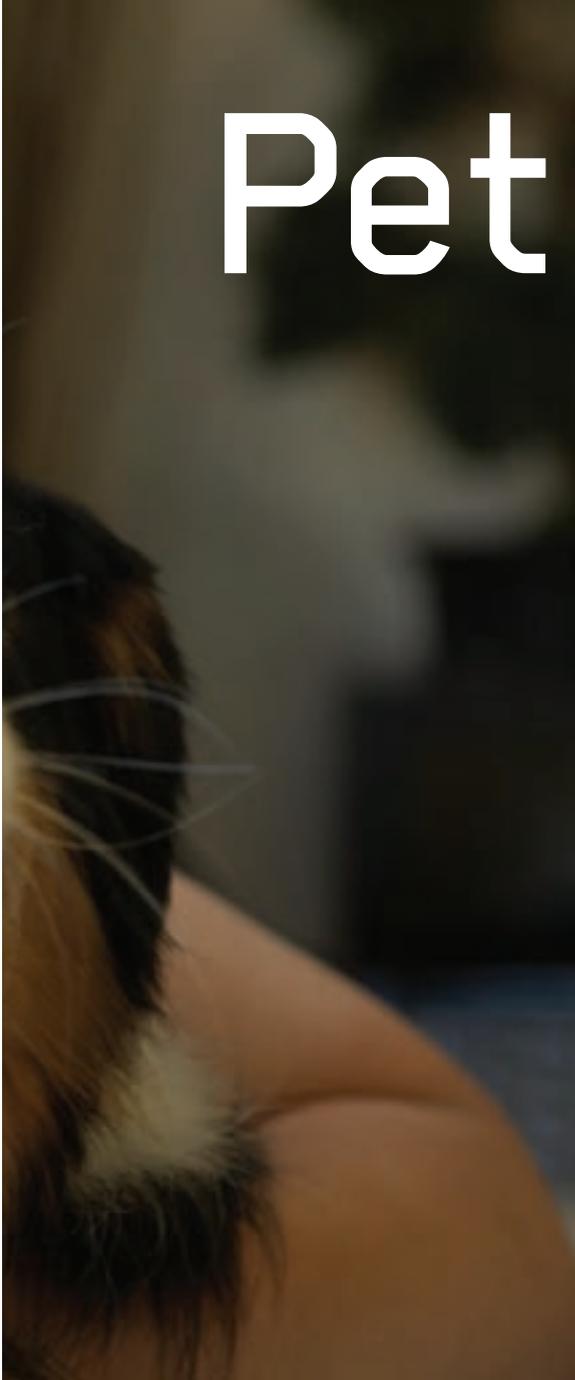




CRUISER (LEFT), A GERMAN SHEPHERD POLICE DOG, HAS A GENETIC DISEASE CALLED FIBROTIC MYOPATHY. THANKS TO TWICE-WEEKLY ULTRASOUND TREATMENTS, CRUISER IS STILL ON THE BEAT, CATCHING BAD GUYS.



Pet project

STORY BY
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REHABILITATION TECH SAM SIMPSON DISCOVERS 'THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD' IS GIVING DOGS AND CATS A NEW LEASE ON LIFE.

For some entrepreneurs, starting a business means breaking new ground. For Sam Simpson, co-owner of what is believed to be Alberta's first licensed animal rehabilitation facility (one of only a handful in Canada), it also means getting into deep water – literally. As a certified canine rehabilitation technologist, Simpson has mastered the art of slipping into a wetsuit and climbing into a giant aquarium-like tank. There she puts dogs of all sizes – and the occasional intrepid cat – through their paces on an underwater treadmill.

The Edmonton Veterinary Rehabilitation Clinic opened in February and offers a range of customized treatments aimed at reducing pain while increasing mobility, strength and endurance. While rehab has long been recognized as beneficial for humans, such therapy is still uncommon for dogs and cats.

Among the patients on today's schedule: a handsome mixed-breed rescue from the Caribbean, recovering from a ruptured cruciate ligament – one of the most common canine knee injuries; a stately golden retriever with bone cancer, slated for post-surgery massage; and a border collie, injured during agility training. In a large sunlit room, owners who have travelled from Red Deer are learning dance-like exercises for their bichon, an arthritis sufferer, while a large elkhound-cross makes a dignified exit post-treatment for spondylosis (degeneration of the spine). Relaxing under the heat of a deep-muscle thermal ultrasound is canine celebrity Cruiser, the German shepherd police service dog responsible for tracking down Edmonton's notorious Duggan Rapist a year after he brutally raped a mother while forcing her seven-year-old son to watch. A genetic disease called fibrotic myopathy is causing lameness in Cruiser's right rear leg, threatening to cut short his career and, if it gets bad enough, his life. Thanks to twice-weekly treatments, Cruiser is still on the beat, catching bad guys.

"It's made a big difference," says Cruiser's handler, Acting Sgt. Tom Bechthold. "He's just a year away from retirement and hopefully these sessions will keep him active until then."

Nearby another star patient, Buffy, prepares to swim for her life. A feisty six-year-old miniature dachshund, Buffy became completely paralyzed within 24 hours of rupturing a disc in her lower back. Although success was not guaranteed, owners Heather and Craig Montgomerie chose surgery rather than to put her down – a decision they'd sadly had to make for their previous dachi at the same age and with the same injury. After surgery left Buffy pain-free but still unable to stand without support, the Montgomeries decided to try aggressive rehabilitation on the surgeon's recommendation. Buffy started underwater treadmill and additional therapy almost immediately. Within two weeks, she'd taken her first steps.

An estimated 47 per cent of small and medium enterprises are owned, at least in part, by women.

– STATISTICS CANADA

"It was a very emotional moment, enough to make your heart leap out of your chest," says Simpson, who spent hours splashing with Buffy. "I'm lucky to do what I do; I have the best job in the world."

Simpson describes Buffy as "a fighter, a very determined personality." She could well be describing herself. Simpson has created a tranquil spa-like environment at her clinic, but not without persistence. The final product - with stone water fountains, relaxing music, bonsai plants, Japanese prints, floor mats and a Zen-like vibe - belies the challenges behind it. "I'm very stubborn, very driven," says Simpson.

As a student in NAIT's Animal Health Technology program, Simpson developed a keen interest in pain management and rehabilitation, spurred on by the needs of Titan, a Rottweiler she adopted from the pound after his guest appearances at NAIT classes for students' training.

After graduating in 2002, Simpson spent the next four years honing her skills as a vet tech at several Edmonton veterinary practices and the south-side emergency clinic. She loved the hands-on nursing but wanted more rehabilitation training. After taking every continuing education course possible, she hit a dead-end in her search.

Then Titan led her to her ultimate career path. As he became progressively lamer, but no cause could be diagnosed, Simpson took Titan to the newly opened Canine Fitness Centre in Calgary. She returned with a home-exercise program for Titan - and information on rehabilitation courses for herself. Seeing the improvement in Titan from



exercise alone, Simpson says: "I knew it was what I had to do."

Never mind that the only two certification options were in the United States - or that she was newly pregnant. On the day she learned she was having twins, Simpson flew to the Canine Rehabilitation Institute in Florida. As she got bigger and bigger, so did her plans. Originally she'd intended to continue working at Mill Creek Animal Hospital post-pregnancy, occasionally using her new skills. Instead, she approached Mill Creek owner Dr. Karen Allen with a proposal: a new, independent clinic, totally devoted to veterinary rehabilitation.

PAWS CASE STUDY PAWS

PATIENT NAME: Tinkerbell
 DESCRIPTION: Well-cared-for, eight-year-old spayed feline with a weighty problem.
 PRESENTING COMPLAINTS: Despite owner's best efforts in limiting treats and switching to a low-cal diet, Tinkerbell has ballooned to almost twice her normal size, tipping the scales at 19 pounds. Owner is distressed at Tinkerbell's obvious discomfort; Tinkerbell can no longer groom herself and rarely plays, and may be grieving for the loss of her feline companions, deceased several months earlier. Owner also concerned about future health risks.



Diagnosis: Morbid obesity. Complete blood workup revealed no abnormalities; thyroid testing also normal. Aside from Rubenesque figure, Tinkerbell appears in good health. Immediate treatment required to prevent further weight gain.

Treatment protocol: Since restricting calories has had no impact, increase activity to burn them off. Best option: water therapy to prevent strain on over-burdened joints - assuming patient co-operation.

First session: Tinkerbell willingly donned life jacket, but panicked as water entered tank. With continual coaxing by attending rehabilitation technologist Sam Simpson, aided by owner's encouraging cries of "Come to Momma, baby!" progress was made - without food rewards. A brisk, if less-than-enthusiastic, gait on moving treadmill was achieved and sustained.

Prognosis: "Woo-hoo Tinkerbell! I think this will work!" says Simpson. With twice-weekly water therapy, plus home exercises, a trimmer Tinkerbell is a hopeful outcome.

WEB EXTRA

See Tinkerbell's treadmill water therapy + get an iTunes playlist inspired by the workout.
techlifemag.ca/treadmill.htm



SURGERY ON A RUPTURED DISC LEFT BUFFY PAIN-FREE, BUT STILL UNABLE TO STAND WITHOUT SUPPORT. WITHIN TWO WEEKS OF STARTING UNDERWATER TREADMILL AND ADDITIONAL THERAPY, SHE'D TAKEN HER FIRST STEPS.

"Karen was all over it and decided to get her rehabilitation certification too," says Simpson, who then spent her maternity leave laying the groundwork with Allen, who eventually opted out after the clinic opened so she could focus on her family and her original practice. "We put together a business plan, although I'd never done one before. It was intimidating; vet rehab is all new territory, so there was nothing with which to compare our future practice. But the bank said it was the best plan they'd seen."

Funding secured, one major hurdle remained: licensing from the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association (AB.VMA). That was a potential deal-breaker. "We weren't going to do this without licensing," Simpson states, since the clinic's vision was to work with vet-referred clients. And to earn veterinarians' trust, an AB.VMA licence was essential.

Again, dogged determination paid off. Simpson and Allen launched an educational campaign including "lunch-and-learns" at vet practices where they explained their clinic and its goal of collaborating - not competing - with diagnosing vets. Endless PowerPoint presentations later, the Edmonton Veterinary Rehabilitation Clinic became what is believed to be the first rehab facility to receive an AB.VMA licence - and the vet board is currently consulting the clinic to develop regulations for future rehab clinics in the province.

"Honestly, we haven't had a case where rehab hasn't helped," says Simpson. "A centre's been needed here for a long time."

Educating professionals and the public on rehabilitation's benefits will be an ongoing process for Simpson and her new business partner, Dr. Sandra Reid, a nutrition expert and former NAIT instructor, but a number of vets are already on board. Among them is Dr. Colin Sereda, the Western Veterinary Specialist Centre surgeon who repaired Buffy's back. "Every human orthopedic patient gets follow-up rehabilitation, and rehab therapy definitely improves outcomes for animals as well," says Sereda. "It's a huge benefit to have the clinic's services post-surgery."

For proof, look no further than Buffy, drying off after her happy dog paddle. Session completed, Simpson hangs up her wetsuit to prepare for her next appointment, a canine massage on terra firma. No time to get dry behind the ears; less than a year since the clinic opened, Simpson is eager to keep getting her feet wet as a pioneer in a still-evolving field. And so far, things are going swimmingly. ■

Five years after graduating, 12.5 per cent of NAIT grads are business owners.

- CLASS OF 2002, GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT SURVEY

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