

Sid is 15 years old and for a while now he's been feeling his age, but in the hydrotherapy pool there's something surprisingly puppyish about his swimming technique.

In human years, Sid would already have his telegram from the Queen, and he's the oldest dog to swim at Meadow Farm. But owner Roberta Baxter has refused to give up on her canine companion's quality of life just because he's considered a very old boy.

"Sometimes people think: 'Oh, my dog's getting old, there's nothing I can do about it'," she says. "It's sad because if their pet is suffering from arthritis or just getting a bit stiff there is so much that can be done to improve their enjoyment of life."

As a pup, Sid was found abandoned on the side of the A11 and at nine months he was diagnosed with hip dysplasia. Despite this rocky start, he grew into a sweet, gentle family dog who loved long forest walks and river swimming around Thetford. Seven years ago he started to develop arthritis in his elbows, and although conventional veterinary medication has helped, Roberta decided to look at additional treatments to ease Sid's aches and pains.

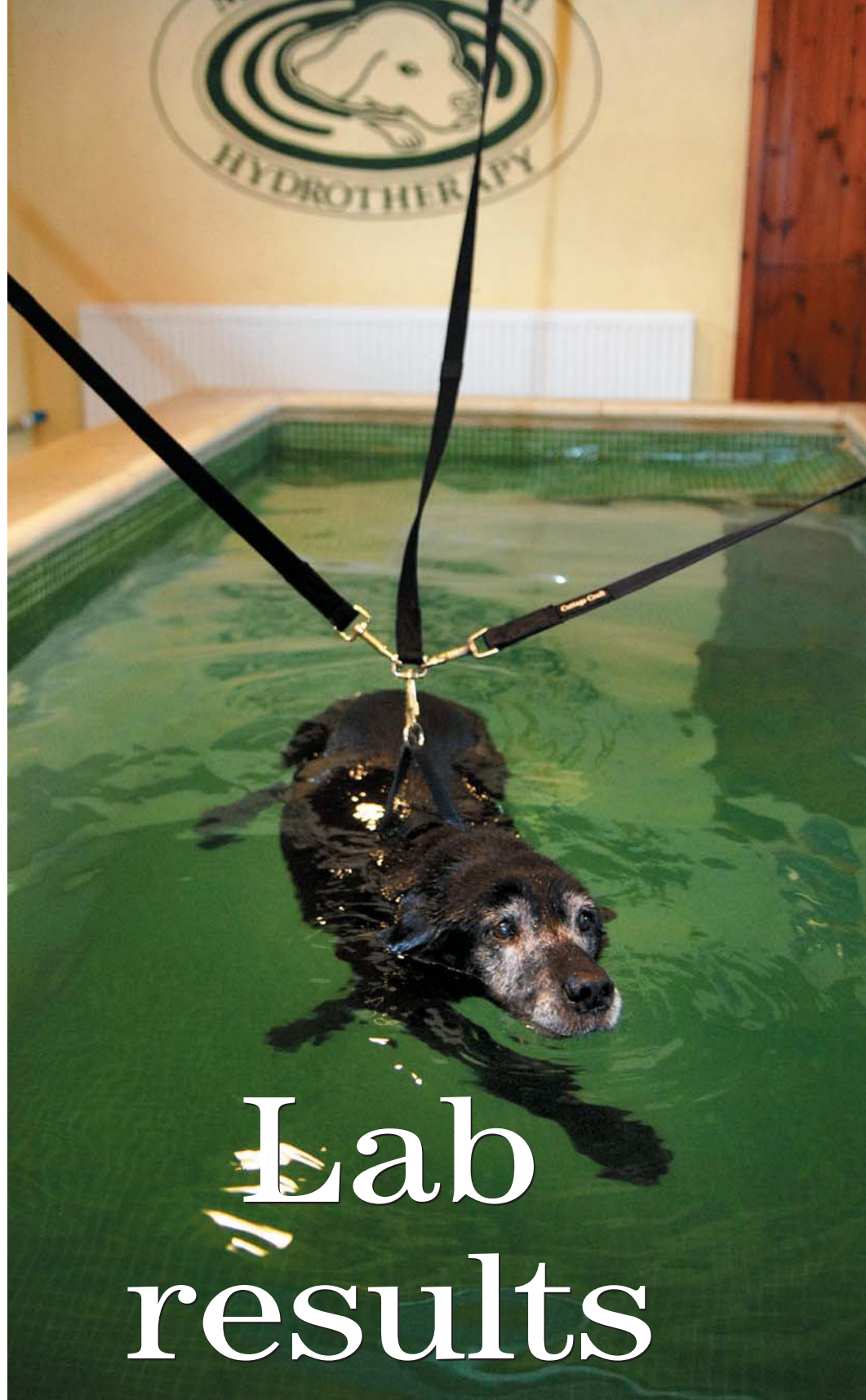
Today, he is supported in a harness and encouraged to paddle at leisure around the hydrotherapy pool at Meadow Farm in Hepworth, one of the UK's leading complementary animal care centres. On dry land, Sid is hesitant and a little unsteady, but once in the water he wiggles lazily in circles, flapping his ears and omitting an occasional, contented "humpf" noise.

Sid is one of 80 dogs who the centre sees every week for hydrotherapy. The therapy has enjoyed a real surge in popularity recently and is recognised as an effective treatment for a wide range of canine conditions. At Meadow Farm, just 10 miles from Diss, dogs swim in a safe and controlled environment under the supervision of experienced handlers such as company director Rachel Watkins.

"The main advantage of swimming as an aid to recovery is the buoyancy of the water, which drastically reduces the effects of gravity," says Rachel. "This provides non-weight-bearing exercise, enabling injured dogs to continue with a full exercise programme where otherwise they would have to be rested. In this way the recovery process is enhanced."

Dogs of every shape and size swim at the centre's free-standing pool, from a tiny Yorkshire terrier to a strapping St Bernard. Some have hydrotherapy to help with conditions such as hip and elbow dysplasia, cruciate ligament ruptures and osteochondritis dissecans (OCD); some use it as a way to strengthen their muscles pre and post-surgery; some are overweight and swim for exercise; but many are simply over-the-hill hounds like Sid who find hydrotherapy helps their arthritis and other old-age grumbles.

Measuring 12ft by 5ft and at 4ft 6in deep, the pool is suitable for all sizes and abilities. There are also ramps both inside and outside the pool enabling dogs to walk in and out of the water, although there is a hoist for larger or less mobile dogs, as well



Lab results

Joint conditions are the scourge of Labradors and other large dog breeds, but hydrotherapy and a holistic approach to prevention and treatment are improving the quality of life of hundreds of canine customers. Sarah Cassells went to Meadow Farm to meet the staff helping dogs get better through doggy paddle. Pictures by Sonya Brown.



Meadow Farm company director, Rachel Watkins with her dog Chunky. (Opposite page) Sid, the 15-year-old Labrador, takes his turn in the pool.

as six different buoyancy aids and eight different-sized harnesses.

"We want it to be a nice experience for the dogs," says Rachel. "We don't use chlorine, which can be an irritant to the dogs' sensitive eyes, skin and ears. Instead, we use a harmless, biological additive to kill bacteria, fungi and algae. Many dogs start in a lifejacket so they are supported and as many as possible will walk into the pool themselves so they can see where their exit is. Once they know they are in control they relax and move around."

When he started the therapy, Sid was given a programme tailored to his age and condition. He would swim twice a week, beginning with a couple of minutes. Now he takes the plunge once a week for maintenance. Younger dogs, depending on their condition, would be likely to swim for longer and against the pool's jets for extra resistance. Sometimes the pool is used by working dogs to practise retrieving in water.

Rachel says: "I'm a firm believer that you should watch how the dog naturally moves in the water and tailor their treatment around that. With dogs like Sid, where arthritis causes the most pain, the pool time is for free swimming to encourage him to stretch his joints and move more comfortably."

At the end of the session, a waggy-tailed Sid steels himself for a big shake and splashes his audience before Roberta rubs him down with a towel. All the dogs who have been in the pool are either sent home in a towelling dog coat in order to keep their muscles warm, or dried off with the farm's blast dryer.

"I've definitely noticed an improvement in terms of Sid's mobility," says Roberta. "I didn't think I'd have him for many more months, but his heart is strong so I wasn't worried about swimming him and he seems to have taken it in his stride. Mentally

it seems to have done him a world of good too."

Rachel agrees: "We see a big mental change in animals that swim. Injured dogs can get depressed just like humans, but once they are in the water and can move more freely, they realise they can still do things. It might take several sessions for you to notice a physical change in your dog, but mentally you can often see the difference after just one."

Most owners will see an improvement in their dog's condition after five or six sessions. If someone is interested in hydrotherapy, Rachel recommends they come to the centre for a free consultation, where they can assess the dog and tailor a treatment depending on their age or condition. Treatments start from £16.50 for a 30-minute session (discounts are available for multiple bookings) and every dog who swims at Meadow Farm must be fully vaccinated and have completed a vet referral form, which can be obtained from the centre or downloaded from the website.

Although hydrotherapy is helping hundreds of dogs across Norfolk and Suffolk, Rachel is quick to stress that it is especially effective as part of a complete holistic approach.

"Meadow Farm has a number of practitioners dedicated to improving the welfare of injured animals," she says. "We offer physiotherapy, acupuncture and McTimoney manipulation, and staff can advise owners on all aspects of exercise, nutrition, animal behaviour and lifestyle management. When I started Meadow Farm it was because I fell in love with the concept of helping dogs. Reaching more owners so we can help more dogs to lead fulfilling lives is of paramount importance to us." ●

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HOLISTIC HOUNDS

A holistic approach to wellbeing isn't just for us humans. Here are some therapies that if used alongside veterinary treatment may make a big difference to your pet's life.

Aquatic treadmill

This unusual piece of equipment enables dogs who may not be able to swim due to medical conditions (such as heart and lung problems) or are fearful of swimming to benefit from hydrotherapy. The treadmill allows staff to treat specific body areas or joints on every dog and to monitor more closely the animal's natural gait pattern.

Physiotherapy

After surgery or injury, animals can experience discomfort and reduced mobility. Physiotherapy is an effective and proven therapy that uses massage, specific exercise and electrotherapy to optimise healing, recovery and return to full function. Conditions such as tendon and muscle injuries, hip or elbow dysplasia, osteochondritis dissecans (OCD), arthritis and joint problems can be especially receptive to physiotherapy.

Acupuncture

If your dog suffers with a painful condition such as muscle/joint problems (such as arthritis), skin disorders or digestive or bladder diseases, acupuncture may help. The treatment involves placing very fine, sterile needles through the skin in positions where they can have an effect on the nervous system. Although the needle part might sound a bit scary, they are actually so fine your pet will barely notice them. In fact, some animals find acupuncture relaxing. Treatments are normally repeated weekly for three or four weeks and then at increased intervals as the effects become more long-lasting.

McTimoney Manipulation

Just like us, animals can suffer from neck, back and musculo-skeletal pain, and McTimoney treatment can help by realigning the skeletal system, improving movement and nerve function, and restoring natural balance. If your pet is particularly active, works or competes regularly, or has had an accident or fall, a McTimoney practitioner will use their hands to manipulate muscles and joints to treat the cause of the discomfort.

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