

Dog Weight-Loss Camps

For an overweight dog, a dog fat camp could be just the thing.

Robin Whitsell

Susan Hartzler of California and her dog Bliss had a problem that many Americans and their dogs are familiar with. "I was so concerned that I actually had her tested to make sure there was nothing medically wrong with her," Hartzler says.

Bliss's problem? She was fat.

Upon discovering an open bag of cat food that Bliss had been helping herself to, Hartzler came up with a solution: dog fat camp.

"We signed up at DogPaddle Hydrotherapy & Wellness at the Rose City Veterinary Hospital. They offer a complete weight-loss program," Hartzler says. In addition to weigh-ins and underwater treadmill sessions, Bliss received regular massages, acupuncture, and nutritional counseling. After six weeks Bliss' weight was back to normal.

Time-crunched dog lovers are turning to professionals for dog weight loss, says Sean Sullivan, owner of K9 Conditioning, a fitness center for dogs. Sullivan places most of his clients on an eight-week weight-loss plan based on Fartlek, a Swedish conditioning program originally developed for humans.

"Fartlek training conditions the aerobic system by varying exercise modes, speeds, and intensities," Sullivan says. At the end of each training day, canine clients are rewarded with soothing rubdowns and paw attention. "Sore or torn pads can be an end all. Fortunately there are great products available like waxes and boots," Sullivan says.

Another component of Sullivan's success is tough love. Although he gives treats for good behavior, Sullivan doesn't go overboard. "[I] don't give in to those sad puppy eyes," he says.

At night, the dogs sleep in temperature-controlled rooms with a TV or radio. "Even though they are here for a lifestyle adjustment, mental wellness is part of that," Sullivan says. Additional perks include field trips to the city park, the beach, or the pet food store.

Boca Raton, Fla., is known for its luxurious human accommodations, and Camp Canine there seeks to provide that same atmosphere for the chubby pets who enroll in its program. Owner Lisa Schettino believes that much of the weight loss is achieved by supervised play in a cageless environment and carefully monitored meals. Of course after all that hard work and play, the dogs are treated to some much-needed pampering at the camp's spa which features "a soothing massage, manicure and pedicure, and either specialty grooming or a bubble bath," Schettino says.

Canines who enroll in Dogs at Camp, in Canada, can expect a makeover of their diet and exercise regimen, according to Glen Kowarsky, the camp's director. The first sacrifice on the list? Canned food, since it tends to be higher in calories.

A daily round of exercise includes as much ball and Frisbee play as a dog can handle, depending on the temperature, her weight, age, and general health. Dogs can also hike 35 acres of trails, and swim and retrieve balls from freshwater ponds during the summer months.

All work and no play can be rough on a pampered pooch, and these dog weight-loss camps aim to combine just the right amount of leisure and exercise. And after all that running, sweating, and soaking, you can be sure that your canine companion will look and feel better than ever.

Robin Whitsell is a freelance writer who lives in North Carolina with her husband, two daughters, and Labrador Retriever Foster.