

Mutts kick butt at new doggy boot camp

Injured dogs are benefiting from an exercise programme aimed at strengthening core muscles, writes **HELEN BAMFORD**

THEY do sit-ups, squats, strength training and exercises to strengthen core muscles – but members of this gym work out on all fours.

Welcome to Pet Active, a boot camp for dogs.

Local vet Dr Megan Kelly introduced the concept to Cape Town after a visit to the US where dog gyms are popular.

"In the US dogs even have their own gym cards. You go through turnstiles into massive areas with pools, ramps and treatment areas," Kelly said.

She said there were people overseeing the exercises but also one-on-one sessions.

"Some owners exercise their dogs themselves."

Kelly has started classes every Monday night at Holisticvet, an animal wellness and rehabilitation clinic in Diep River.

She said that, like with humans, the goal was to strengthen the core muscles.

"And like people, the more you go to gym the stronger you'll get."

Kelly said the exercises, which must be done under veterinary supervision, were primarily for dogs with injuries or older dogs with age-related issues like joint problems.

But breeds susceptible to problems, such as German shepherds who often get hip dysplasia, labradors with hip and knee problems and dachshunds with back disorders, would also benefit.

Kelly said certain muscle groups are targeted.

"The main idea is to strengthen muscles and to increase the animal's spatial awareness of where their legs are."

She said it was also good for the human/animal bond.

Dogs exercise on a balance board, which is similar to a half ball at the gym and is good for balance and strengthening core muscles.

They also manoeuvre their way around weave poles, which strengthens the back muscles and improves flexibility and mobility.

Foam mats of varying density and thickness stimulate the sensory receptors in the paws and promote better balance.

The dogs also walk over Cavaletti rails – horizontal poles that are raised off the ground and can be spaced at different heights.

Kelly says this stimulates balance and awareness of where the dog's legs are as it steps over the poles.

Dogs are also encouraged to do side sit-ups. They start off lying on their sides and then a treat is used to get them to sit up.

One member is Shana, a 10-month-old German shepherd who had to have an operation when the growth plates in her hind legs didn't close properly.

Owner Anne Mayne said that after the operation, Shana had lost all muscle tone.

"She was so clumsy – like a drunkard. But I have seen an immediate improvement and she's much better co-ordinated."

Mayne said that despite her physical limitations, Shana was



very clever but occasionally dug in her heels when it came to some of the more challenging exercises.

Tari, a ridgeback who was rescued by rehab therapist Bridget

Hammond, who runs the classes, has one back leg that is shorter than the other after she was hit by a car.

Kelly had an orthotic made for

her which lifts the shorter leg.

"It's a hock paw device – a dynamic splint which allows the joints to move freely while giving support."

ABOVE: Monty the boxer is guided by his owner, Hermann Hanekom, over the Cavaletti rails – horizontal poles that are raised off the ground to help with balance.

ABOVE RIGHT: Anne Mayne with her German shepherd, Shana, who is negotiating a balance board at boot camp.

RIGHT: Dr Megan Kelly helps Monty up stairs to strengthen his muscles.

LEFT: Tari, a ridgeback whose back leg is shorter than the other after an accident, wears a hock paw device which lifts the leg and gives support.

PICTURES: JEFFREY ABRAHAMS

Monty, an 18-month-old boxer, came to class to strengthen his hind leg after two operations.

Kelly said the dog arrived with some lameness and a limited range of motion.

Owner Margaret Hanekom said he was doing extremely well.

"He's much better aligned, his balance has improved and he's much stronger."

She said the dog loved boot camp.

"He thinks it's heaven, with all the attention he gets."

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