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Gone with the Wind

Innovative new fitness programs have people and their pets off and running.

By Kim Kavin

Davis was roaming the streets of the City of Brotherly Love last August when she noticed more than a few people walking dogs—and more than a few dogs looking awfully anxious on their leashes.

Davis had long been a runner as well as a dog lover, and to her eye it looked like the local dogs needed more exercise than they were getting. She called a friend in Manhattan who told her about a service there not for dog walking, but for dog running. A light bulb went off and the idea for Run Philly Dog Run (RunPhillyDogRun.com), a business in which dogs receive their due exercise, was born.

"I figured I could start it in Philadelphia," she recalls. "I had my website up for a week or so, and I was contacted by the owner of PhilaPets.com. They're the largest pet-sitting company in Philadelphia, and they asked if I wanted to partner with them. I'm at the point now where I've had to limit my clients to four a day. I run with every [kind of dog] from a Cockapoo to a Boxer. It's awesome exercise for me and for the dogs, and I really enjoy it."

That's just the kind of feeling animal shelters and running clubs across America are trying to encourage this time of year, when dog-walking and dog-running programs kick into high gear. In addition to personal dog-running services like the one Davis operates in Philadelphia, there are running clubs and shelters working together from coast to coast to help pets—and people—get more exercise.

Angela Lindbo knows the benefits all too well. She has been a volunteer at the Multnomah County Animal Shelter near Portland, OR, for several years, as well as a member of the local Red Lizard Running Club, a nonprofit running group for

"A lot of the dogs [who] linger in the shelter are the active ones, because people like the couch potatoes," Lindbo explains. "Pairing the dogs with the running club was an idea to match high-energy dogs with high-energy people."

And so, on the second Saturday of each month, Lindbo and other shelter volunteers bring around a half dozen adoption-ready dogs to run or walk with Red Lizard members. The exercise helps to keep the dogs socialized and get them fresh air, while giving club members an opportunity to both meet the dogs and consider them for adoption.

"Last month we had two adoptions on site, and two others were adopted within an hour after returning to the shelter," she says. "And they had all been dogs [who] were lingering in the shelter. They were just more relaxed with the running, and they showed better."

Media Wilson isn't necessarily seeing an uptick in adoption figures with a similar program she organizes at Indianapolis Animal Care and Control, but she says community interest has been overwhelming.

Indianapolis has an obesity problem, she says, so her shelter markets its program as more than a way to find adoptable dogs. Every Saturday from June through October, her shelter simply makes about a dozen dogs available for walking and running in local parks—where there are often lines of people waiting to take a turn.

"It is not a huge adoption event," she says. "It's an exercise event. We get people who live in small apartments and can't have dogs. We get people who used to have dogs and can't have them anymore. We have some adult group homes that come.

As with dog-running services like Davis', the shelter-based programs help to keep both people and dogs in better physical shape, as well as more able to socialize. It's essentially a win-win situation, but there can be challenges.

For instance, when programs get larger, controls need to be in place to ensure the dogs don't get overwhelmed. Wilson has a staging area where only volunteers can go to get the dogs and deliver them to their runner or walker. That way, families with small children don't swarm the dogs and startle them. Wilson's program also limits an individual's time with a dog to about 30 minutes so that nobody strays too far or overworks a dog to the point where he might get overheated.

All in all, though, the more exercise dogs and people get, the better. Davis points out that when people have dogs with behavioral issues, veterinarians often suggest increasing their exercise regimen. Dogs can also get overweight, and an extra walk or jog helps prevent that problem, too.

Perhaps best of all for people walking or running with shelter dogs is that the animals get a chance not just for a healthier life, but for a longer one.

"Any dog, if you leave [her] in a kennel long enough, is going to go kennel-crazy," Wilson says. "So even if they're not adopted right away, this give them a better chance in the long run."

people. She saw a lot of perfectly adoptable dogs hanging around the shelter instead of in homes, including those who were more likely to go kennel-crazy fast.

We have youth camps that come, churches that come. We used to have four or five mentally challenged adults who came by. That was a program to help them, too."