

Canine Warm Water Therapy

(Therapeutic for *all* dogs, for *all* reasons, at *all* stages of life)

Q & A with Small Animal Massage Practitioner, Certified Hydrotherapist, Owner and Operator of K9 Lap of Luxury and Bullmastiff Fancier, Carrie Lane, MA, SAMP



(Carrie offering increased resistance to Serena for a great cardio workout)

How did you get started in hydrotherapy? As is often the case our dogs are our teachers; my dog Owen is no exception. 8-years ago I began taking him swimming at a pool near our home in Issaquah, WA for added conditioning for the show ring and for his overall health. Initially, he wasn't a fan of the water, but he soon grew to enjoy the added perks such as massage, hugs and kisses and of course treats! After a few sessions, he couldn't wait to get in the water and although he was never much of a retriever, he didn't need to be. He enjoyed swimming with me and the one-on-one attention. In a brief period of time his muscle tone noticeably improved and he was lighter on his feet. He had increased reach and drive and overall seemed happier.

After moving to Lynden, WA nearly 5-years ago and seeking a pool in the area, I was disappointed to learn that there were none. After speaking with my veterinarian about the prospect of opening a pool, he was completely behind me stating that there was a tremendous need in the area for such a facility. After 2.5 years of development and construction of the facility as well as personal training, we opened in February, 2009. I have the best job in the world. I have a front row seat to miracles made possible through hydrotherapy.

What is Canine Warm Water Therapy (CWWT)? CWWT combines warm water swimming along with various forms of bodywork such as massage and stretching that serve to improve range of motion, circulation, relax tight muscles, reduce swelling and offer pain relief among many other benefits.

Who should swim? Who shouldn't is the question. I have yet to come across a dog that would not benefit from warm water therapy. From puppies learning to swim, to offering a bonding experience with your dog, to all of the known reasons that water is therapeutic.

Why swim? Swimming offers the body 10 times the resistance and 4 times the distance of that on land. The added bonus is that there is no impact to the joints, bones and body. The buoyancy of the water allows the dog to move freely and put their limbs through full range of motion without putting stress on the joints and bones. Combined, resistance and buoyancy make muscle mass building, improved mobility and decreased recovery time from injury and or surgery a plus. Swimming in warm water helps to relax superficial muscles and makes range of motion through the limbs painless by comparison. Additionally, the workout helps to keep the heart strong and improves circulation.

Swimming has increased benefits to dogs that are naturally heavy in bone and mass due to the decrease in compression to their joints and bones.

Are Bullmastiffs 'natural' swimmers? It may surprise you to learn that even though dogs seem to have an innate ability to swim when they are in water where they cannot touch the bottom, as with people, if the dog panics, they can drown quite quickly. Breeds such as the bullmastiff that are heavy boned, heavy muscled, without a lot of fat will not be able to maintain a level back in the water without a floatation device. They will quickly tilt vertically as their hind ends begin to sink and drowning becomes imminent. It's scary, if not deadly, if you thought ALL dogs innately know how to swim and you take your bullmastiff to a lake and they sink like a stone.

At K9 Lap of Luxury, we use life jackets made by Ruff Wear, a company out of Bend, OR to support dogs that need floatation devices. I have tried all the jackets on the market and Ruff Wear products are simply the best. If you plan to take your bullmastiff for a swim, plan to have a life jacket available. Most hydrotherapy pools allow you to borrow theirs.

What if my dog doesn't know how to swim or doesn't like the water? One of the best ways to introduce a dog to water is in a controlled environment such as an indoor pool with a trained professional. I have helped many dogs become confident swimmers that I was told "don't like the water," or "will only go up to their chests in the water." I have yet to meet a dog that doesn't find something they like about being in the pool. I tell people that we have to find that dog's *trigger* and from there they graduate into swimmers. Sometimes it's a toy, food, massage, but it's always something. Taking time, being patient and working within the dog's comfort zone are keys.

Why not just swim at the lake? I get asked this question especially in the summer when the lakes are warmer and people think "Why not the lake?" I am not a fan of lakes, rivers, or the ocean. For one thing outdoor bodies of water are simply colder. Dogs with arthritis, hind end weakness, who are seniors, or post op are not good candidates for cold water swimming. Also, outdoor bodies of water carry contaminants as well as parasites that can be picked up. If swallowed, even small amounts of salt water from the ocean can easily upset a dog's stomach. Other unknown variables make outdoor swimming dangerous even for the healthiest of dogs.

Pool water at hydrotherapy facilities should have no negative effects on dogs. At our facility the water is sanitized with Ultra Violet (UV) light, and we use bromine as our backup sanitizer, in low doses. The water doesn't dry out a dog's coat or leave an unpleasant odor. The temperature is between 88-91 degrees depending on the time of year and the pool room has dehumidification to keep the air from feeling heavy and wet thus helping the dog to maintain a comfortable and safe body temperature. Certain breeds such as bullmastiffs that have short noses and process heat less effectively than other breeds need to work with a competent swim assistant. We are trained in animal first aid and check the heart rate in between swim reps.

What other conditions are helped with hydrotherapy To name a few: Arthritis, Effects of Aging, Hip and Elbow Dysplasia, Degenerative Myelopathy, Degenerative Joint Disease, Osteochondritis Dissecans, Neurological problems and Spinal injuries, Circulatory problems, Pre-op and post-op, recovery from Knee Surgery, as well as Obesity.

Conditioning/Safe Exercise/Bonding/Increased Confidence There is a belief that hydrotherapy is only for dogs that have a problem of one kind or another. In actuality hydrotherapy is great for general conditioning and overall well-being. The benefits of swimming are many and I don't know of any dogs that don't enjoy massage and extra attention. Another benefit that doesn't seem to get touched on is the wonderful bonding experience that occurs in the water. Some pools do not allow guardians to be in the water, but I do. I feel that the opportunity for such a bonding experience is a special gift. The other surprising benefit is that when a dog learns to swim, they often develop increased confidence that spills over into other areas of their lives. It's really quite remarkable.

Where to find a pool? Fortunately, in the past several years hydrotherapy pools have grown in number. Word is getting out about the myriad benefits and people want the best for their dogs. I would recommend starting on the Internet and visiting some of the web sites to get more information. Specifically, I recommend visiting the web site for the International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork www.iaamb.com and click on ACWT (Association of Canine Water Therapy) which has a reference list of facilities that offer hydrotherapy by trained practitioners.

At 9-years-young, Owen is not showing his age. He swims regularly and remains fit and happy as a result. Thank you for the opportunity to share what I love best, bullmastiffs and hydrotherapy! Feel free to contact me with any questions you might have and check out our web site www.k9lapofluxury.com for some fun pictures, information and a video of my bullmastiffs in the water.

Best regards,

Carrie Lane