

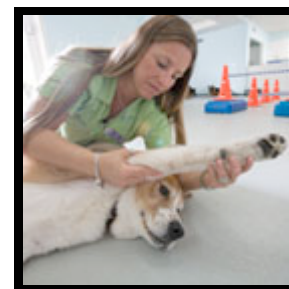
Personal Trainers for Fat Pets

by *Lenore Skenazy*

September 24, 2010 | 9:55pm

A shocking new study reveals that half of all pets are overweight. Lenore Skenazy talks to the fitness gurus slimming down America's big dogs and fat cats.

"Jamal, he's a super-handsome guy and he comes in and he does a combination of things," says personal trainer Jessica Waldman, 34 years old, talking about one of her favorite clients. "He does 30 minutes of exercises that are core strengthening, and he'll also do instability work." That is, he'll balance or power walk on an unstable surface to strengthen his back and stomach muscles. Then he does an obstacle course to limber up, or some endurance work on the treadmill.



Dr. Amy L. Kramer performs stretching exercises with an animal at California Animal Rehabilitation in Santa Monica.

(Photo: Jesse Eisenhardt)

One brochure insists that "dogs do not need special training to enjoy and benefit from Super Fit Fido Club, only a willingness and commitment toward getting healthy."

And then he gets a treat.

Welcome to the \$130-per-hour world of personal training for dogs (as well as the occasional cat, and, at least once at Waldman's gym, a very old, blind rabbit named Nibbles). The recently [released third annual study](#) by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention reports that more than 45 percent of dogs and 58 percent of cats are overweight. As such, where personal fitness training for humans hit its stride a generation ago, professional pet-fitness services have now popped up in a smattering of American cities.

"We do all sorts of 'people yoga' positions for pets," says Waldman, a veterinarian whose [CARE: California Animal Rehabilitation](#) center outside of Los Angeles employs four physical therapists who formerly worked on people, including one who trained Olympic athletes. "For example," she says, "we do the 'downward dog.' In people, it's where you bend over and put your hands on the ground so you have all four down and you sort of look like a little triangle with your rear end up."

Just like dogs do naturally when they're telling you they're ready to go for a walk. To train them to do it repeatedly, however, Waldman's therapists wait for their clients to do a downward dog on their own, then reinforce it by giving them a treat—a low-cal dehydrated sweet-potato fry that, more than once, Waldman has noticed pet owners absent-mindedly snacking on while their dogs worked out. "They're marked 'For Animals,'" she says, "but it's questionable these days what's for whom."

The line has indeed blurred. Consider Paws-irates, another new animal exercise regimen, developed by Andrea Metcalf. "Paws-irates is a way for you to stay engaged with your pet while you still work out yourself," says Metcalf. Basically, the dog is used like a free weight: You lift it, you shift it, you put it down and pick it up. And then there's another exercise where you sit on the ground, legs out, with the dog between your legs. When you lean forward, your pet suddenly becomes a pillow. At the end, the dog is rewarded with a wonderful massage delivered by you, a key part of the tandem workout.

Owners are encouraged to be heavily invested in their pet's exercise regimen. In Manhattan, the new [Super Fit Fido Club](#) claims its mission is to “teach dog lovers how to become their dog’s personal trainer for life.”

Fido’s “Club”—actually a series of classes offered outdoors—is the brainchild of Gail Miller Bisher, a dog handler who trained show dogs for 30 years and served as spokeswoman and marketing director for the American Kennel Club. She recently turned her attention to civilian dogs, in part because she was dismayed to see them getting so fat. Soaring obesity rates are causing pets terrible problems, says Bisher: heart disease, diabetes, the blahs. Too many of them spend their days lying listlessly on the living room floor.

Not so Bisher, a sort of Jillian Michaels to the animal world, whose workouts include this balance exercise: “The dog is standing still and then you take a front leg and you lift it off the ground, forward,” she says, “and you take the opposing rear leg and hold it backward.” It’s very similar to a human exercise, whereby one gets down on their hands and knees then sticks one leg out and the opposite arm, and tries not to tip over. “It’s not easy, but it’s good for the stomach and abs,” says Bisher, “and it’s the same thing for the dog.”

breakAd

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But that does raise the question: Do dogs need to make a commitment to exercise? In a way, most dogs already seem to have that instinct; they were born to run and jump and do the downward dog. According to Waldman, however, unsupervised running and jumping isn’t the same as a structured workout routine, or even necessarily desirable. “When do children get hurt? When they romp!” she says, applying the theory of helicopter parenting to pet care.

If anything, perhaps it’s their owners—the ones who spend 12 hours a day staring at some sort of screen—who are the real couch potatoes. In the end, the creatures who may really benefit from pet fitness routines may not just be the ones with a paw in the air, but the ones helping to lift that paw instead of lifting that beer.

“All the physical therapists say the humans don’t do their own exercises at home,” laughs Waldman. “But they’ll do it for their pets.”

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