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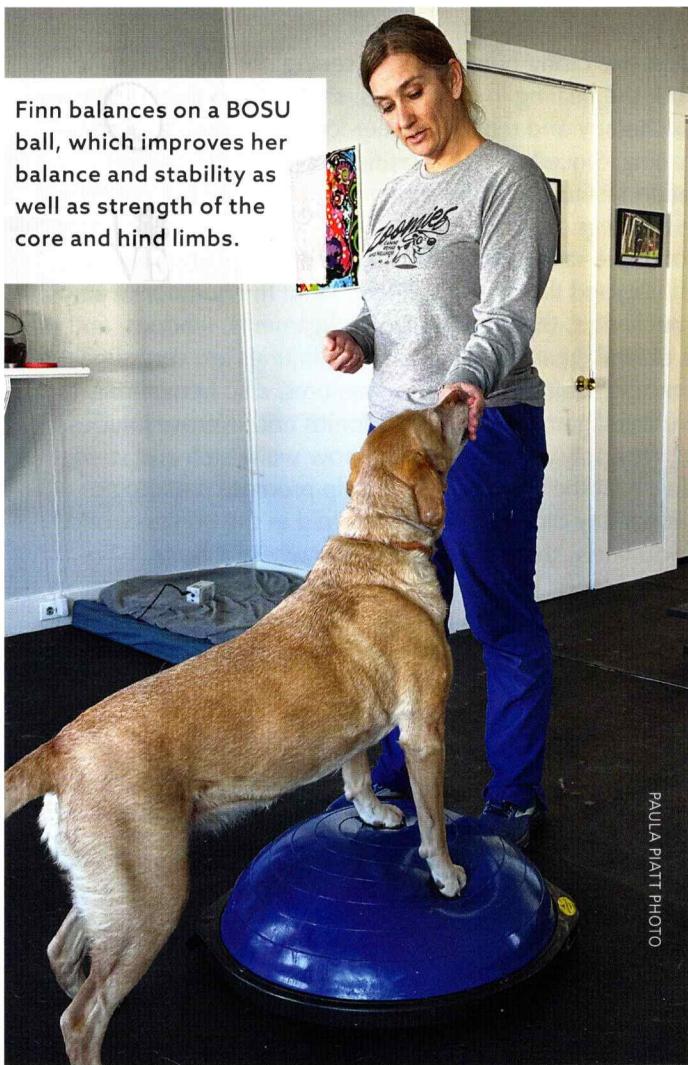
Whitney Mitchell watches as Finn negotiates the Cavaletti poles. These will help her normalize her gait and improve weight bearing, coordination, balance, and proprioception (her sense of body position and movement).



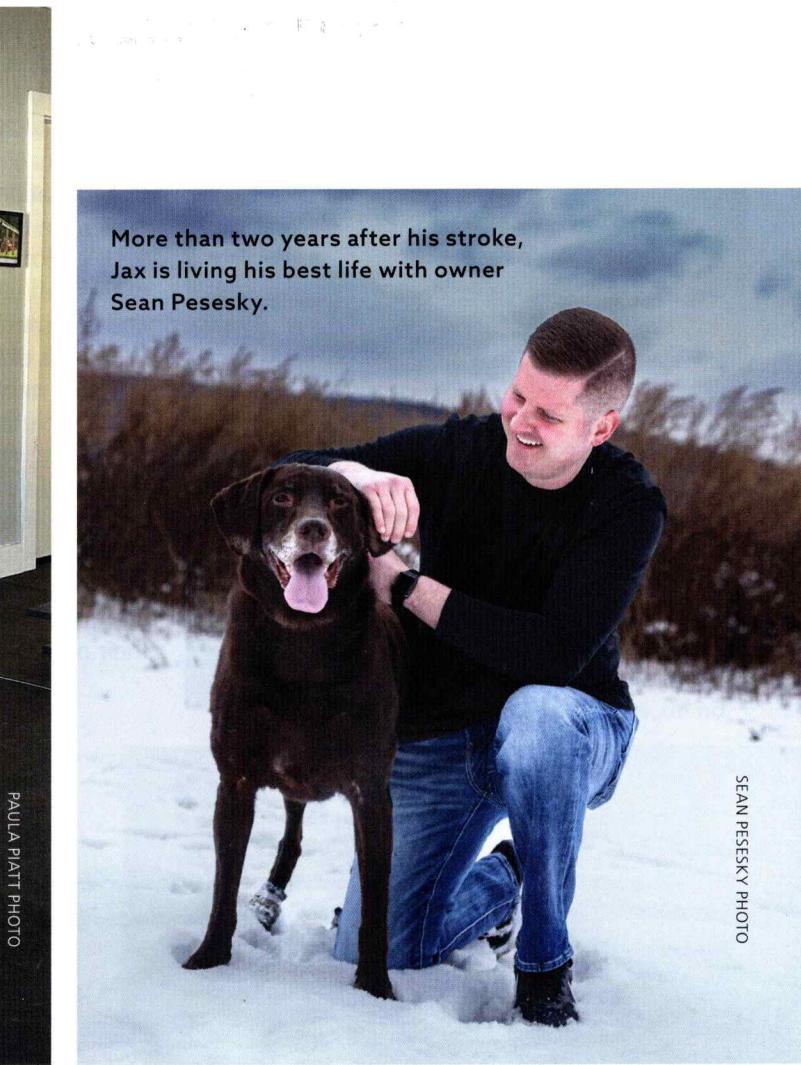
Back on Their Feet

Canine rehab can be an important tool on the road to recovery.

by Paula Piatt



Finn balances on a BOSU ball, which improves her balance and stability as well as strength of the core and hind limbs.



More than two years after his stroke, Jax is living his best life with owner Sean Pesesky.

SEAN PESESKY PHOTO

Jax isn't walking."

Sean Pesesky stood in the Detroit airport, his mind racing with a million different thoughts. He'd just left his seven-year-old chocolate Lab at the kennel. He was happy, healthy, playing with his friends, starting his own vacation. And now his brother is on the phone telling him Jax can't walk?

Looking at the departures board, he knew he could go anywhere in the world. "Wherever you're taking Jax, let me know and I'll be there," he told his brother, who ultimately got the pup to Cornell University's Companion Animal Hospital. The diagnosis of a spinal stroke left the dog's hind end paralyzed, and an infection had him in rough shape. Cutting his trip short and heading back east, Pesesky visited Jax at Cornell. The news was not good.

"He was in absolutely terrible [shape]," remembers Pesesky, who disregarded the advice of immediate euthanasia. His mom convinced him to take Jax home where the vet could come the next morning after a night of treats, ice cream, and cuddles in familiar surroundings.

"I woke up the next morning and there he was, bright-eyed and he had the ball in his mouth. It was the best news ever."

But Jax still couldn't walk on his own, he needed a catheter, dressings needed to be changed; the pup needed Pesesky more than ever. And Pesesky needed help, too. He had to find a way to get Jax back on his feet; it would not only give him some mobility (and a better quality of life), but could also mean he wouldn't need the catheter.

"I was grasping for anything," remembers Pesesky. He found an answer nearby: Zoomies Canine Rehab and Wellness, about a half hour from home.

Whitney Mitchell, MPT, and a certified canine rehabilitation therapist, opened Zoomies in 2019. Trained in human physical therapy, she "went to the dogs" after her own Lab, a two-year-old yellow named Kahlua, had a tough time recovering from a second stifle (knee) surgery. Her surgeon recommended rehab.

"What do you mean, take her to PT? I'm a PT!" says Mitchell, who spent 20-plus years stretching, massaging,



A week after his stroke, Jax was fitted with a wheelchair that gave him some great mobility. But he didn't stop there, eventually shedding the wheels after a long course of rehabilitation and joining owner Sean Pesesky on walks all on his own.

lasing, and exercising humans. After seeing not only Kahlua's recovery but the healing in other dogs, she realized that combining her love of therapy and rehab with her love of animals and dogs was her calling. Since her 2019 certification from the Canine Rehabilitation Institute (CRI) in Springfield, Missouri, her patients now have four legs.

"It's a lot of the same things that I applied to humans," she says of the shift. Beyond the obvious difference in the number of limbs and gait mechanics, the muscles, joints, ligaments, tendons, and the principles of healing are similar. "And the injuries are very similar to humans; muscle strains and sprains, fractures, disc herniations, torn [cranial cruciate ligaments], even tendonitis and overuse injuries. Everything we apply as far as healing, how we stretch and strengthen the muscles, heal the structures, and help promote neurologic recovery is not any different than what I did in the human world."

But unfortunately, the dogs can't tell her where it hurts.

"One of the biggest differences is the nonverbal component, so there is a little more problem-solving," she says. "You have to read their nonverbal clues and you have to rely on observation, watching

Manual massage and stretching improves circulation, range of motion, and flexibility, while also reducing pain and inflammation. Jax received regular massages from Whitney that also helped stimulate the nerves in his hind legs.



their functional movements and really zone in on where they're compensating."

Because they will compensate.

"Dogs are so forgiving; they can hide pain," says veterinarian Dr. Kara Amstutz, CEO and owner of CRI. "Because they're on four legs instead of two, they can shift their body weight around and mask some of that pain. But if you take the time to look at how the dog is moving and palpate their muscles, you learn a lot." That knowledge will get your dog from the operating table to the field safely, albeit slowly.

"[After surgery] the joint is fixed, but all those other compensations are still there. The soft tissues are either weak or tight or now the muscles don't fire appropriately. If you let your dog tear off the deck after the squirrel, you're putting him at a really high risk of a new injury, not necessarily the surgical injury, but some of the surrounding tissues."

That's why, after an \$8,000 TPLO surgery, your dog doesn't – or shouldn't – run from the OR and jump in the back of your car.

After an initial evaluation – complete with a mandatory referral from the dog's primary veterinarian or surgeon – Mitchell will lay out a care plan. Like human PT, exercise, ice, heat, rest, laser, and massage all have their place.

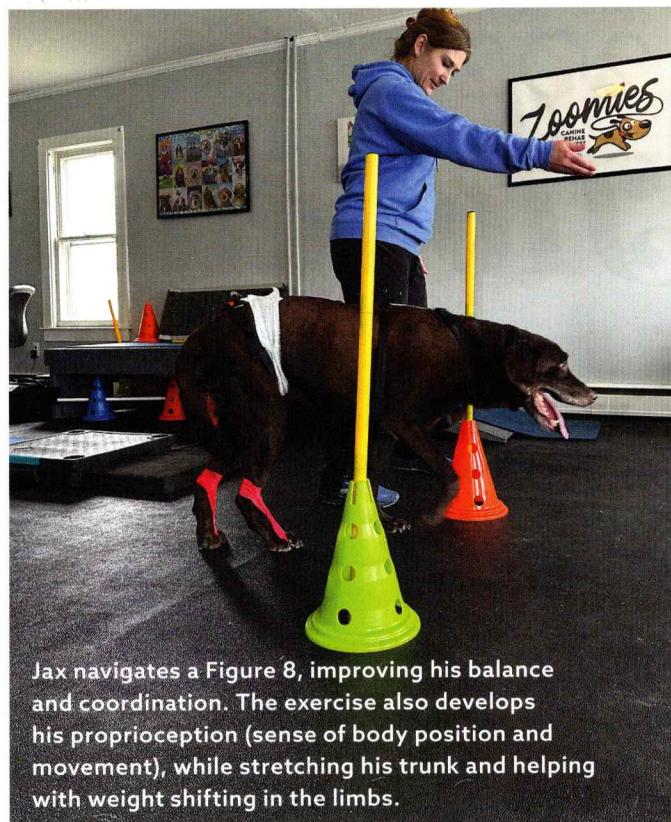
Jax, obviously, brought all of Mitchell's training to bear, but your pup doesn't have to experience a spinal stroke to take advantage of canine rehab. Even post-surgical treatment isn't the largest share of her patients. Lab owners, specifically, can benefit from treatment for degenerative myelopathy and laryngeal paralysis/polyneuropathy – two of the biggest concerns in the Lab world. Arthritis, elbow dysplasia, sprains and strains, lameness and soreness resulting from Lyme disease or anaplasmosis, leg amputations, and even vertigo are all candidates for rehab. It's all about quality of life.

The variety of issues demands Mitchell's creativity.

"You need an appropriate treatment plan to work the right muscles, and it has to be something that the dog is excited about and thinks it's a game," says Mitchell, sometimes missing her human patients' ability to take home, read, and follow an exercise regimen. The plan is different for every dog, and she'll know if you aren't doing your homework.

"The owner plays a huge part. If they go home and all they do is sit on the couch together, I can always tell," she says, having given them exercises to complete at home. "[The dogs] are more compliant with the exercises during the session [if they've done them at home], because they're familiar with them. The progress is much greater with dogs where the owners remain compliant."

Greater progress means a faster recovery for your pup and, honestly, it's less expensive. For some owners, cost is not an issue, but it certainly can be. Most pet insurances



Jax navigates a Figure 8, improving his balance and coordination. The exercise also develops his proprioception (sense of body position and movement), while stretching his trunk and helping with weight shifting in the limbs.

PAULA PIATTI PHOTO

will now cover rehabilitation services, but be sure to read the fine print; some will only cover the service if it's performed by a veterinarian or in their office. If you don't have insurance, of course, it's all out-of-pocket. As many will tell you, however, it's so worth it for the dog. Owners – and veterinarians – are realizing that.

"It's been part of our profession for a while, but more so in the last twenty years," says Dr. Amstutz, adding there's now a board certification for veterinarians through the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation; and CRI, among other programs, offers certification for rehab therapists. It's important, she says, to find a trained specialist.

"When I think about rehab, I don't think of tools. I think of the person's knowledge base and what they can do with their hands when it comes to assessing and treating the patient. All the tools are fancy and nice, but they're just tools," Dr. Amstutz says.

For Jax, it was Mitchell's touch and expertise, coupled with a simple ramp, some soft mats, and traffic cones – and, let's face it, Mitchell's never-ending supply of peanut butter – that has him up on his feet again. With an incredibly strong spirit and immense drive, he's now going down the stairs and has long since shed his carry harness, his wheelchair, and that nasty catheter.

Jax isn't slowing down. 