstrong says. "Cheza works because she loves it. You can watch the switch flip in her brain and her tail begin to wag the moment she hears her search command." **FD**

Penny Leigh is the director of the [AKC Agility League](#) and competes in dog sports with her canine team.

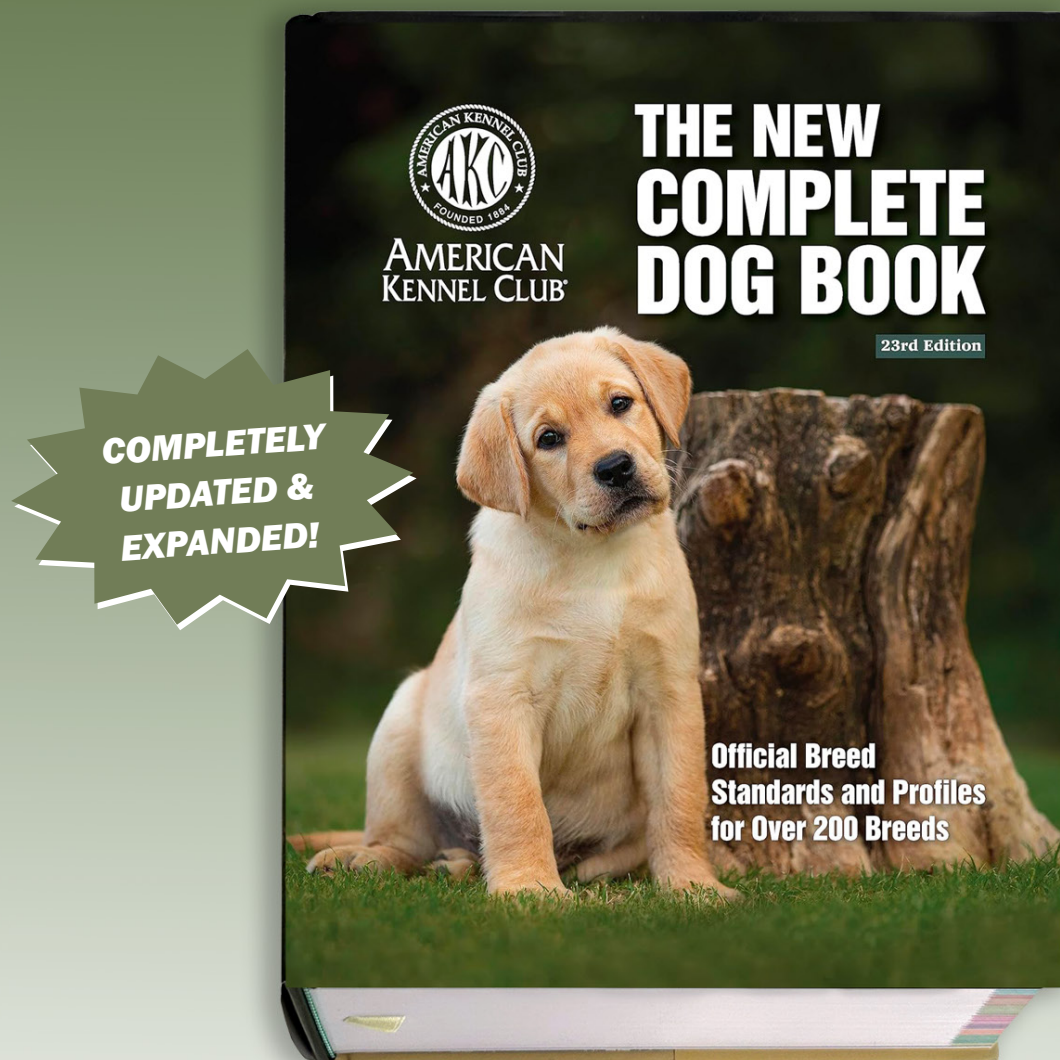
“He has the ‘it’ factor. He loves to show and you can feel it. His attitude makes him one of a kind, and I worry I won’t be lucky enough to find another like him before I age out.”

—Hadrian Towell, 15, of Norfolk, Virginia, on his Junior Showmanship partner, Simon (Gold GCh. Passport Sunkissed It’s A Yes From Me Bonchien). Hadrian was crowned Best Junior at the 2026 Westminster Kennel Club show, showing the Toy Manchester Terrier.

Hadrian likens Junior Showmanship to presenting fine art. “You have to invite people in to look at your masterpiece,” he says, “and part of that is looking like you are sure your masterpiece is the best thing there.”

When asked how it felt to win Best Junior, Hadrian says: “I felt fantastic. How could it not?”

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