

Pup, two, three four! Workouts keep pets and their owners from getting too poochy

By Melissa Heckscher Staff Writer  
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After a few laps around Beverly Hills' Roxbury Park, Gina Turley's workout partner was exhausted.

And it's no wonder. When you're a miniature pinscher - and consequently stuck with 6-inch-long legs to support a chubby body - a half-mile run might as well be a marathon.

"She has a little bit of a weight problem," said Turley, who enrolled in the Thank Dog! Bootcamp program with her dog, Riley. "She should probably weigh about 10 pounds and she's 16. In human terms, that's about 60 pounds overweight.

Founded by sisters Jamie and Jill Bowers and taught with the help of longtime fitness trainer Torri Shack, Thank Dog! Bootcamp is an exercise program for people and their pooches.



Gio Giammarco does sit-ups with his Australian Kelpie, Whiskey, positioned beneath his legs during a Thank Dog! Bootcamp workout. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)

The Thank Dog! motto: "If your dog is overweight, then you're not getting enough exercise."

"I don't think people understand the dangers of an obese dog," said Jamie Bowers, a certified dog trainer and former inner-city schoolteacher. "It definitely shortens their life span."

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, about 40 percent of dogs in the United States are considered overweight or obese. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration last year gave its approval to Slentrol (manufactured by Pfizer Animal Health), the first and only veterinary-approved obesity drug for dogs in the United States.

"There's an epidemic of not just overweight people, but overweight animals," Bowers said.

As it does in people, obesity

in pets can lead to a host of health problems including diabetes, arthritis, cancer and high blood pressure. It can also worsen pre-existing conditions such as osteoarthritis, not to mention affecting a dog's overall quality of life by making exercise and play difficult.

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"My dog can't get her teeth cleaned because the vet won't (give her anesthesia); she's too fat," Turley said. "It's one of the main reasons why we're here. She's supposed to have a 20-year life span - I'd like to not After a tough workout, Shayne, a vizsla, takes a quick rest as owner Bonnie Gottlieb does weighted sit-ups. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher) blow through it with obesity."

Getting in shape, though, isn't the only goal. Thank Dog!

originally was a private in-home dog training company; as such, the bootcamp class is as much an obedience class as a workout session.

"A lot of our clients, the reason they were having so many behavior problems is because their dogs weren't getting exercise," Bowers said, adding that a lot of dogs release pent-up energy through disruptive behaviors such as chewing, barking and digging. "We combined the obedience and exercise because it will help a lot with the behavior at home."

But the dogs aren't the only ones being trained. People have to learn to control their dogs or face consequences.

When a dog doesn't sit on Dachshund-mix Peanut looks out over owner Jackie Espinoza during a Thank Dog! class. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher) command during class, for instance, his owner has to do 10 push-ups.

"I tell people they have three chances to correct their dogs," said Shack, who also teaches traditional (humans-only) bootcamp classes at Barry's Bootcamp in West Hollywood. "If the dog doesn't sit, they give me push-ups. That motivates people to go home and work with their dogs."



Dachshund-mix Peanut looks out over owner Jackie Espinoza during a Thank Dog! class. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)

Shack said. "People have a lot more fun with each other. They seem to be able to laugh at each other more and not take it all so seriously."

But don't think the "awww" factor makes things any easier. Shack estimated the human participants burn 400 to 800 calories during a typical hourlong class.

Those who have kept up with it said they've seen changes in themselves and their dogs.

"My body has tightened and toned up," said Bonnie Gottlieb, who has taken the class twice weekly with her dog, Shayne, since the beginning of June. "My dog's muscles have tightened up, too. ... And he's a lot more obedient."

Of course, anyone who's ever been a dog owner knows that a tired pup equals a happy owner.

"Riley passes out when we get home," Turley said. "And that's nice." Melissa Heckscher (310) 540-5511, Ext. 329 melissa.heckscher@dailybreeze.com



Gio Giammarco and his Australian Kelpie, Whiskey, traverse an obstacle course during a Thank Dog! Bootcamp workout. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)



After a tough workout, Shayne, a vizsla, takes a quick rest as owner Bonnie Gottlieb does weighted sit-ups. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)