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the senior issue



On the Cover: A child connects with Golden Retriever Moriah of the LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs program, Courtesy Lutheran Church Charities

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Canine Partners agility champ

Senior Living

Puppies are cute, exciting, and full of life. But those who've lived with senior dogs know how special they are.

Whether it's a dog you've raised your whole life from puppyhood, or a dog who came into your life much later—and I've been lucky enough to experience both—there's something wondrous about being around these wise canines.

Though senior dogs have many stories to tell ... they still never quite learn how to talk. So, we'll have to do the telling for them. (It's literally our job, after all.)

This issue covers seniors from every angle. We've got articles about how to help **senior dogs dealing with dementia**, and an in-depth look at **expanding the lifespan—and healthspan**—of our senior dogs, both now and in the future.

For dogs as well as humans, so much about healthy aging is about staying active. We look at what we can do to provide senior dogs with **appropriate games and training sessions**, and ways to keep an **always-active dog in the game** as they get older. We also learn that it's never too late to get **older dogs into sports**, or **other types of clubs**.

We also look at the flipside of being a **senior in the dog-owner relationship**, noting the many benefits for senior citizens who continue to prioritize dog ownership in their lives.

Generally speaking, I do subscribe to the idea that "age is just a number." And the dogs in these pages prove it time and time again.

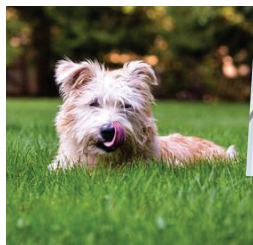
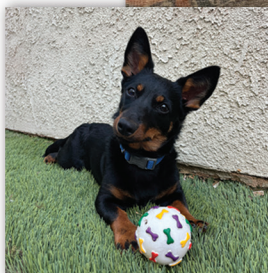
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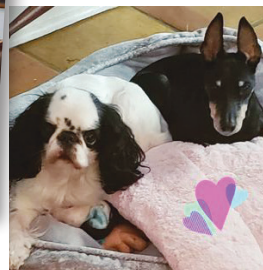
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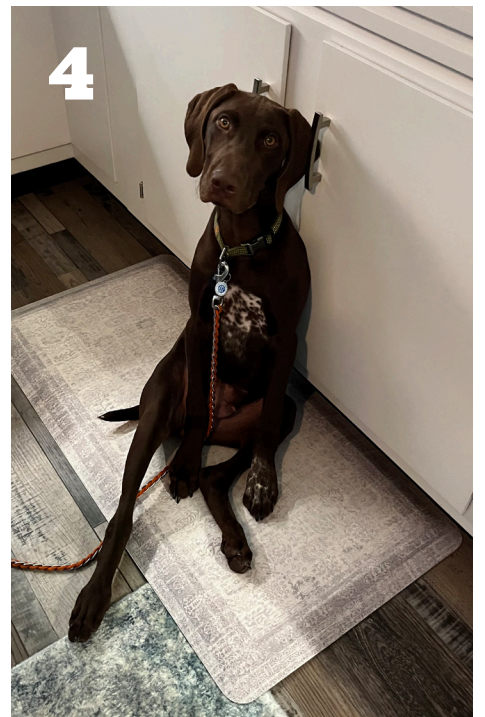
Quality Nutrition



1

See You in September

Whether they're going back to "school"—doggy daycare—or simply back to the sofa, these dogs are ready for another autumn.



YOUR FAMILY DOG



1. SOPHIE, *Molena, Ga.*
2. GRIFFIN AND MAGUIRE, *Birchwood, Tenn.*
3. CHARLOTTE AND DAPHNE, *Krum, Texas*
4. MAVERICK, *Springfield, Ill.*
5. LUCY, *Canal Fulton, Ohio*
6. RILEY, *Austin, Texas*
7. JETHRO AND LAZLO, *Sandy Lake, Pa.*
8. GEMMA, *Mahtomedi, Minn.*
9. NALA, *Sewickley, Pa.*
10. ABBY, *Phoenix, Ariz.*





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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.

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Contest Craze

New Canine Partners mixed-breed photo contest joins ongoing AKC competitions.

The AKC has announced its newest competition to highlight its refreshed AKC Canine Partners enrollment program for mixed-breed dogs.

Submissions are now open for the AKC Canine Partners Photo Contest, which invites owners of mixed-breed dogs to submit photos of their beloved pets. Entries will be evaluated on creativity and originality, representation of the AKC Canine Partners spirit and community, and overall photo quality.

“Responsible dog ownership is central to the American Kennel Club’s mission,” says Gina M. DiNardo, President and CEO of the American Kennel Club. “Our refreshed AKC Canine Partners brand reflects our commitment to welcoming mixed-breed dogs and their owners into the AKC family while providing meaningful resources, opportunities, and a community that supports them throughout their journey together. This photo contest is a wonderful way to celebrate the incredible bond people

share with their dogs.”

The contest will run through November 17. For more information and contest rules—and to submit your entry—see the AKC Canine Partners Photo Contest [contest entry page](#). Winners will take home prize packages.

THESE CONTESTS CLOSE SOON—GET YOUR SUBMISSIONS IN!

Three of our other big annual contests at the AKC are closing for submissions in the next few months. If you have any



interest in getting involved and you haven't done so yet, now's the time.

First is the [AKC National Art Contest](#), which invites young artists ages 5 to 18 to submit their own unique works. The contest closes to submissions on September 29.

While that will be closing this month,

AKC Public Education's Meet the Breeds Art Contest should be open as of this writing. Kids in grades K-12 across the Tri-State area will be able to enter the contest. Finalists will receive complimentary tickets to the AKC Meet the Breeds event, and winners

will earn prizes and have their artwork featured at the AKC Museum of the Dog.

The 2026 virtual AKC Trick Dog Competition has an October 1 deadline for entries. Check out the guidelines and last year's winner on the [AKC Trick Dog webpage](#).

And last—but certainly not least—our very own photo contest, the 48th Annual AKC Publications Photo Contest, will be closing its submissions at the end of October 31. Check out our [contest rules and submission guidelines](#). It's free for anyone to enter. Winners will be featured in a later issue of this magazine—and they'll take home cash prizes.



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Museum of the Dog features Dog Days, Photo Contest winners

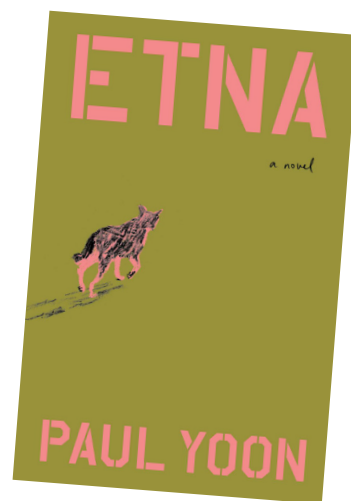
The [AKC Museum of the Dog](#) in New York City is currently showing *Dog Days of Summer*, the museum's member art contest. If you visit the museum by September 13, you'll be able to cast a vote for your favorite artwork. The exhibition will remain on view through September 27.

Our 47th Annual AKC Publications Photo Contest winners also went on display in the museum in July. This is the first time our contest winners have seen their photos up on the museum's wall.

Xoloitzcuintle, an upcoming exhibition dedicated to the ancient Xoloitzcuintli breed, will be on view in the museum starting October 1 through early January.



On The Page



Award-winning author Paul Yoon, writer of novels *Snow Hunters* and *Run Me to Earth* and numerous short story collections, recently released his newest novel, *Etna*. The title character is an ex-military dog named Etna who decides to leave on an adventure to find home, and the story is told through his eyes.

Yoon has experience in dog writing—he contributed an essay to the Alice Hoffman-edited collection *The Best Dog in the World* (featured in the March/April issue of this magazine).

Etna is now available in bookstores.

Coming Attractions

Heart of the Beast

Landing in theaters this month is *Heart of the Beast*, the story of a retired Army Special Forces officer and his combat dog who find themselves stranded deep in the Alaskan wilderness, with only each other to rely on for survival.

Brad Pitt stars as James Belmont, and his dog Odin is mainly played by a German Shepherd Dog named Uber.

For those viewers who have immediate concerns about the fate of the dog: There's no reason to Google it for this movie. Producer Richard Raymond took to social media to explain: "And look—everybody loves a dog. It's about the only thing the whole world agrees on. So let me put your mind at ease right now: The dog does not die. You're welcome."

Heart of the Beast will be released in theaters on September 25.



Top left: AKC Museum of the Dog. Bottom: *Heart of the Beast* / Alamy Stock Photo

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The Dog-and-Baby Lady



Late-1950s *Tonight Show* host Jack Paar once introduced Constance Bannister as the “world’s most famous baby photographer.” And Paar, whose catchphrase was “I kid you not,” was not kidding. At the peak of Bannister’s fame it seemed as though “Bannister Babies,” often accompanied by their mischievous dogs, were everywhere: TV, film, magazines, books, billboards, newspapers, ad campaigns, baby food

labels—just about every platform available to a pre-internet visual artist.

Bannister and the ’50s were made for each other. Millions of returning veterans had made up for lost time by starting long-delayed families. The population soared. The baby boom provided Bannister with an endless supply of subjects.

During these boom years the gross national product doubled, fueling the

exodus of the middle class from cities to newly built suburbs. The dramatic rise in the number of young couples with children, backyards, and leisure time led to a spike in dog ownership.

Bannister’s portraits of kids with dogs—often in the densely saturated reds, greens, and blues typical of ’50s graphics—are delightful artifacts of a time when the family dog was becoming, more than ever, one of the family. **FD**

Images courtesy Lynda Bannister



The Longevity Quest

Extending your dog's lifespan—now and in the future

People are increasingly determined to help their dogs live as long as possible. In a relatively short period, society has moved away from dogs being regarded as livestock to becoming members of the family. In the past 60 years or so, we've seen the shift in practice from having dogs live out in the backyard to having them sleep in the bed with us, and even home-cooking them specialized meals.

As humans have become individually bonded to their dogs, we're thinking about canine lifespan in the same way we think about our own. What if we could extend their lives, even by a year or two? Or more?

The [Dog Aging Project](#) is a massive, long-term study that investigates how genes, lifestyle, and environment influence aging in dogs. Centered at the University of Washington and Texas

A&M University, and funded by the National Institute on Aging, it tracks tens of thousands of companion dogs with the goal of improving canine—and human—long-term health.

The project relies heavily on dog owners' observations and feedback across the U.S. These dog owners fill out regular health and lifestyle surveys, and in some cases, provide DNA samples or veterinary records.

While the researchers eventually hope to be able to extend a dog's lifespan using cutting-edge longevity drugs, they're uncovering plenty of simple, practical things you can do to help keep your dog as healthy as possible in the meantime.

UNDERSTANDING AGING

One factor that makes dogs so unique is the huge variance in their sizes, personalities, and life expectancy. Giant breeds may have a life expectancy as short as 6 to 8 years, while small and toy breeds can live twice as long, or more. No matter their expected lifespan, as dogs age, they have different needs. Steps you take when they are younger can help your dog live a longer, healthier, and happier life, thus improving the quality of their final years.

Senior dogs are generally defined as being in the last 25 percent of their life expectancy (depending on the breed, this is typically 6 years or older). Geriatric dogs are those at 100 percent or more of their expected lifespan.

Seniors often need minor lifestyle adjustments, while geriatric dogs require intense, specialized care and pain management.

Want to help your dog to live a longer life? According to researchers, the leading cause of death among dogs

is cancer. This is true among all breeds. The second leading cause of death is

heart disease, and the third leading cause of death is trauma or injuries.

While we can't completely prevent cancer or heart disease, and while it's difficult to prevent every possible case of trauma or injury, there are steps we can take to help our dogs live longer lives.

PROPER WEIGHT AND CONSISTENT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Maintaining your dog's proper body weight and a regular exercise routine is a critical part of keeping your dog healthy for longer. We know that proper exercise can help reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease, orthopedic issues, and more—but research shows that consistency is key. Dogs that are largely sedentary, then do short bursts of exces-

Senior or Geriatric?

Senior Dogs (The "Aging" Stage):

- **Age:** Roughly 6–8 years for large and giant breeds, 9–12 years for Toy and small breeds
- **Characteristics:** Slight slowing down, potential for minor weight gain, occasional stiff joints, and early signs of reduced sensory function
- **Care Focus:** Proactive care, including annual or biannual vet checks to monitor for changes

Geriatric Dogs (The "Frail" Stage):

- **Age:** Usually over 10 years for medium and large breeds, over 12 years for small breeds
- **Characteristics:** Significant reduction in mobility, fragility, increased sleeping, potential cognitive dysfunction (confusion), muscle atrophy, and increased dependency
- **Care Focus:** Specialized care, high-level pain management, mobility aids (ramps, rugs), and increased, specialized veterinary care

Key Takeaways for Care

- **Mobility:** Geriatric dogs are more prone to severe arthritis and require more support with movement, such as ortho-beds, harnesses, and non-slip surfaces.
- **Vet Visits:** Increased veterinary surveillance (semiannual exams) is crucial for both senior and geriatric dogs, but it's critical for geriatric dogs to manage chronic conditions.
- **Cognitive Function:** Geriatric pets are more likely to experience cognitive decline, requiring changes to their routine or environment.



sive activity like an intense hike or long run on the weekends, can experience a whole host of health issues.

The body of evidence overwhelmingly shows that physical activity is linked to better cognition and fewer owner-reported medical diagnoses. That's because exercise lowers rates of obesity, which is [linked to a higher risk of diseases](#) like cancer, heart disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis, urinary incontinence, and impaired respiratory function that can shorten a dog's life.

As for how much activity your dog needs? The [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#) recommends at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity a day, but the amount largely depends on your buddy's breed and disposition. Sporting and herding breeds, like heelers and spaniels, need far more activity than, say, a French Bulldog or Maltese.

The key, however, no matter the breed, is to be consistent. Weekend warriors—dogs that are largely sedentary but exercise intensely on the weekends—can experience a whole host of health issues. As in people, that kind of intermittent



extreme activity is more likely to cause injuries.

Walking may be the most obvious solution, but you can also jog, hike,

swim, enroll them in agility classes, play fetch, disc, or tug-of-war. If you're short on time, hide treats in your home and encourage your dog to look for them or go on a quick 10-minute power walk around the block. The best exercise is the one you and your dog will do consistently.

FEEDING TIME

Follow the science—not trends. It's not just what you feed them, but how much and how often!

Expensive food is not necessarily better. From kibble to home-cooked meals and raw food to freeze-dried, there are numerous options when it comes to feeding your dog. But many carry a range of health risks.

Like all things, your dog's nutritional needs depend on their age, breed, activity levels, and personality. Keep it simple. Many veterinarians recommend choosing a pet food that meets the nutritional standards established by AAFCO, an organization that provides assessment and standards for animal



Top: Eve100pr / Alamy Stock Photo; Bottom: Angela Hampton Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo



feed. Look for AAFCO nutritional adequacy statements on the packaging, which guarantees the food is complete and balanced.

Raw foods may contain microorganisms that cause infections like salmonella. Home-cooked meals, unless directed by a veterinary professional, may not meet the protein, fat, and micronutrient needs of dogs, and they have been linked to higher rates of gastrointestinal and renal diseases. Excess table scraps, especially fatty ones, can lead to life-threatening issues like hemorrhagic gastroenteritis and pancreatitis.

The biggest issue vets see is overfeeding and obesity. People often underestimate how much they feed their dogs. Obesity has been linked to a shorter lifespan to the tune of about 2.5 years less, by

some estimates, while having a lean body mass is linked to a longer lifespan. That's something noted across all breeds, weights, and life stages.

Additionally, research from the [Dog Aging Project](#) reveals that adult dogs fed once a day had lower odds of developing gastrointestinal, dental, and orthopedic conditions. However, experts advise that puppies, pregnant dogs, or dogs with specific medical conditions require multiple meals.

SOCIAL AND MENTAL STIMULATION

Dog Aging Project researchers have further discovered that [social connectedness](#) can have a profound impact on a dog's well-being. Dogs that had more human and animal friends (cats,

birds, and rodents included) had fewer owner-reported medical diagnoses like osteoarthritis, allergies, and gastrointestinal diseases, a 2023 [study](#) found.

The findings add to [older research](#) showing that dogs living in enriched environments (with stimulating toys and lots of playtime) were mentally sharper later in life. Those researchers posited that enrichment promotes the generation of new neural pathways that keep a canine's brain healthy and adaptable. Play games with your dog, take them on excursions, and let them hang out with their furry friends if they get along with other animals.

REGULAR VET VISITS

Go to the vet for health checks at least once a year during their adult years—and twice a year for senior dogs. Scheduling routine exams for your dog can help you catch diseases earlier, start treatment sooner, and improve your dog's long-term health outcomes and lifespan.

A 2023 [paper](#) found dogs regularly evaluated by a vet were 30 percent less likely to develop chronic diseases. It also found that vaccinated dogs had 40 percent fewer cases of transmittable diseases, while access to flea, worm, and tick medications cut the risk of parasitic infections by about 35 percent.

BRUSH THOSE TEETH

[Dental care](#), too, has been linked to reduced mortality rate in dogs. Dental diseases can trigger inflammation in the body, cause life-threatening infections, and exacerbate preexisting health conditions like heart disease, kidney function, and more.

Daily brushing is ideal, but even a handful of quick swipes across their teeth a few times a week is beneficial.

The goal isn't to make your dog live forever. Rather, it's to maximize your dog's [healthspan](#)—the length of a dog's life they're active and disease-free.



ANTI-AGING DRUGS FOR DOGS?

Anti-aging drugs for dogs are medications that could help them live longer, healthier lives. Currently, two

notable medications are being tested in clinical trials.

Rapamycin is a drug that is being investigated for its anti-aging potential in dogs. There is growing scientific and clinical data on the matter. While it is not FDA-approved to extend lifespan, it is being studied for its anti-aging, cardiac, and anticancer properties, and is sometimes prescribed off-label by veterinarians.

The biotech company Loyal has developed and is currently investigating and performing trials on drugs targeted for senior dogs, aiming to affect the longevity and metabolic health of aging dogs. These drugs differ significantly in their target age groups, the dog breeds they are designed for, and how they function biologically.

In the meantime, we must never accept “old age” as an explanation for a dog’s condition, and there are likely things that can be done to help improve outcomes.

What we can do now is what you already know. Keep your dog at a lean, healthy weight, keep them engaged and active. Keep up with your preventive medicine, and watch this space, because there will be new things we didn’t even think were possible a few years ago. **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.



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Adjusting the Approach

Strategies for grooming senior dogs

As dogs get older, grooming that didn't bother them at all in the past may suddenly feel worrisome to them. In many cases, part of the reason senior dogs balk about being groomed is pain.

Dr. Robin Downing, founder and hospital director at The Downing Center for Animal Pain Management, is famous for saying that old age is not a disease and that veterinarians and dog lovers alike need to stop thinking pain is normal with age.

So, if your senior dog's attitude and behavior around grooming shifts, that's a sign to schedule an exam with your veterinarian to

find and treat any underlying medical issues.

That's step one. Step two is adjusting your expectations and strategies.

HUMANITY OVER VANITY

Adopt this mantra of longtime dog groomers—humanity over vanity. “Overall, the most important thing we can change for elder dog grooming, whether at home or in a salon, is to lower the expectations on the dog,” says Liz Jackson, a master groomer behavior specialist (MGBS) at Spike



Dog Grooming in Biddeford, Maine.

Jackson advises always working within a dog's comfort level. Yes, she understands that it can be hard to reset your expectations over time and even from day to day.

Kim Sykes, CPDT-KA, a breeder of merit and owner of K9 Manners & More in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, agrees. "We do shorter sessions. I often trim nails one day, trim foot hair another, comb and pre-bath brush another, and bathe and blow dry another."

Remember that cognitive decline may also cause dogs to feel easily confused and scared. For that reason, Jackson advises rescheduling a salon appointment or trying again at home on another day if your dog is struggling.

ADAPTED GROOMING

There are many ways to adapt grooming routines for your senior dog, based on their physical or mental issues from aging. Consider these changes:

Frequency and priorities. Laura Tsuk, an agility handler in California, says, "We use a mobile professional for Skitch (an Australian Shepherd). I keep his coat shorter and have a list of priorities with the groomer on what they do and what I can do at home, so we can keep visits short. She starts with high-priority things I can't do easily (wash and dry, then any fur trimming). ... We also do more frequent visits now than we did when he was younger (every 4 weeks rather than 6 to 8 weeks)."

Attention to paws. Make paws less slippery on solid surfaces by trimming excess hair around the edges and between the pads

for dogs with longer coats.

Body comfort. Experiment with different body positions that accommodate changes in your dog's range of motion. For example, Sykes works on getting dogs comfortable lying on their sides for nails and foot trimming. Prone positioning may be more comfortable for the dog, but Jackson jokes this may mean turning yourself into a pretzel to reach the body parts you need to reach.

Traction. Use nonslip mats, even yoga mats, for better traction in the bathtub or for any grooming done with dogs standing. Plus, Jackson advises taking extra time to allow unsteady dogs to regain their balance as you go.

Sound sensitivity. "Dogs can become more sensitive to sound as they age," Jackson says. "If your dog needs to be blow dried, it's best to acclimate them to doggy headphones or a 'happy hoodie' that will help muffle the sound of the dryer for them, or else consider ways to cut out the high-velocity dryer all together—box fans, stand dryers, neck mounted dryers, and human hair dryers are all good alternatives." Or simply let dogs air dry, if possible.

Water temperature. While warm water can feel soothing, Jackson cautions against using water that's too warm and might make elderly dogs "feel woozy or unwell." She explains, "As dogs age, they are less able to regulate their body temperature and may have more severe underlying conditions, like heart or kidney diseases that can affect their ability to handle a too-warm bath. Keep bath water on the warm side of luke-warm and watch for signs of unsteadiness or panting."

Tender skin. Many dogs lose tolerance for being brushed. Jackson explains that older dogs often develop thinner and more sensitive skin, making them prone to scratches or brush burn.



Senior Dog Dental Care Tips

Consult with your veterinarian about sedated dental care if you have any concerns about tartar buildup, gum redness, or pain, which often shows up as hesitance to eat.

If brushing even with a super soft child's toothbrush is a no-go, try using dental wipes instead.

Also, investigate low-impact dog dental care products that are "accepted" by the Veterinary Oral Health Council, such as water additives and dental chews.



If mats begin to form, Sharon Liveten, who's had spaniels over the years, recommends cutting them out instead of trying to

tease them out. Sykes agrees and recommends using thinning shears to split mats and trim or thin hair on hips that often gets compacted.

Shave them down. There's a longstanding debate about shaving down double-coated dogs, of any age, and its effect on coat quality and insulation for hot and cold temps. When it comes to older dogs, though, several people said that shaving dogs down all over, especially for summer, is the right thing to do.

"I have clipped our Australian Shepherds and Collies to 3/4 inches for 30-plus years," says Beth Foster in Iowa, "and their hair grows back just fine. Unless you show your dogs and need a perfect coat, the pups are so much more comfortable in the summer heat, especially if they're outside a great deal. They seem almost giddy after a clip, even the older dogs."

Elishaba Fay, with Art and Science Behavior Services in Colorado, recommends using sedation if needed for shaving dogs down. This includes clipping the so-called "potty path" area of the rear end on long-coated dogs. It can make a big difference in comfort and cleanup if and when older dogs develop tummy troubles.

LOVE AND SUPPORT WINS

It's easy to get hyperfocused on getting grooming done. So, take a breath and bring your patience to the process—and, as Sykes suggests, give your senior dog "lots of treats and petting and let the dog tell you if they can tolerate it that day." **FD**

Roxanne Hawn is a journalist and an award-winning dog blogger. She is the author of Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate.

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Never Stop

Senior dogs still desire an active life—it's up to dog owners to provide opportunity.



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Training dogs for almost four decades has put me in a unique position to be part of my students' dogs' lives from beginning to end. My perspective on senior dogs and how to help them live their fullest lives is shaped by hands-on experience, not just scientific data.

Because these dogs have trained with me for many years, progressing from puppy class through advanced levels and into various sports, I'm able to prepare them (and their owners) long before the canine senior years arrive.

From the beginning of our training journey together, I tell my students that

with puppies, we train for the future. Still, with seniors, we continue to train to preserve their joy, abilities, and relationships with their families. In a nutshell, my philosophy for working with senior dogs is to prioritize preventive care for both their brains and their bodies. It's not just "exercise for old dogs."



The exercises I use all have a similar theme—building confidence—because what I’ve noticed most is that aging

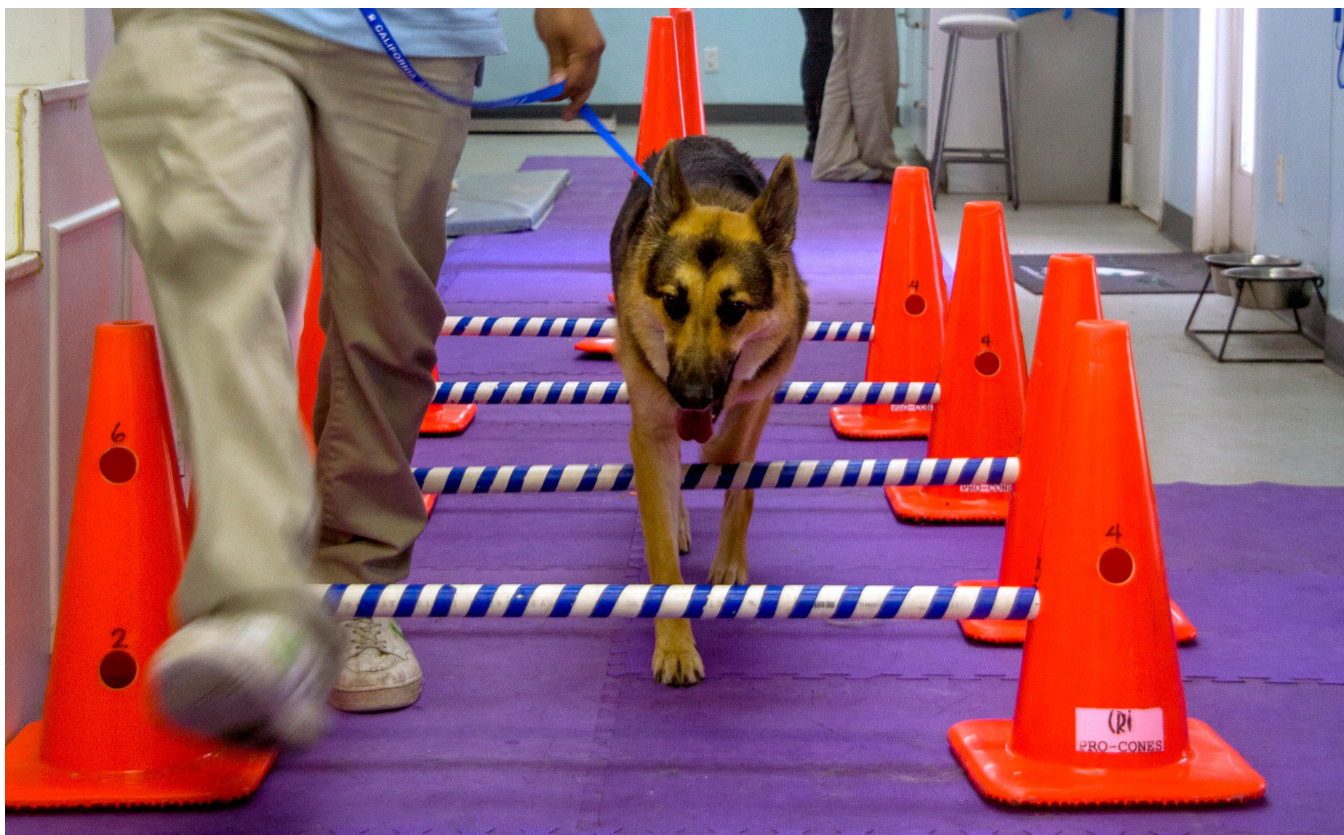
dogs often lose confidence before they lose mobility. Which makes sense, because many times, owners stop asking

their older dogs to participate in life.

For example, dog owners will skip training sessions, shorten walks, don’t play games with them, and leave them home while the younger dog goes on adventures because they assume that the older dog “just wants to sleep all day.” And due to those changes, dogs move less, think less, engage less, and tend to recover more slowly.

The result becomes a downward spiral. Less movement leads to weakness. Weakness leads to instability. Instability causes dogs to move even less, and eventually both their physical and mental worlds begin to shrink. It’s like what happens to some people when they retire. Human and canine bodies and brains like assignments, and when they no longer have them, things begin to deteriorate.

Of course, we should absolutely accommodate physical limitations, but sometimes our kindness becomes overprotection. Too often, owners



Top: Tony Taliec / Alamy Stock Photo; Bottom: Marmaduke St. John / Alamy Stock Photo



misinterpret slowing down as checking out. Most senior dogs still want a job. They just need one that's appropriate for where they are in life.

ADDIE'S STORY

When Addie first arrived at my school, she was 8 weeks old, extremely frightened, and had some pretty serious structural issues. She was, as her owner Shari put it, “a project.” Addie’s biggest asset was her owner, who was committed to rehabbing and training this tiny puppy for as long as it took to give her the best life possible.

In the beginning, we focused on confidence, socialization, and physical strength. As Addie progressed, we added basic manners and command training. Through all of this, Addie blossomed from an awkward puppy into an amazing adult.

Her reliability, both on- and off-leash, her social skills, and her physical strength were so exceptional that she became a bit of a muse for me. When I wanted to teach a dog to back up a wall, Addie was the one. When I wanted to test different objects for “Paws Up,” she eagerly tried everything I asked of her. She eventually excelled in everything from advanced obedience to dog sports.

As Addie’s age climbed into double digits, our training changed from “What new challenges can you do?” to “What types of physical strength and mental acuity do we need to maintain?”

What follows are two of my Addie-approved, brain-and-body activities for senior dogs. After you read them, wake up your senior partner and get ready for some fun training!

CAVALETTI POLES

A row of cavaletti poles is excellent for improving rear-end awareness, strengthening stabilizing muscles, boosting coordination, and mentally engaging dogs by requiring them to focus on where each paw lands as they step over the poles.

Don’t have a set? No problem! Broomsticks, pool noodles, PVC pipes, or even rolled towels make great substitutes.

When we teach this exercise, the dog is on a leash and we walk beside them. The goal isn’t to run through the poles. When a dog moves through them quickly, they rely on momentum instead of balance and don’t lift their feet as deliberately. Moving slowly gives the brain time to focus on where each foot lands. That’s challenging their pro-

prioception, and it’s exactly what this exercise is designed to improve.

One of my students was doing this exercise with her Cocker Spaniel and made the mistake of turning her five- to 10-minute sessions into much longer workouts. Her reasoning was simple: The dog loved it. And while that may have been true, the dog was also showing signs of fatigue, which, to me, is the enemy of good movement. When muscles get tired, dogs compensate by moving more slowly. With any training, but especially with seniors, leaving your dog wanting more is the best way to end a session. A few excellent repetitions are far more valuable than two dozen mediocre ones.

SCENT GAMES

A dog’s nose doesn’t retire with age, and scent work may be one of the most accessible activities for senior dogs because they can work at their own pace. It’s one of the best low-impact, cognitively rich enrichment activities you can do with your senior dog.

A big plus is that these games don’t require special equipment and can be played indoors or outdoors. Whether you scatter kibble or treats in the grass or

TRAINING & BEHAVIOR

play a simple game of “Find It” around the house, your dog is solving problems, making decisions, and earning rewards.

The best part is that the game can easily be adapted to your dog’s physical abilities. A dog with arthritis can search on flat ground, while a more agile senior might enjoy searching around or over obstacles. Either way, they’re exercising their brain while moving at a pace that’s comfortable for them.

STRUCTURING A SENIOR TRAINING SESSION

If your dog has a history of training in sports or tricks, your sessions may naturally be a little longer. The suggestions below are geared toward dogs who are new to training or whose training has lapsed. A great place to start is:

- Three minutes

- Several times a day
- Ending every session with your dog feeling successful

Since senior dogs often fatigue mentally and physically more quickly than younger dogs, a good rule is to stop the session while your dog is still excited to continue. They’ll be much more excited to train again later (or tomorrow).

Training doesn’t always have to look like training. Food-based enrichment toys, snuffle mats, and frozen food puzzles are wonderful additions to a senior dog’s routine. You don’t even have to buy anything special. Cardboard boxes and empty toilet paper rolls make great hiding places for your dog to find treats. Just be sure to supervise so your dog eats the food, not the cardboard.

Personally, I prefer to use these enrichment activities alongside one-on-

one interactions rather than instead of them. My goal is to continue connecting with, or reconnecting with, my senior dog through activities we can both enjoy.

Our dogs spend their lives showing up for us. As they age, I think it’s our turn to show up for them. Whether it’s stepping over a cavaletti pole, searching for a hidden treat, or practicing a favorite trick for a few minutes, these activities remind our senior dogs that they’re still capable, still included, and still an important part of our lives. That’s a gift worth giving to them. **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, New Jersey, and online courses. For more information, visit kathysantodogtraining.com.

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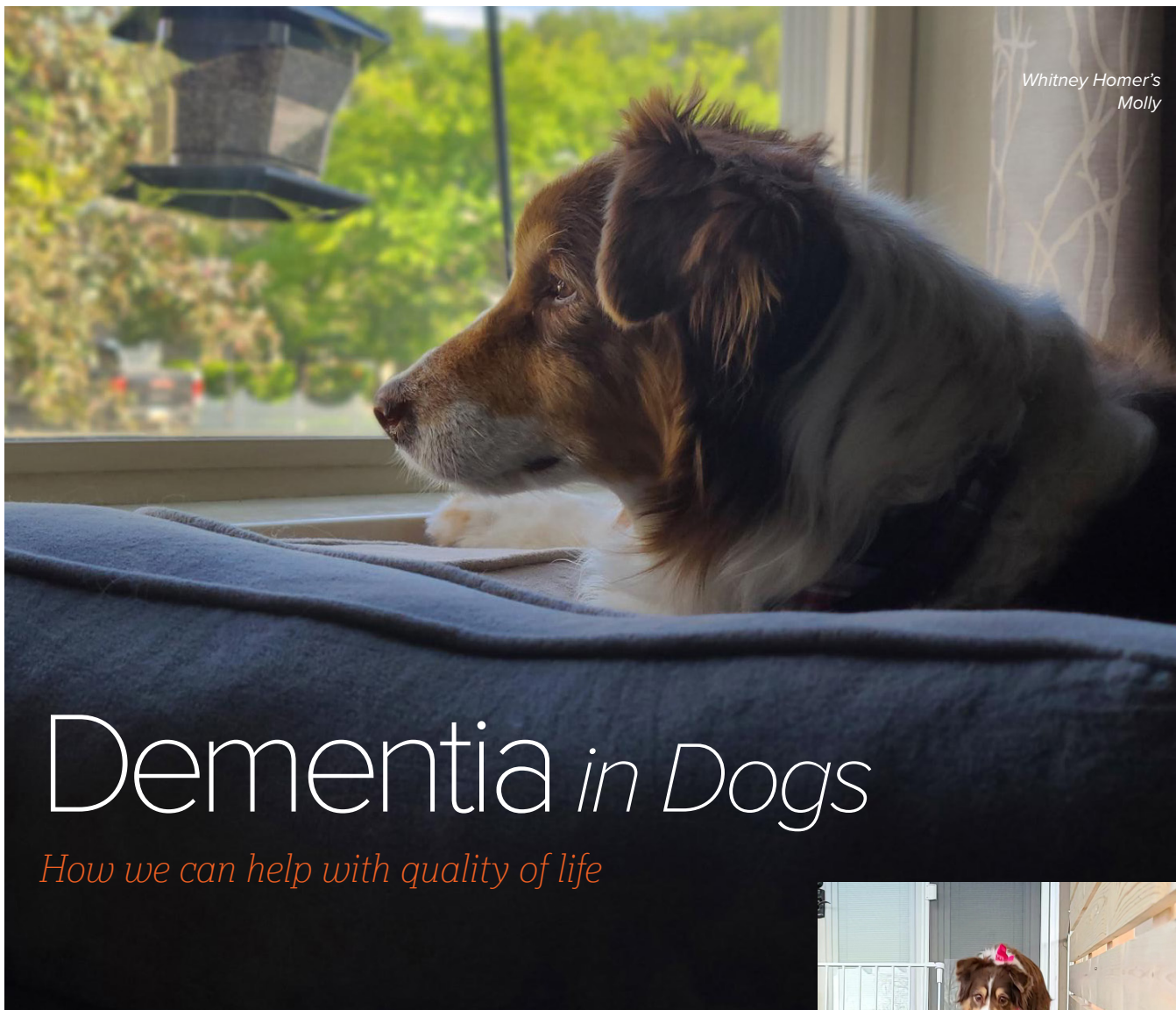
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Whitney Homer's
Molly



Dementia *in Dogs*

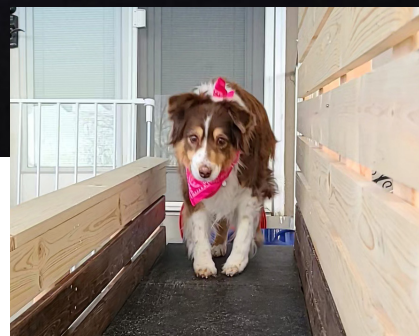
How we can help with quality of life

When Whitney Homer talks about her dog, Maggie, she tells the happy story of training a young dog. But Homer's story about her other dog, Molly, is quite different.

"Molly started to develop canine cognitive dysfunction (dog dementia) when she was 14 years old," she says. "She lived with dementia until she was 15 years and 7 months old when we had to say goodbye due to the severity of her mental decline. This was the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with in my life."

Older dogs often develop physical

problems, but mental decline may appear as well. Canine Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CCDS) is a neurodegenerative disorder that affects elderly dogs. The average age for when the disorder may appear varies across breeds, but the total average age of onset is about 8 years. Large dogs may develop the condition earlier (6 to 7 years) and small dogs may develop CCDS later (8 to 10 years). More severe symptoms may be present in dogs 15 years and older, and female dogs may be more prone to developing CCDS. Sometimes, distinctions are made, with dementia



being considered a more serious, later stage of CCDS in dogs.

For humans, Alzheimer's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder, and in dogs, CCDS is the equivalent. For both humans and dogs, these conditions impact quality of life and relationships with the people in the family. One widely accepted theory related to neurodegenerative disorders for



Therese Hanna's
Sunshine

both dogs and humans is the “free radicals” theory of aging. This says that as aging takes place, all tissues and organs (including the brain) lose their function due to damage to proteins, lipids, DNA, and carbohydrates. Behavior can be affected by reductions in learning and memory function.

Specific changes in behavior when a dog has CCDS may include confusion and disorientation; changes in activity level or sleep patterns; increased anxiety or irritability; fear of people, animals, or objects; compulsive or repetitive behaviors such as pacing or licking people; getting lost in familiar places; forgetting cues that previously got a response from the dog; and no longer maintaining house training.

Therese Hanna's West Highland White Terrier, Sunshine, started life as a loving, happy puppy who Hanna describes as a “wonderful, laid-back dog.”

“I trained Sunshine in obedience, and then she became a great therapy dog. We volunteered in nursing homes for several years. Sunshine was the picture of health, but as she grew older, her behavior changed,” Hanna says as she

described the painful, heartbreaking progression.

When Sunshine was about 11 or 12 years of age, she started staring into space, sometimes facing a wall for extended periods of time. It seemed she was getting lost in familiar locations. She started growling in her sleep, and she needed to be moved to a crate for sleeping. This once happy dog developed anxiety, and her relationship with the other Westie in the home became strained.

Sunshine's veterinarian diagnosed her with canine dementia, and he prescribed a medication. Sunshine responded well to the medication and her symptoms improved. She was happier and more comfortable, although there were still signs of anxiety and disorientation. Once diagnosed and provided with treatment, Sunshine lived until she was 13 years old.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

If your dog is showing signs of CCDS or dementia, it is important to let your veterinarian guide you. In most cases, there will be a three-part approach that includes diet, medication, and daily stimulation.

Diets often include foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants. In some cases, prescription diets and supplements are used.

Medications prescribed by veterinarians may include selegiline hydrochloride (Anipryl) or calming medications to control behaviors such as pacing or whining.

Finally, daily stimulation is important. This can include mild exercise, puzzle toys, simple games, and very basic training with food rewards. Training may be designed to take the dog back to the beginning with skills such as those taught in puppy training.

IMPLEMENTING THE THREE-PART PLAN

With her dog Molly, Homer implemented the three-part plan. “I started

with a therapeutic diet,” Homer says.

“We used a special food and supplements, and these seemed to help. Next, our veterinarian prescribed Anipryl, and this made a noticeable difference for about four months.”

Homer put forth extraordinary effort to provide Molly with stimulation.

“We kept a structured routine, and we changed the way we fed her dinner. We used lick mats for enrichment—she loved this approach and we could see her old self come back. We walked her in a kiddie pool, and she would play fetch or show interest in toys.”

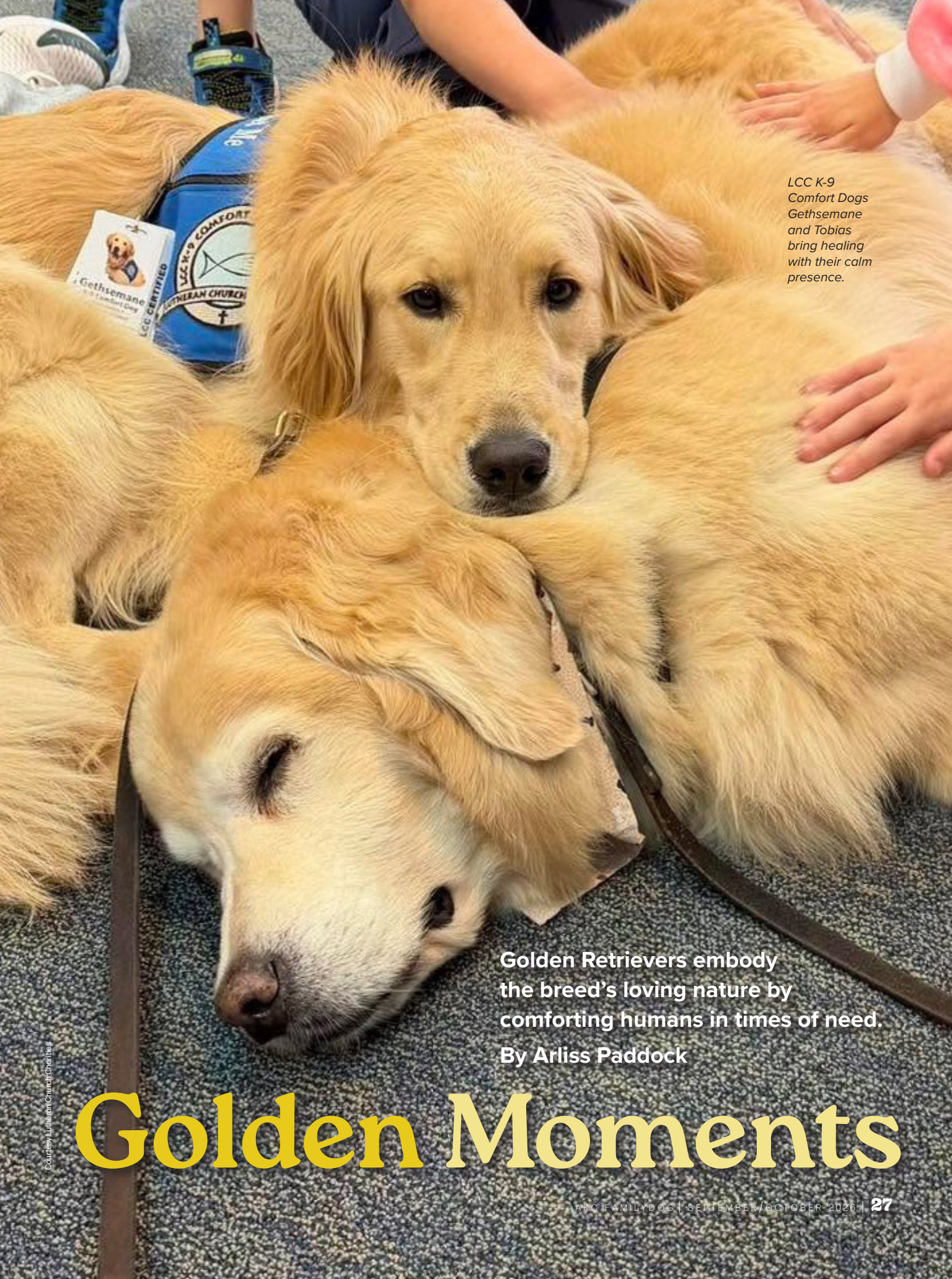
In an extremely honest way, Homer described the hard parts of living with a dog with dementia.

“Once the dementia hit,” she said, “Molly would just pace and pace all night. We used exercise pens because she would get stuck in doorways or corners. We added bells to her collar so we could hear her. A handheld carpet cleaner was a must, and we began to live by the motto, ‘Accidents can be cleaned up, and carpet can be replaced.’ We built a ramp so Molly could get to the backyard. We set aside time every day so Molly could do bird watching—she loved that!—and we would take her on wagon rides so she could still get out in the neighborhood. Dealing with a senior dog who has canine dementia is tough, but until you are certain it is time to say goodbye, there is a period of time where you can help your dog and improve their quality of life.”

We would like to thank Homer and Hanna for their candor when discussing living with a dog with canine dementia. It is one thing to list facts and symptoms in an article; it is another thing entirely when a dog owner has described a painful and real experience to educate others. **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.

Courtesy Owner



LCC K-9
Comfort Dogs
Gethsemane
and Tobias
bring healing
with their calm
presence.

Golden Retrievers embody
the breed's loving nature by
comforting humans in times of need.

By Arliss Paddock

Golden Moments



LCC Comfort Dog Bethesda with young friends

Look up the official description of the Golden Retriever in the AKC standard, and you'll learn that among the breed's stellar qualities are their "kindly expression" and "friendly, reliable, and trustworthy" personality. To those who have ever known a Golden, "friendly" might seem an understatement.

Most Golden Retrievers instantly adore everyone they meet, offering unconditional trust and affection to one and all, irrespective of age, walk of life, or whether the individual is a "dog person." They want nothing more than to be with you and be near you. These dogs seem to live for love.

Their desire for human connection makes Golden Retrievers wonderfully suitable to meeting a variety of people in all sorts of settings. With a wagging tail, soft, silky coat, and "smiling" expression, a Golden can provide nonjudgmental comfort by being there for a human to touch and pet, or to just quietly sit or lie beside them as a peaceful presence. Playing with the dog can also make

for a welcome distraction from difficult or scary moments. [Research](#) has shown what a powerful effect this kind of supportive interaction can bring—with a significant ability to help people through stressful or sad situations, often enhancing physical and emotional healing.

Tragic events in recent decades have brought to the fore the important ways that dogs can serve these kinds of needs and have led to refining the roles of therapy dogs. Although the value of canine therapy has long been known, it was the assistance centers set up following the 9/11 disaster—where dogs on the site provided vital relief to many responders and others affected—that demonstrated the magnitude of the impact these dogs can have.

Expert comforters in times of need

With arguably no breed more perfectly suited as natural comforters, several groups have formed around the country that focus on working mainly or exclusively with Golden Retrievers

in therapy teams that they train and deploy. One of these is the Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) [K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry](#), launched in 2008 and based in Northbrook, Illinois. With more than 100 LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs serving in 27 states, LCC describes the program as a "national human-care ministry embracing the unique, calming nature and skills of purebred Golden Retrievers." The group notes that "LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are working animals, trained to interact with people of all ages and circumstances who are suffering and in need."

LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are trained extensively in three facilities in Illinois and then are placed with schools, churches, and other ministries nationwide. Permanent placement includes full training for handlers and caregivers, with ongoing support and coaching. LCC serves people of all faiths, and there is no charge for their service—the program is supported by donations.

In addition to serving regularly in their own communities, LCC K-9



LCC K-9
Comfort Dog
Sharon at the
library



LCC K-9 Comfort Dog
Sharon with a veteran
before an Honor Flight
trip

teams deploy as needed to different places around the country to provide comfort at times of disaster and crisis. In recent months many Comfort Dog teams have traveled, in many cases long distances, to bring their compassionate presence to people experiencing shock

and grief, such as at schools suffering the loss of a student or teacher, as well as mobilizing to numerous areas where residents face upheaval and tragedy because of devastating fires, floods, or tornadoes. “We go where people are hurting,” says one Comfort Dog team member.

Comfort Dog teams have also traveled around the U.S. providing relief from job-related stress for people in challenging roles that serve the public such as in healthcare, law enforcement, firefighting, and the military. Teams for example have recently gone to airports

Therapy Dog, Service Dog, Emotional Support Dog—What’s the Difference?

Here are a few [guidelines](#):

- Service dogs are specially trained to perform certain tasks for an individual with a disability. This can be, for example, a guide dog who helps his blind owner navigate in the world; a hearing-alert dog who notifies her owner of sounds, such as when the phone or doorbell rings; a dog who helps his wheelchair-using owner do tasks such as picking things up and opening doors and cabinets; or a dog who alerts to her owner’s medical condition, such as seizures or diabetic crises.

- Therapy dogs, on the other hand, aren’t trained to help just one specific person. Rather, they are trained to interact with different people and to be calm and at ease in a range of environments where they provide comfort, affection, and a healing presence. Sometimes they serve in a specialized way, such as lying down quietly while a child reads to them.

- Emotional support dogs aren’t typically trained for specific tasks to aid a person with a disability; instead, they are considered companion animals whose presence eases

situations for their owner that might involve anxiety, phobias, panic attacks, or other emotional or psychological challenges.

Sometimes the differences between these roles are blurred, as in the case of [a special Golden Retriever, Syd](#). Awarded the 2025 Exemplary Companion Award for Canine Excellence, Syd was already an AKC obedience trial champion when her owner, Roberta “Bobbi” Hockenberry, had to have a leg amputated. Though Syd had not previously been trained as a service dog, she instinctively took up her new role right away, learning to assist her owner in daily tasks such as carrying crutches, retrieving dropped items, and providing her with emotional support. Syd relates to her owner on a level that’s “really almost human,” she says. “She is right there all the time.”



Syd and
Roberta
“Bobbi”
Hockenberry

to give warm send-offs to veterans participating in [Stars and Stripes Honor Flights](#) that escort WWII, Korean War, and Vietnam War vets to see their memorials in Washington, D.C.

One of the newer LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs bringing smiles and healing to many in her community is Sharon, a sweet 2-year-old Golden. Sharon arrived last year at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Federal Way, Washington, near Puget Sound. She is the second Comfort Dog in Washington, and the first in the western part of the state. Sharon received more than 2,000 hours of training in Illinois through LCC before coming out to the Pacific Northwest. She has 10 handlers and 13 ministry partners who serve with her. She is available for about two visits a day, six days a week.

Stephanie Pariseau, "top dog" of Sharon's Comfort Dog team, explains:

"Currently, Sharon has a weekly schedule that includes schools, pre-schools, senior living centers and homes, hospitals, a food bank, FUSION transitional housing, a juvenile court and detention center, and community events. Sharon can also be called to go on deployment with other LCC dogs when tragedy strikes. We can go anywhere we are invited to offer comfort to those who are hurting, scared, lonely, or in need of her calming presence."

For those interested in following her journey, Sharon has a social media presence on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

Rescued Goldens healing hearts

[Golden Retriever Rescue of Mid-Florida](#) (GRRMF) began in 1991 when two members of the Mid-Florida Golden Retriever Club stepped up to help a Golden Retriever in need of major hip surgery. More than 30 years later, the all-volunteer organization has rescued and rehomed thousands of Goldens across mid-Florida—and now also runs an extensive therapy program,

One student who hadn't spoken to anyone else during the school year found her voice through reading to Madison. Their bond demonstrated the unique ability of therapy dogs to create a safe, accepting space.



appropriately named Hearts of Gold.

"The GRRMF Hearts of Gold Therapy Program is unique in that it extends the community service mission of our rescue organization," says GRRMF Hearts of Gold program coordinator Ginger Vincent. "We launched in 2019 with 28 therapy teams and finished our first year with 35 therapy visits. Today, Hearts of Gold has grown to more than 220 active handler teams serving their communities in Jacksonville, Gainesville, The Villages, Palm Coast, Melbourne, Orlando, and Clearwater/Tampa. On average we impact 14,000 people every month, and we finished 2025 with 4,116 therapy visits."

Vincent describes the breed as naturally suited to therapy work. "Golden Retrievers, as a breed, are naturally calm, friendly, and very approachable," she says. "They always have a wonderful smile on their face and express pleasure in greeting individuals with a constant tail wag." Although Goldens make up most of the GRRMF teams, the program also accepts family dogs of all breeds who have a suitable personality.

Vincent notes how Goldens can tune in to how a person is feeling. "Several of our dogs have a remarkable instinct for recognizing when someone is having a difficult day. They seek out that individual, staying by their side a little longer to offer comfort, companionship, and reassurance."

She shares a personal perspective on the impact of working with these dogs: "Having a special-needs grandchild gave me a firsthand understanding of the remarkable way a dog can help calm someone experiencing sensory overload. That experience inspired a lifelong commitment to sharing the healing power of therapy dogs. Our first GRRMF Golden, Bailey, became the in-house therapy dog at a special school for children with brain and spinal cord injuries, visiting three mornings each week. Watching Bailey's gentle presence bring comfort, connection, and calm to these students was nothing short of inspiring.

"Our second GRRMF Golden, Madison, possesses the same extraordinary gift for creating meaningful connections. During one visit to a memory care facility, Madison quietly sat beside a new resident

Courtesy GRRMF Hearts of Gold



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A Few Golden Retriever Facts

History: The [Golden Retriever](#) was developed in the late 1800s in the Scottish Highlands by a nobleman who carefully bred several generations of hunting dogs to create a good-natured, sturdy retriever suited to the rainy weather and rugged terrain. In the following decades, Golden Retrievers came to America, where, with their good looks and friendly personality, the breed caught on right away. Today Golden Retrievers are consistently in the top five most popular breeds in the U.S.

A Golden in the White House: In 1974, President Gerald Ford's daughter Susan gifted him with a Golden puppy named Liberty. Liberty was by the president's side much of the time and was often photographed greeting guests in the Oval Office.

Hero Golden Retrievers: Golden Retrievers were prominent among the dogs who tirelessly served in search and recovery efforts following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Two of these K-9 heroes were Riley, who worked at Ground Zero both in searches and as a comfort dog, and [Bretagne](#), a FEMA rescue dog who worked 12-hour days in the rubble at the Pentagon.

Color: The breed is seen in a range of hues, from lighter to deeper golden—color is described in the standard as “rich, lustrous golden of various shades,” with extremely pale or dark tones less ideal.

National Club: The [Golden Retriever Club of America](#) is comprised of devotees dedicated to preserving and protecting the breed. Its members determine the breed standard, code of ethics, and performance standards, and the club provides a wealth of breed education and resources.



President Gerald R. Ford with Liberty, 1974

reading partner. During their first session, the young girl sat very close to Madison and read in little more than a whisper. By their third visit, she was confidently reading an entire story aloud to her. Although she never spoke to anyone else during that school year, she found her voice with Madison.”

GRRMF Hearts of Gold handler Katie K. recounts how her dog Sadie interacted with children at Give Kids the

World Village, where Make-A-Wish families can enjoy a free vacation:

“I brought Sadie to work with me, and she interacted with staff and kids throughout the day. I went to get a drink in the middle of the day, and kid after kid just kept coming up to pet Sadie—even parents. Six or seven kids from different families kept coming up, and they would see one kid pet her and know it was OK, so then more would get excited and come up. We probably spent 20 minutes on that drink run with kids loving on her. It reminded me how special the dogs can be to people who need them. It was different than a scheduled experience, and I think that’s what made it extra special.”

Summing up the gifts these loving dogs have to offer us simply through their presence, Vincent reaffirms the goal in bringing healing moments to people:

“By strengthening the bond between people and therapy animals, [we strive] to enrich lives, inspire hope, and create lasting, positive impacts throughout the communities we serve. With every visit, we aim to create moments of comfort, connection, and joy—one paw at a time.” **FD**

Arliss Paddock is the senior editor of our sister publication, the AKC Gazette. She has participated in canine events for many years and enjoys doing things with her English Cocker Spaniel, Nederlandse Kooikerhondje, and Welsh Springer Spaniels.

who had not spoken to anyone for more than two weeks since his arrival. As he gently stroked her soft fur, something changed. Without prompting, he began talking to Madison, opening a line of communication that had remained

closed until that moment.”

Madison’s special ability to connect had a similar effect on a young person. “Madison also made a lasting impact on an elementary student with selective mutism who was paired with her as a



From left: Golden Retriever Sadie of GRRMF Hearts of Gold visits with a child at Give Kids the World Village, where Make-A-Wish families can enjoy a free vacation. Right: LCC K-9 Comfort Dog Sharon with a Puget Sound fireman



Staying in the Game

Dog owners discuss how they keep their aging canines in sports.

By Sassafras Patterdale
CPDT-KA



Last year, my dog Sirius received an Outstanding Performance Award in the AKC National Trick Dog Competition as a senior dog and was honored with the number one Newfoundland award in the competition for the fourth time. As I hung the ribbons on my wall, I felt a familiar nudge at my leg from a big wet nose. Sirius loves Trick Dog, and she was telling me that she wanted to keep training, right that minute.

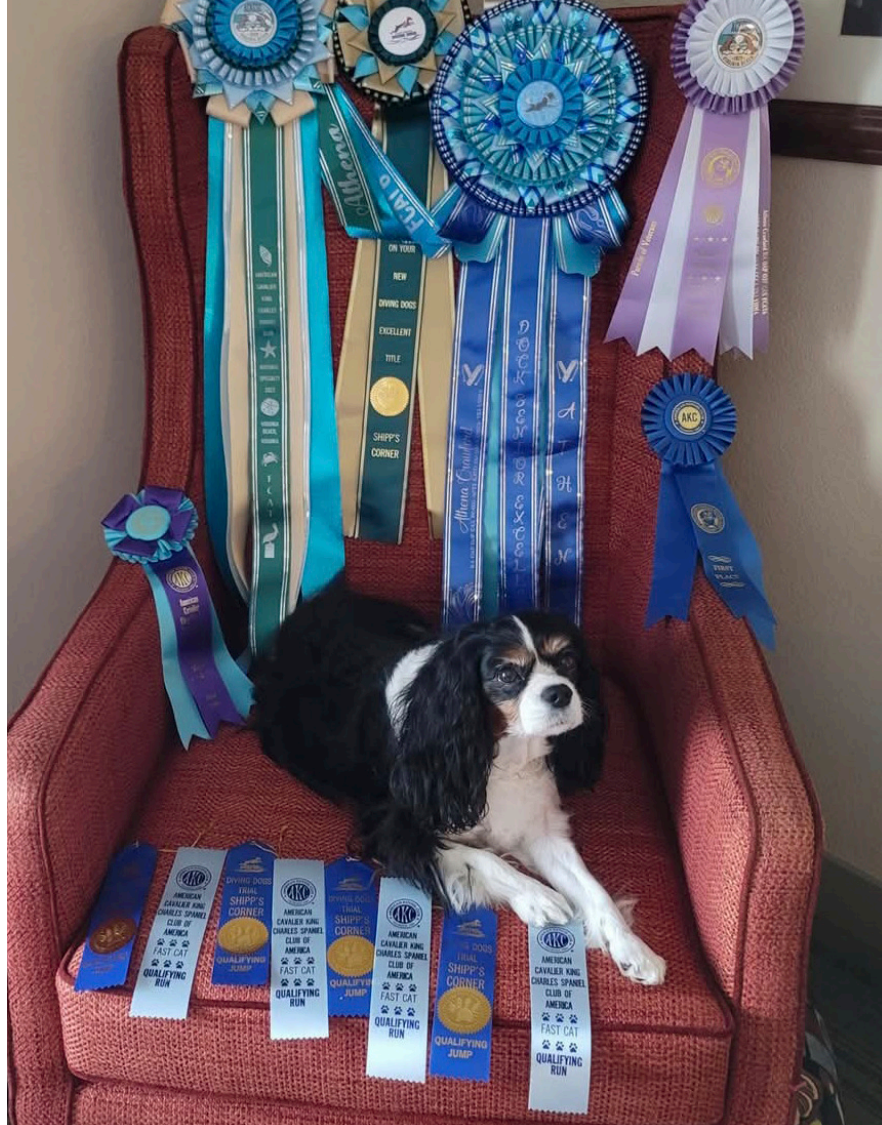
I'm a big believer that there is no better blessing than the privilege of sharing your life with an old dog, and this is magnified when that dog is not just your best friend but also your teammate. Sirius is 9 years old, medically complex and fragile, but more active than some dogs half her age. Sirius is happiest and most herself when she's training, and even if she's not as strong or as fast as she used to be, she's just as driven. Though some of the sports she's participated in have changed over the years, she still loves to work.

A Change of Pace

While there may come a time when some dogs will retire completely from sports, dogs don't necessarily need to stop participating as they age. In fact, there are many lower-impact sports that allow senior dogs to continue competing happily and safely.

As Sirius has aged, I've shifted some of our sports priorities, deciding to retire her from rally after she earned her intermediate title to avoid jumping, while also reducing or cutting some of the more physically demanding tricks out of her routines. Reducing high-impact sports while remaining active in others is a common approach to navigating aging with an active dog.

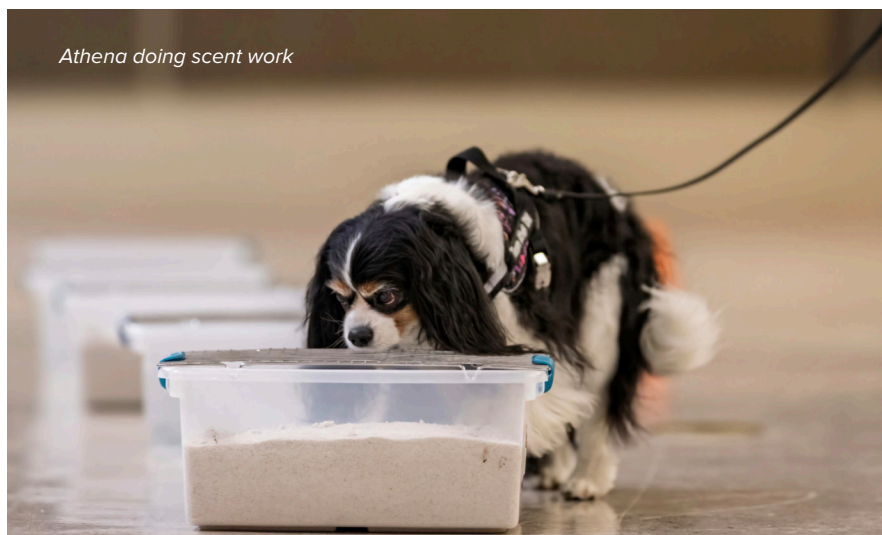
Angela Crawford and her 12-year-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Athena, have competed in dock diving, Fast CAT, lure coursing, agility, Barn Hunt, and rally over the years, and now compete in scent work.



"Athena has been active in competing in dog sports most of her life—it wasn't uncommon for most of our weekends to be spent traveling out for dog events," Crawford says. "I knew eventually we

needed to transition to an activity that wasn't taxing on her body but kept her stimulated and engaged."

As handlers, we may be concerned that quieter or slower sports might not



Athena doing scent work



Atlas participating in Barn Hunt

have the same excitement for our dogs, but we might be surprised.

“At 9 years old, we started looking into scent work training. I didn’t think the stimulation would be enough for her, but I was pleasantly surprised. You’re taking a dog who went from 0 to 60 in a matter of seconds to a sport that tested her natural ability to search and seek out scent at a much slower pace. She took to it like she was born to do it,” Crawford says.

Erin McCourt and her 11-year-old Doberman Pinscher, Atlas, are involved in rally, FIT DOG, Barn Hunt, and obe-

dience. For McCourt, there have been adjustments to the sports they play.

“As he has aged, I avoid certain activities like lure coursing. I have considered retiring him from Barn Hunt since he gets so physical, but we have been able to adjust our approach to keep him safe with guided (or) cued dismounts from tunnel structures, not encouraging crazy jumps or unstable searches,” McCourt says. These handling modifications allow Atlas to still compete, but with less strain on his body.

There is no magic age where we need to start thinking about taking the inten-



Erin McCourt with Atlas

sity of competition or training down. Rather, it’s important to look at the dog holistically, including their breed, size, health, and any underlying medical conditions. Regardless of our dog’s age, we want to be attentive to how they are feeling and moving during our training sessions.

“Age is just a number, but it’s so important to honor the dog and I think every day that we compete about what is fair to ask of him. I rewatch our videos and critique every performance for signs that he isn’t enjoying it. I make sure he has rest days built into his schedule, and that training (and competing) are fun for him,” says McCourt.

Fitness Matters

For my dog Sirius, staying active in training and sports means having a wrap-around veterinary team—her physical therapist, sports medicine veterinarian, canine sports massage therapist, as well as her general practice vet—all of whom understand that she’s an active senior athlete.

Her team is continually amazed at her

muscle tone and overall level of fitness. I've repeatedly been told that staying active in sports has actually kept her alive despite her significant health issues.

We're not alone in seeing the benefits of canine fitness work for senior sport dogs. "I credit our fitness class from early 2025 with helping me realize this stuff was still possible. I'm incredibly lucky that Atlas has been healthy and sound so far," McCourt says.

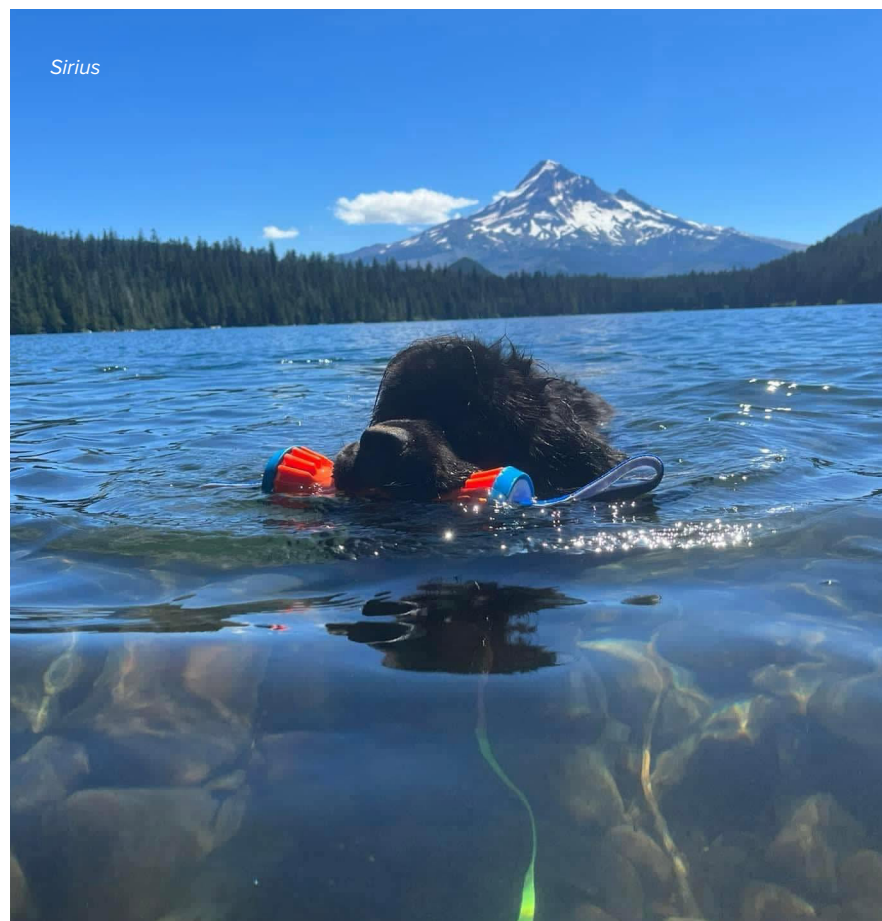
When we think about fitness training with our senior dogs, we're mostly thinking about physical fitness, but it's important to remember how beneficial the mental side of these games is for helping to keep our aging dogs as mentally fit as possible.

McCourt's perspective is that "age doesn't have to limit your dog; but it does matter. There are studies that have shown that even just attending basic (obedience) classes with senior dogs help delay the onset of cognitive decline and improve physical health and mobility. I would argue it's one of the best things you can do for an older or senior dog, even if you don't plan to compete."

The mental aspect of the game is also important for helping our sport dogs feel like life hasn't ended. These are dogs who have spent most of their lives physically and mentally active, training regularly and going places, and just because they are older doesn't mean the fun has to stop.

Crawford says she "can't stress enough the importance of making sure your dog has an outlet as they get older. It gives them, and even you, something to look forward to. ... Retirement doesn't have to be so hard when you can still have fun and still find that common bond to get out and do things together."

My younger dog and I have started training with a flyball team, and the first dogs she's learning to run against are senior, retired dogs. Not only is this a perfect way to introduce an inexperienced dog to aspects of the sport, but it's also enriching and fun for the



senior dogs. Their joy is evident when they come out of the lane with wiggly bodies and tails wagging. They still feel like they are playing the sport they love, even if they physically can no longer meet the demands of actually running competitive flyball.

Making the Adjustments

Sometimes adjustments need to be made in training to support a senior dog staying involved in sports. For McCourt, this looks like planning for fewer shows each month and avoiding or reducing the more physically taxing parts. "We don't warm up as much, and it forces me to train 'cleaner' since I can't have as many reps. I make sure he gets plenty of time to rest in between sets (or) runs," she says.

Gabby Casanova and her Border

Collie, Casey, who is now 11 years old, have also adapted their approach. When he was younger, Casey competed in dock diving, flyball, agility, disc, and Fast CAT.

"Being able to stay active with my older dog has been absolutely great. It helps him stay in shape and keeps his joints active! As long as they're doing their activities safely and they're still enjoying it, keep doing all the things," Casanova says. She plans to keep Casey involved in dock diving, his favorite sport, for as long as he's physically able to participate.

She cautions: "I have to know when enough is enough for him. Especially with him being a Border Collie, he would go until he physically couldn't anymore!"

It's on us to support our senior dogs



Casey

by taking the breaks that they need. Being aware of our dogs' new limits as they age and talking with your vet about how to best monitor a dog's aging body is an important part of supporting senior sports dogs.

For Sirius, swimming remains one of her favorite activities, but I've added a dog life jacket so she doesn't have to work as hard or put as much strain on her body while she's in the water.

The Joy of Working with an Older Dog

There are tremendous physical and mental benefits to keeping our dogs active as they age, but continuing to participate in sports with senior dogs isn't a charity act. It's a new and fun

challenge that improves us as handlers and has a lot to teach us.

"The last two years I have learned some tough lessons, and I have become a better teammate for Atlas. ... I listen to him more now than I did when he was younger, and I think our relationship is the best it's ever been," McCourt says.

I feel the same way. Sirius still works regularly as a demo dog for my training business—not because she must, but because she demands the chance to work. At this point, our communication feels seamless and second nature. I can tell by the way she looks at me if it's a day she wants to train, or if she's happy to let my younger dog take the lead.

Our senior dogs may not be as fast as

they once were, but there is nothing like looking down at a teammate who you have spent years knowing and loving. In fact, the learning for both us and our senior dogs is still happening.

"With the fast-paced sports, I was guided by her natural adrenaline and (her) want to do the sport. With scent work, while it's similar in some respects, I had to put all my trust in her response on searching and recognizing her ways of communicating. It definitely pulled us closer together as a team," Crawford says.

Casanova has found that as her dog Casey has aged, "I definitely feel like I know him better! One of the key things I've developed as the ages is to trust and know your dog. If something seems off, there probably is. The best thing you can possibly do is listen to your dog."

I know that Sirius won't be able to train forever. She's exceeded the life expectancy her veterinary team estimated for her, and on her next birthday, when she turns 10, she will be considered a "living legend" by the Newfoundland Club of America. I don't take a moment with her for granted. I know her probably better than any dog I've ever had.

Just looking at her, I can tell how she's feeling that day, and she makes her wants known. I feel blessed that she has far more good days than bad, and she insists that most of those good days are spent training in the sports that she loves. Most of all, Sirius has taught me that you can always teach an old dog new tricks. **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.

For more senior dog-friendly activities, check out our [Training and Behavior](#) column in this issue.

In a Dog's Age



Lisa Waggoner and
Keaton

*The special bond
between people over
65 and their dogs
brings a plethora of
health and
well-being benefits.*

By Jen Reeder

For over 25 years, Lisa Waggoner has shared her home with Australian Shepherds—and she says they're the reason she gets up every day.

The 71-year-old retired dog trainer adores Keaton, the 4-year-old Australian Shepherd she currently shares with her husband, Brad. The couple enjoys the dog's companionship at home in North Carolina and on monthlong road trips in their vintage Volkswagen bus.

"He's just so well-adjusted and social that he loves the life we lead," she says.

Over the years, Waggoner has pursued activities with her dogs based on their proclivities, from agility and therapy dog work to stand-up paddleboarding and dock diving.

"Brad and I never had children. We weren't able to, and they are our four-legged kids," she says. "There's nothing I would not do for them."

She's found spending time with dogs calms her nervous system, and feels dogs are good for seniors since they need exercise and provide companionship and unconditional love—which is "good for all of us."

She's right. Studies show dogs offer

numerous health and wellness benefits, from lowering blood pressure and boosting physical activity to creating a surge of oxytocin—sometimes called the "love hormone"—when we gaze into their eyes.

Just last year, a major [study](#) found dog owners aged 50 and up had slower memory decline than people without pets. That's a compelling reason why we should welcome dogs into our homes as seniors, according to Steven Feldman, president of the nonprofit Human Animal Bond Research Institute in Washington, D.C.

"Especially taken with all the other scientific research that suggests dogs are beneficial for healthy aging that point to reduced cardiovascular disease risk, increased walking and activities of daily living, decreased loneliness and increased social interaction and connection, and improved mood," he notes.

A Life Among Dogs

Wisconsin resident Cornelia Gordon grew up with dogs, and has always felt it's important to have them in her life. The 83-year-old retired college professor—"I'm a little older than Mick Jagger and not



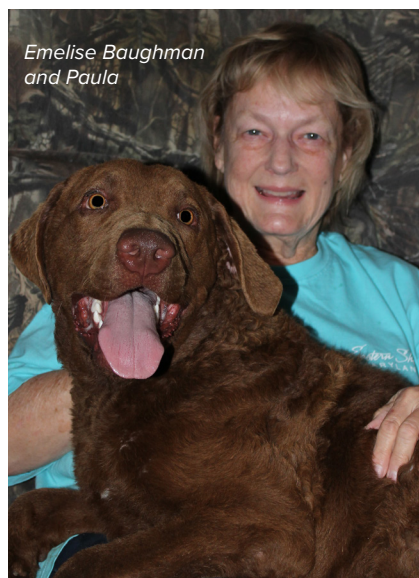
quite as old as Paul McCartney”—lives in her house with Xander, a Large Munsterlander, and Loki, an English Cocker Spaniel.

Her buddies were “really helpful” after her husband died in 2022. Xander was about 5 years old at the time, and she brought home Loki about two months later so Xander would have a companion.

Xander alerts her to any visitors at the door, and Loki sits in her lap to watch TV and lets her know when it’s time to head outside. Both dogs follow her from room to room and sleep in the bedroom with her at night.

“They’re both wonderful. I would be extremely lonely without them,” she says. “They’re fun to be around.”

Chesapeake Bay Retrievers have been constant companions for Nebraska resident Emelise Baughman, 71, and her husband, Pat, since the second year of their 50-year marriage. They chose the breed since she can show the dogs in conformation competitions and he can compete with them in hunt tests.



Emelise Baughman and Paula

But Baughman, a mental health therapist, spent over a decade away from the show ring since her champion show dog, Hazel, had to stop showing at age 2 after she got pyometra and had to be spayed, disqualifying her from competition.

All that changed earlier this year



Brad and Lisa Waggoner with Keaton

when Baughman learned of a female puppy whose great-aunt is Hazel, and whose grandfather is their other dog, Diesel, a Champion Master Hunter.

“I had to have her,” Baughman says. “We named her Paula after Pat’s grandfather Paul, who once told him that if he ever got a Chesapeake, he’d never have another breed.”

Paula got Baughman back in the show ring—and into shape.

“I had to get back onto the elliptical,” she says. “Because when you gait an 80-pound athletic, super-conditioned dog around the ring, you have to be able to do it physically.”

By the time Paula was 6 months old, she’d won her group in two puppy competitions and given Baughman a precious memory: showing Paula at the Grand Island Kennel Club Dog Show, where her daughter and two granddaughters also showed Chessies.

“All four of us—three generations—were in the ring at the same time,” she says. “To me, that was just the best.”

Pennsylvania resident Steve Piatt, 70, is loyal to Labrador Retrievers since they’ve been beloved fishing and hunting companions for over four decades. His wife of 38 years, Paula, shares his passion for the breed and outdoor adventures.



Steve Piatt and Molly



Fred Souza and Bug

Top left: Photo by Bryn Souza; Top right: Courtesy of Steve Piatt; Bottom: Courtesy of Jill Schilp

"We do have a special marriage and not just because of the Labs, but we've always loved the breed," he says.

Years ago, when Piatt had terrible back pain that required surgery, Ben, a black Lab, stayed in bed with him watching the news and *Northern Exposure* reruns. Later, Maddie, a yellow Lab,

stayed in bed with him as he recovered from cancer treatments.

Now Riley, a yellow Lab, and Molly, a black Lab, are carrying the torch for predecessors Magic, Brooks, Ben, Maddie, Hailey, and Finn as constant companions who make life more fun.

"There's been eight (Labs) and I hope there's nine and ten, Lord willing," he says. "We can't envision a house without a Lab."

Dog Time, Any Way Possible

Other seniors prefer to find ways to spend time with dogs without having a pet of their own, such as raising service dogs (see sidebar) or dogsitting for loved ones. Connecticut resident Fred Souza, 77, and his wife, Nancy, frequently watch their daughter's Boston Terrier, Bug—and have grown quite close with the little dog, who enjoys snoozing in "sun puddles" in between snacking.

"I've had cancer over the years and I get really tired. So frequently I will take a nap in the afternoon," Souza says. "He comes in and snuggles up



Molly and Riley outdoors

next to me and it's fine."

Texas resident Jill Schilp, 78, a retired healthcare professional and author of *Dogs in Health Care*, enjoys cuddling with Kringle, the Golden Retriever she shares with her husband, George, on days when lupus makes it more challenging to move around. They adopted Kringle at Christmastime in 2023, which helped them through the grief of losing their previous Golden, Junior.

"Sometimes the right dog finds you," she says. "His size and his energy—and he's strong—created some unexpected challenges for us being older. But it turned out to be an advantage for me because he's very tall and I have a little bit of balance problems. So, I just put my hand on that boy, and I have something to lean on because he's so tall."

Kringle adds structure to their days, which includes watching squirrels in the garden and the Texas Rangers play baseball on TV. Walking the young dog helped Schilp build strength; she can walk twice as far now. Best of all, Kringle is a source of "great humor" in the home with his funny antics, like fetching his toys by name, or flopping onto his back to make silly noises.

"It just makes all the difference in the world to have a dog at this stage of life, I think, if you're a dog person," Schilp says.



Jill Schilp and Kringle



Mojo

Merrie Meyers, Ph.D., a 68-year-old who splits time between Florida and North Carolina, just got her first puppy last year. She's working with a dog trainer to teach Mojo, a Standard Poodle, to be her guide dog since she lost an eye to cancer.

"I have no depth and no spatial perception," she says. "The real experience was walking into a post at Costco because I just didn't see it."

While she teaches Mojo impulse control and basic obedience, he's reminding her to appreciate hummingbirds and smell flowers. Danny, her 16-year-old Bichon Frisé, is grudgingly learning to share her with the pup.

Ultimately, she's grateful to share her life with dogs since they helped her cope with the sudden death of her husband 21 years ago.

"I could have crawled into a hole and



Mojo (left) with Merrie Meyers and Danny

never come out, but the dogs needed to be walked every day and fed every day and they had their routines, and that really forced me to stay in the moment and stay in the living, so to speak. So, I think that's really important, what they do for us: They push us to be present," she says. "I don't think you're ever too old to get a dog." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

Puppy Raising: A Rewarding Alternative to Dog Ownership

When New York resident Jerry Burns, 74, retired last year, he wanted a volunteer role that would help him maintain a structured schedule.

He found the perfect fit as a puppy raiser for the nonprofit Guiding Eyes for the Blind. His job is to help socialize a German Shepherd Dog named Geneva to a variety of people, places, and situations. He enjoys the camaraderie with other puppy raisers, who often meet for training sessions and group outings with the future guide dogs.

"It absolutely makes you feel good," he says. "I love the fact that I can be a step for her future to try to get her prepared to do great things."



Jerry Burns, with Geneva (left), Kohl (on the table), and Buddy (at his feet)

LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Human Animal Bond Research
Institute: habri.org

Guiding Eyes for the Blind:
guidingeyes.org

Embracing the Golden Years

Enriching your senior dog's life



The playful days of a mischievous puppy racing through the house, nibbling on your shoes (and everything else in sight) may now be behind you, but your senior dog still has plenty to offer.

As dogs enter their senior years, their lives—and yours—change significantly. If your dog is retired from conformation, has stepped away from dog sports, or has slowed down from a formerly active lifestyle, the transition can feel like a big adjustment for both of you. However, there are numerous ways for you and your dog to engage in meaningful activities and maintain an active lifestyle together.

EXPERT ADVICE

Lori Stevens, an expert in animal behavior, believes that providing opportunities for movement and mental enrichment is essential for aging dogs. In the AKC



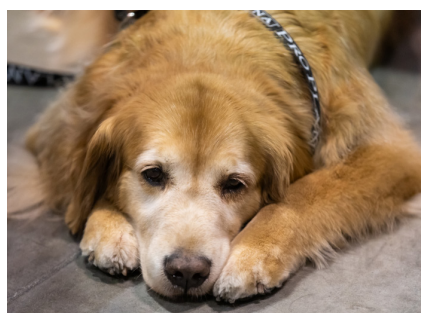
Expert Advice article “[How to Improve Your Senior Dog's Quality of Life](#),” Stevens explains that, like humans, dogs can experience cognitive decline as they age. Providing low impact opportunities for physical, mental, and social engagement could help slow down this process, ensuring dogs remain engaged and happy.

AKC CANINE AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

One way to keep your senior dog mentally and physically active is by visiting

community organizations to educate the public about dog-related topics. Joining the [AKC Canine Ambassador program](#) is a great way to get started.

Canine Ambassadors arrange visits within their communities and use the resources provided by AKC Public Education to engage the public. This program both benefits the community and is a gentle way to keep senior dogs active and engaged. Many of our Canine Ambassadors have canine companions who are retired conformation dogs



or therapy dogs. They share that their dogs eagerly anticipate meeting new people, and these outings provide enjoyable, low-pressure activities for both the ambassadors and their dogs.

Kelly Skiptunas, a Canine Ambassador, says that her senior therapy dog, Jager—a 9-year-old Rottweiler—“gets depressed that he doesn’t get to show at AKC events,” particularly since his younger siblings remain active in the sport. “He gets very excited when we are headed out to visit. He adores meeting new people.”

Despite dealing with some mild arthritis, Jager’s sense of purpose keeps him mentally stimulated, contributing positively to both his and Kelly’s overall well-being.

JOINING AN AKC CLUB

Another way to get involved in the community is by joining an AKC club that offers opportunities for outreach and educational activities in a group

setting. This can alleviate the pressure of being the sole organizer or speaker while still allowing dog owners to share experiences and responsibilities with fellow dog enthusiasts.

There are clubs across the country creating meaningful opportunities for dogs and their owners to connect with their communities. To highlight just a couple: the Paper Cities Kennel Club in North Central Wisconsin runs classroom programs focused on teaching children about bite prevention and how to be safe around dogs. In Grants Pass, Oregon, the Rogue Valley Kennel Club organizes school visits on a variety of topics and participates in the local public library’s “Reading Buddies” program.

Many other clubs also offer opportunities for experienced individuals to mentor juniors or adults interested in



Kelly Skiptunas
and Jager

getting started with Canine Good Citizen (CGC), conformation, and other dog sports and events. For senior dogs who enjoy socializing with people, these types of low-pressure engagements can be both enriching and rewarding.

FINDING A NEW PURPOSE TOGETHER

Whatever you decide to do with your senior dog, make sure it’s something you both enjoy. Senior dogs can become less tolerant of loud noises, other dogs, and small children as they age and become less mobile. Finding a new purpose together can be extremely beneficial for both you and your dog’s mental health and physical well-being.

In these golden years, your senior dog may be slower, but the bond and joy you share can grow deeper. By providing them with opportunities to stay active and engaged, you enhance their quality of life and create lasting memories together. **FD**

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



Old Dogs, New Sprints

Starting agility at an advanced age

One might describe the first 11 years of Bentley's life as pampered. The Yorkshire Terrier spent most days cuddling on his owner's lap. When he did venture out, he rode first class in a dog tote—no walking required.

"We got him as a puppy for my mother-in-law in 2012—as a lap dog for her," says Dr. Jennifer Barber Jones, DVM, of Colorado. "He never went anywhere except the vet and the groomer. Occasionally, he would ride in her dog purse to go visiting."

Sadly, Bentley's "mother" Elizabeth Jones passed away in September 2023,

and the little dog came to live with Jennifer Jones and her husband. They did their best to make the adjustment easy for him, but the move was a major lifestyle change.

Jones had recently lost her first agility dog, Girlie, a Miniature Schnauzer, and was continuing to train her younger dog, Qi, a cattle dog. She thought about introducing Bentley to agility but doubted that he could handle traveling to class and starting a new endeavor at his age.

"He was a complete chicken. If you dropped something, he ran away, so I was not sure he would take to agility," she says.

But at age 11, Bentley began going with the family to agility classes—and, surprise to everyone (except maybe Bentley)—he liked jumping, tunneling, and climbing on stuff. Today, Bentley is 14 years old and going strong as an agility competitor, running on an AKC Agility League team in the Veteran classes.

Most agility enthusiasts start their dogs as puppies on foundation exercises and begin competing with them around the age of 18 months to 2 years. But if they are in good shape, dogs can start agility at any age, even as seniors, and have fun and success.



Waid Harbison in action with his dog, Manny

“Bentley never ceases to amaze me with what he has learned. He can do all the obstacles—weaves, jumps—and his understanding of handling improves all the time. He always comes with enthusiasm. I can hear him barking with excitement when he arrives for class,” says Kathy Craig, Bentley’s instructor.

“I think that keeping older dogs mentally and physically engaged increases their longevity and quality of life. Just because you are old does not mean that you stop living,” Craig says.

MANNY’S JOURNEY

Alabama resident Waid Harbison adopted mixed breed Manny from a shelter when the pup was 3 months old. It wasn’t until 9 years later that agility finally entered their lives after visiting a dog park that contained agility equipment.

“I had seen agility videos online and always thought Manny would be able to

do it. He is very smart and picks up new tricks very easily, so I was able to teach him how to go over the basic obstacles at the park,” Harbison says. “We would practice about two days a week. He got pretty good within a few months.”

After just three months of practice at



the dog park, Harbison entered Manny in an AKC Agility Course Test (ACT). The tests are designed for beginning dogs and feature shorter, easier courses. Level 1 ACT does not have weave poles or teeters, which are two of the harder obstacles to train.

Most agility dogs do not compete in an event until they have completed at least a year of training. But Harbison had confidence that Manny was ready, and they came home with their first AKC title—ACT1 Jumpers.



Top left: Pamela Panton Photography; Top right and bottom: Photos by Jen Crisman



Bentley is still going strong on the agility course at the age of 14.



"We really learned a lot about competitions and how everything would work as well as what to practice. And both of us really had a lot of fun," he says.

Next, Harbison built equipment for their yard so they could practice more. A turning point was when he enrolled Manny in classes at WestRover Agility Club near Birmingham, Alabama.

"Once we started classes, we quickly started having tons of success at trials," he says.

Today, at age 11, Manny is competing in Masters—the highest level of AKC agility—and bringing home the ribbons.

"Age is just a number. Though Manny is a veteran, his body and mind are still sharp. Manny thrives on the attention (and treats) he receives from Waid during training sessions," says Jennifer Crisman, Manny's instructor and owner of WestRover. "I believe a strong, positive relationship with your dog is the key to success in agility."

Keeping Manny active and in shape has helped with his overall well-being

and his agility career.

"Manny and I have always done lots of activities, including hiking up to 14 miles, going on backpacking trips, and playing with toys every day; this is key to him having so much success as a senior dog," Harbison says.

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Both Bentley and Manny compete on teams with the AKC Agility League. Around the country, teams of three to eight dogs compete on their home fields and run the same courses during the same time frames. The League offers a Veterans class for dogs 10 years and older. Seniors are allowed lower jumps, and they receive a 2-second handicap.

Bentley runs with the Jumping Jackalopes in Colorado, while Manny is a member of WestRover's Team2Beat in Alabama.

"I absolutely love the League. It's a chance for us to compete, socialize, and have fun without the pressures of a big show—perfect for us," Jones, Bentley's handler, says.

"I love competing in League with my teammates," Harbison says. "We are all very encouraging and supportive of each other, and I have a lot of amazing memories just one year into doing League."

If you have an older dog and want to try agility or other new activity, first make sure they are physically fit for the task. Have your veterinarian give them a physical examination and explain what activity you plan to pursue, Jones says. If your vet thinks agility is too much, there are other, less taxing sports that keep your pet engaged, including AKC Scent Work and AKC Rally.

"As a vet, I see a lot of cognitive decline in senior dogs, and I think agility is helping keep Bentley sharp," Jones says.

Another benefit is that former "chicken" Bentley has gained confidence.

"It has helped Bentley come out of his shell so much. I never thought Bentley would love it as much as he does. When you say 'agility' at home, he bounces so much it's hard to put his harness on," she says. **FD**

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

THE END OF THE LEASH

AS TOLD TO PHIL DZIKIY

My friends have grown used to hearing, ‘Sorry, I can’t ... I have agility.’ What started as a way to keep Millie active quickly became my favorite hobby.

—Lexi Schreppel of Charlotte, N.C. After adopting mixed-breed Millie, Schreppel was looking for a way to get her more exercise and mental stimulation. She started agility classes with Millie, and Schreppel soon decided that to push themselves in the sport, getting Millie registered with AKC Canine Partners “was an easy decision.”

Years later, what was once a curiosity has turned into a full-fledged passion for Schreppel and Millie. Schreppel’s backyard is full of agility equipment, and Millie is now a MACH2, or two-time Master Agility Champion.



Courtesy Lexi Schreppel



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!



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