

The Whole Dog Journal

March 2011 Issue

Canine Orthopedic Equipment Designed for Increased Mobility and Extra Support

By Lisa Rodier

“Assistive equipment” that can help your dog maintain his mobility.

Do you have a dog recovering from orthopedic or neurologic surgery, one who has mobility issues, or a senior dog who has arthritis? If so, at some point, you have probably wished you could do something – anything! – to help make your dog’s life (and your own) a little easier.

As someone who has shared her life recently with two large breed, geriatric dogs, I can attest firsthand that having a little bit of help can make all the difference in the world. Axel, our 85 lb. Bouvier, in particular, needed assistance toward the end of his life with getting up from lying down, being lightly supported during toileting, and occasionally steadied while walking. We used a few of the products listed below and found that they helped him maintain a good quality of life, mobility, and independence while lessening the physical strain on us.

I asked two veterinarians who specialize in canine rehabilitation to share some of their top picks for canine assistive/rehabilitative equipment. Laurie McCauley, DVM, CCRT, is founder and medical director of TOPS Veterinary Rehabilitation in Grayslake, Illinois, and is considered one of the pioneers in the field of veterinary rehabilitation. Evelyn Orenbuch, DVM, CAVCA, CCRT, recently opened Georgia Veterinary Rehabilitation, Fitness and Pain Management in Marietta, Georgia, and has focused on veterinary rehab medicine since 2003. (Full disclosure: I have worked with Dr. Orenbuch in my capacity as a marketing consultant during the launch of her new clinic.)

Harnesses

My favorite tool (and that of both veterinarians) is RuffWear’s Web Master™ Harness, described as a supportive, multi-use harness. Originally designed for dogs with active lifestyles (e.g., hiking, search and rescue), the harness has gained a big following with pet people looking for a way to give their dogs assistance in getting up and moving around, whether it be post-surgery or due to a degenerative or other medical condition. The harness features a well-placed, large handle, and is sturdy, machine-washable, and great for helping a dog up, or providing a steadying hand. The only downside is that the dog is required to lift a front paw to get into the harness. Suggested retail price: \$50.

Offering more support is the Help ’Em Up Harness from Blue Dog Designs. Both vets and I also give this product four paws up. The Help ’Em Up is a complete shoulder and hip harness system, featuring two comfortable, rubber handles, one at the front and one at the back. The harness is well made, machine washable, and the front support is detachable from the back. To put the harness on, you don’t need to lift any of the dog’s limbs; I was even able to put it on my Bouvier, Axel, when he was lying down. Suggested retail price: \$90 to \$110.

Both the Web Master and Help ’Em Up are comfortable enough for the dog to wear throughout the day in the house.

Foot Wear

For dogs who have difficulty navigating slippery floors, Dr. McCauley likes Show Foot™ Anti-Slip Spray by Bio-Groom. Show Foot can be sprayed directly on the bottom of the dog’s feet (pads), or, if the dog is sensitive to the spray sound, can be sprayed on a cotton ball and dabbed on. The spray



In his final year, Axel, author Lisa Rodier’s senior dog, was frequently outfitted with RuffWear’s Web Master Harness. It helped Lisa and her husband provide Axel with extra support when he was unsteady or weak.



The Help ’Em Up Harness from Blue Dog Designs has two well-placed handles allowing for ease of maneuvering a dog who needs extra assistance.



makes the feet feel tacky so they are less likely to slide on indoor slick surfaces.

Having hardwood floors in our house, I tried this product with Axel and found some success. It did leave some smudges where he walked, but they were easily wiped up. Priced at about \$10.

Particularly for outdoor use, but great for any dog needing extra traction indoors or out, Dr. McCauley recommends Thera-Paw boots by Thera-Paw. These boots are made of a comfortable, breathable, lightweight, washable neoprene material. They are unique in that they have a front opening, so they're great for dogs who don't like to put their feet into boots. The boots use a Velcro closure, and have a natural flex point.

Although suitable for indoor use, these boots are especially good for dogs who need help outside or who chew their feet. The boots are sold individually, which is a nice option if your dog needs only two. Suggested retail: \$22.

Mobility

For dogs who have limited hind end mobility and strength, Walkin' Wheels offers a two-wheeled adjustable wheelchair that can be adapted as your dog's needs change.

When a dog first requires a cart, he might be strong in the front end. But with time, or if he has a condition such as degenerative myelopathy, his front end can become weak, too. Dr. McCauley likes Walkin' Wheels because the angle of the wheels, and therefore the cart's balance point, can be changed to take the weight off of the dog's front end, allowing longer ambulatory quality of life for him.

The company sells direct to consumers, and there are numerous instructional videos on fit and sizing on the company website. However, Dr. McCauley recommends that consumers work with their rehab veterinarian to get the correct fit. Walkin' Wheels are priced from about \$250 to \$500.

For dogs who cannot put their full weight on their front limbs, but still have motor ability in their hind limbs, Dr. Orenbuch likes a four-wheeled cart, so that the dog can continue to engage his hind legs. A "quad cart" can give the dog support by transferring his weight to the wheels while allowing him to use his legs as much or as little as possible.

Putting a disabled dog into a cart does not have to signal the end, says Dr. Orenbuch. Depending on your pet's condition, using a quad cart can actually speed the rehab process, allowing the dog to achieve greater mobility. She does not have a particular model that is a favorite. Talk with your dog's rehab vet about whether your dog is a candidate for a quad cart.

Other Aids

Dr. Orenbuch casts a vote for another Thera-Paw product, the Hind Limb Dorsi-Flex Assist. These light-weight custom braces provide support and stability for weak or dragging rear paws. Dr. Orenbuch likes them for dogs who have neurologic deficits such as degenerative myelopathy or disc disease, and whose rear toes knuckle, or turn under, as a result.

This product allows those dogs to walk nearly normally and have been used on dogs ranging from a 2-lb. Chihuahua to a 220-lb. Bull Mastiff. She cautions that they are not, carte blanche, for any dog with these conditions, and should be prescribed and fitted by your rehab veterinarian. They generally retail for \$75 and up; this is typically a custom-ordered and custom-made product.

Many older dogs have chronically overused or injured their wrists, resulting in arthritis. For those dogs, or others who have wrist pain or have stretched the ligaments that stabilize the wrist, Dr. McCauley recommends Canine Icer Carpal Wraps. Many people don't realize that sore wrists are a problem for their dogs.



Thera-Paw boots are lightweight, breathable, and utilize a front closure for easy on and off. Photo courtesy of Thera-Paw.



Handicapped Pets' Walkin' Wheels can be adapted to support the dog's rear end, or to take some weight off his front end, as his needs change.



Canine Icer Carpal Wraps



How can you tell? If your dog has his shoulder and elbow bent, when you bend his wrist downward, his toes should be able to touch his forearm. If this motion is uncomfortable, or if he tightens his muscles or pulls away, then Carpal Wraps can help.

Carpal support is also good for dogs whose wrist joints bend the “wrong way” when they’re standing. These dogs have hyperextension, and carpal support can help slow the progression of arthritis and the accompanying discomfort. Dr. McCauley likes the Carpal Wraps because they do not stop the dog from using the wrist (immobilization makes the joint weaker) but work by preventing the wrist from hyper-extending (which is what causes pain). She recommends dogs wear them on walks or when playing or running around. Suggested retail price: \$21 (each).

Lisa Rodier is a frequent contributor to WDJ. She recently assisted in the launch of the Georgia Veterinary Rehabilitation, Fitness, and Pain Management facility. She shares her home with her husband and senior Bouvier, Jolie.

What you can do...

Resources Mentioned in This Article

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Comments (3)

I was very disturbed by the article in the latest issue of WDJ on assistive equipment. To have included an article that provided opinions on products, specifically wheelchairs, while containing a “full disclosure” statement I think is irresponsible. At the very least, there might have been a disclaimer at the end of the article to make it clear that WDJ acknowledges there are other companies manufacturing mobility carts, as well as other rehabilitative aids. Your readers who are less informed might easily take their opinions as “gospel”, rather than seeing them as just opinions.

As the Sales Director for Eddie's Wheels for Pets and a certified small animal massage therapist, I truly believe that our carts work with the biomechanics of the dog in a very healthy way. Over the past several years, as a subscriber and a holistic health care provider, I have come to look upon your publication as a valuable resource. Please return to the highly professional and unbiased viewpoint that I have come to know.

Carole Groman, MST, CSAMT,RP

Posted by: Carole G | March 14, 2011 2:18 PM [Report this comment](#)

Over 10 years ago, Whole Dog Journal helped to put Eddie's Wheels in business by publishing a letter I wrote about our brand-new design for a dog wheelchair that eliminated many of problems associated with canine carts: decubital ulcers in the groin due to saddles that support on soft tissue, poor biomechanics and bad craftsmanship. Since then Eddie's Wheels has become the preferred canine wheelchair by most veterinary professionals, including Dr. McCauley. I was disappointed by this article's lack of research and objectivity. Handicapped Pets cart is a pre-fabricated one size fits all (does it actually fit anyone) cart that can be purchased by vets at wholesale prices and resold at a profit. A complete analysis of its engineering, or lack thereof, can be found on the Eddie's Wheels website, which has links to a technical comparison and short videos showing the differences between this product and ours. Walkin Wheels cannot be upgraded to compensate for weakness in the forelimbs, and has NO ability to be upgraded to a four-wheel cart. No one at the Handicapped Pets organization has lived with or cared for a disabled animal and they are not qualified to offer customer assistance. We hear from people every week about their frustration with Walk'nWheels carts – dogs who refuse to budge in the restrictive harness, are too weak to pull the heavy load (their cart is 20% heavier and wider than an Eddie's Wheels). These biomechanical and service issues matter, as well as the fact that Walkin Wheels is manufactured in China. Eddie's Wheels, on the other hand, is manufactured in the USA, exported worldwide, and warranted for the life of the dog. We are also the only company that makes a simple two-wheeled front wheel cart for pets with forelimb disabilities. This article was inadequately researched and we are very disappointed that WDJ did not do more to find out the whole story about what is available for disabled dogs. Regards, Leslie Grinnell, Pres. Eddie's Wheels www.eddieswheels.com

Posted by: Leslie Grinnell | March 12, 2011 3:15 PM [Report this comment](#)

For years we have subscribed to and recommended the articles in WDJ because of its integrity and the quality of the research that goes into the articles and information



Hind-Limb Dorsi-Flex Assist

provided. When I received this month's WDJ, I was beyond surprised that the article about products for orthopedic and rehabilitative issues did not include DogLeggs. The list of companies and products is limited to a very few products that address only a small part of the issues for senior dogs and pets, let alone the entire companion animal population. After 10 years of working closely with the rehab community since the beginning as well as solving coverage issues for thousands of dogs worldwide, veterinary recommendation and prescription daily and all the pet insurance company coverage of our products, no mention. I hope that an article can be written that covers the true breath of the rehab, senior pet community and who and what is truly out there to help. Regards, Schon Gross, founder, President, DogLeggs

Posted by: Schon G | March 11, 2011 7:49 AM [Report this comment](#)

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