



# For Active Dogs!

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Coaching dog enthusiasts to embrace the unique needs of active dogs through teaching, mentoring and educational media

## The Gift of Being the Only Dog

VOLUME 4 | ISSUE 6 | May 2021

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Some roads lead on from what you know  
To what you need to find

--- Della Mae

My very first Golden Retriever, Cajun, was the dog who really got me hooked on canine sports. We competed in obedience, conformation, hunt tests, and the then-new sport of flyball. All that time spent developing a whole new relationship with Cajun through training and competing led to my interest in canine sports medicine and rehabilitation, and the rest, as they say, was history.

When Cajun was older, I had moved to the United States (from Canada) and I had added two more Golden Retrievers to my pack. I had a tiny Toyota that didn't safely fit three Golden

Retrievers and all the equipment for competitions, and I couldn't afford a new, larger, vehicle on a post-doctoral fellow's stipend.

Once Cajun had gone as far as he could in competition (there weren't nearly as many dog games available then), I found it necessary to leave him at home while I competed with my other two dogs. After all, dogs just spend all day sleeping, right?

I will never, ever, forget one day as I left the house with my two younger dogs and equipment all packed in the car, and I looked through the window of the door to my house and saw Cajun sitting there, watching me leave. The expression of disappointment on his face brings tears to my eyes even now. I swore I would never do that again.

So here's to the old guys! And to letting them share fully in our lives for all of their lives. And to finding ways that they can be the Only Dog every now and then.

### **Gifts you can give your senior dog:**

- If your dog enjoyed **agility** competition, consider entering them in a competition For Exhibition Only (FEO) in a lower height class. This allows you to take your past-their-prime agility dog into the ring and do whatever you want. You can take a toy into the ring, play with your oldster, and only do the obstacles you wish to, or that your dog will enjoy. Just watch their eyes light up as they remember the old days training and competing.
- Another option is to sign your retired pooch up for a novice agility class and jump really low jumps. Who cares if your senior is slower than the other dogs? This is the gift of you spending time together, you and your Only Dog.
- And speaking of training – why not teach your old dog some new tricks? How about working on a **tricks** title? The lower levels are easy, and you even get credit if your dog already has a Canine Good Citizen (CGC) title. If you don't already have a CGC, why not make that a goal? With a lifetime of learning under their belt, maybe your oldster will surprise you and earn the higher trick titles. And anyway, it isn't about titles anymore. Your old friend doesn't have anything to prove.
- One of the most rewarding experiences for dogs is being able to use their noses. Believe it or not, studies have demonstrated that dogs that are given the opportunity to use the ol' schnoz have a more positive outlook on life (1). What a gift! Here are two ways you can do this:
  1. Go to a park (first thing in the morning is ideal, when there are few other people around) with jillions of slices of mozzarella cheese sticks. (The low-fat ones are best because they are easier to slice, they don't melt much in the heat, and they have fewer calories.) Leave your dog in the car while you find a nice starting point that you'll remember. Put a small pile of mozzarella slices there. Then walk from your starting point to fencepost, to sign, to light standard, keeping mental track of where you went. As you walk, every time you lift your right foot up, drop a piece of mozzarella in the footprint. Then get your dog out of the car, put them on a 10 to 12' leash and a collar or harness – it doesn't matter which – and take them to the starting point where they can gobble up the pile 'o treats. Then guide them to the first mozzarella slice and just

- follow along as they walk or even run along the food track! See if you can catch a glimpse of the grin on your dog's face, even though you'll be trailing behind.
2. With your dog in another room or in a crate, hide mozzarella slices in your house on the floor, in corners, behind small items (turning the ceiling fan on makes it harder), and also on elevated places like low shelves, the coffee table, etc. Then release the hound and give lots of encouragement as they search the house for hidden treasure.
- Take your senior best buddy to a Starbucks or a local café. Purchase yourself a favorite drink and ask for a puppachino for your canine partner (they're usually free). Sit outside and enjoy the people who will no doubt strike up conversations with you and ask to meet your pal. Dogs are the best social catalyst ever! And if there's no café nearby, grab an ice cream bar for you and a Frosty Paws for your frosty-faced friend and head to the local park. Find a bench and meet some new friends. Or if no one's around, enjoy your treat, breathe deeply (because you know that's what your dog is doing), listen to the sounds around you, smell the scents as best you can (because you know that's what your dog is doing), and enjoy all the tiny miracles you can see in the plants or snow or whatever surrounds you. Also, the canine miracle that sits beside you.

I'm sure you can think of lots of other things to do. Take a saunter together, with your dog on a long line, stopping as often as they want. Extra points if you can take your saunter at a big park or a beach. Take your buddy for a swim in a clean lake or a local dog-friendly pool. Just spend some time – any time – letting your senior be the Only Dog for a while.

And as you do that, think about how each canine member of your family has taught you a life lesson, just like Cajun taught me. And be grateful.



An image from the archives. Cajun is the dog on the right (my left).

#### Reference

1. Duranton C, Horowitz A. Let me sniff! Nosework induces positive judgment bias in pet dogs. Appl Anim Behav Sci 2018;Dec. 3.