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HEALTH BEAT: PETS AND EXERCISE

In the long run, dogs are better off

A six-time marathoner, Chicago Dog Runner helps canines live healthier lives

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David Hill is an insurance agent, not an animal trainer. But several months ago he stumbled on a foolproof way of calming his high-strung border collie mix, Flynn: taking the dog with him on his frequent 4-mile runs.

"He's very protective of me," Hill said. "So if he saw anything that looked threatening" - a lawn mower, a police officer on horseback - "he would lash out. When we would go running, that tendency would lessen."

An entrepreneurial light bulb went on above Hill's head. And lo, the Chicago Dog Runner was born.

Hill, a six-time marathoner who grew up helping out in his father's veterinary practice, opened his dog-running business a few months ago. By taking your pup for regular 30-minute, 3- to 4-mile runs, he said, he can help improve its health, life span, fitness level and even behavioral problems.

"You have to drain [a dog's] energy," he said, "or it will manifest in anxiety issues." Just ask Flynn.

Or ask Dr. Sheldon Rubin, a veterinarian who serves as chief of staff at Blum Animal Hospital in Lake View (and whose client list of animal owners includes Oprah Winfrey).

"We know for sure that dogs that have things like separation anxiety do much better if they're exercised on a regular routine," Rubin said. Exercising outside not only helps a dog stay fit, he added; it can also help it become more sociable and less fearful.

"Whether they walk or they run to me doesn't make a lot of difference," the vet added. "The important thing is that the dog is getting exercise."

Hill disagreed: "Dog walking is nice to break up the day's boredom and let them go to the bathroom. But

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just as we humans can walk around all day and still be out of shape, it's the same with dogs. This is taking it to the next level, to improve their fitness level and their health."

Hill has each potential client complete a profile of the dog, which includes health history, current activity level and behavioral issues. He goes over the information with his veterinarian father, then takes the dog on a 10-minute trial run. If all seems well, owners can sign their dogs up for \$21 per run, with discounts for multiple weekly sessions.

Of course, dogs that aren't used to regular exercise may need to build up to long runs. "I pay attention to the dog," Hill said. "If he's struggling at all, then I'll take a timeout."

Client Sara Beaver said her Weimaraner's runs with Hill help keep the dog happy and relaxed. "Most Weins are insane because they don't get enough exercise," she said. "They're sporting dogs. She just wants to go, go, go." Beaver pays Hill to run with her dog once a week: "If I could afford it, it would be more often."

Before signing their pets up for running sessions, Rubin emphasized, owners should have their dogs checked out by a vet to rule out heart disease, arthritis or other problems. Other safety measures include making sure the dog knows how to heel and avoiding choke chains and retractable leashes, because they can tangle in the wheels of passing bikes.

While Manhattan has at least two similar operations, Hill knows of no other professional dog runner in Chicago. Right now, he has about half a dozen clients. "That's only about 20 miles a week," he said - small change for a marathoner who is used to running 30 to 40 miles weekly. He said he is prepared to double that; after all, he's currently training for a 50-mile ultramarathon.

Sustained running isn't for all dogs, Hill cautioned. High-energy breeds are most likely to benefit. On a recent trial run with a cocker spaniel, he said, "it was trotting, and it was like, 'This is nice, but I'd rather just sniff and walk around.'"

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