

# Water Work

## Hounds Set Sights On Canine Water Sports

Deborah Lee Miller-Riley

**W**HEN EXPERIENCED DOG OWNER and trainer Cynthia Fox, of Westport, Connecticut, decided her home and life was ready for another Afghan Hound she had a pretty good idea what she was looking for. For most of us, elegance, grace and regal aloofness come to mind when we think of this fast desert hunter with the rich, long flowing coat of hair. We think show dog. We think fashion magazine. But we don't compare them to a Labrador. Cynthia has long appreciated the beauty and style of an Afghan Hound as she has been raising them for 19 years, but she wanted more than just looks from her new pup. She wanted a working dog, a thinker, a dog with a purpose beyond turning heads on a busy street corner. She wanted a Sighthound that would, of all shockers, swim! Please pass the smelling salts to the Afghan Hound breeder on your right!

Cynthia enjoyed long walks along the sea shore and down lakeside paths. She loved to share nature with her dogs. But when her dog, Wonka, was a pup, one walk led to a life altering lesson. The walk that day took them along the rim of the harbor where tall concrete walls puckered upward, holding in the dark waters swishing twelve feet below. Her walk that morning was repeatedly interrupted by the need to guide her inquisitive hound away from the tantalizing odors that wafted up from the harbor's lips. Wonka was way too bold for his own good and within moments he was at the harbor's edge and before Cynthia could react, he'd toppled into the frigid waters. He made it to land on his own, but not without emotional trauma to himself and Cynthia. Cynthia was grateful that survival was the outcome, but panic could have made it otherwise. Guilt, fear and gratitude have made Cynthia a wiser dog owner.

Canine Water Sports, an organization dedicated to teaching and testing all kinds of dogs for water sports, encourages all

owners to teach their dog to swim. Exposure to water should be part of a puppy's early socialization program. Dogs who are attracted to water need to learn limits and self-control so they don't jump into water without permission. Dogs who are not attracted to water need to be taught how to swim. A dog who associates swimming with pleasure stands a better chance of avoiding panic when water conditions become dangerous.

Because her dogs were around water so much, Cynthia's new pup would be taught to swim. In addition to safety concerns, she thought it would also be a wonderful way to condition her dog for sports and a healthy long life. Swimming poses far less risk to joints than traditional weight bearing activities which meant that her new puppy could start swimming for pleasure and health right away. Swimming can help build aerobic capacity, strength, stamina and coordination. It can even serve to satisfy puppy exuberance and curiosity. Cynthia knew that Sight Hounds have a low fat to muscle ratio which is a handicap when it comes to buoyancy, so she would be careful about exposure conditions. Keeping her pup safe and confident around water was her number one priority.

When she was ready to start her search for a new pup, Cynthia sought out breeders who put working titles on their breed champions and who bred for sound temperament. She found breeders who permitted her the latitude to test their litters for qualities that Cynthia thought were important. After careful consideration and much discussion, Cynthia brought her pick pup home. She named him Victor.

Cynthia exposed him to new things and situations every-day. During his first summer he was cheered and applauded for exploring the ocean. He freely romped the shoreline with water-loving dogs and boldly followed a pack of Portuguese Water Dogs into the waves. He leaped and chased the Water Dogs until he was exhausted. Cynthia brought Victor's toys to the water and encouraged him to revel in the sun and surf by tossing his toys around for him. Victor became passionate about his opportunity to explore the water. He raced and splashed in the shallows and joyfully submerged his head to touch sea shells. He made toys of the sea grass, the hollow crab shells and any old discarded plastic bottle filled with sea water. As summer ended his memory was filled with the comfort of refreshing wetness and the delightful sounds and smells of water. The mere sight of water filled him with desire.

At home Victor was permitted to explore things with his mouth. When he picked up objects, even inappropriate ones, Cynthia encouraged Victor to bring her the prize. She accepted the gift gently and exchanged it for a special treat followed by much praise. He was learning how much fun it was to be a retriever, a trait and skill Cynthia thought would only serve to increase Victor's play, work and exercise options in and out of the water.



Victor the Afghan Hound is always ready for water play!

(All photos by Deborah Lee Miller-Riley)



Briar, complete with float vest, stands ready on the dock for a fun session of water work training.

Meanwhile Kate Connick, of Ardsley, New York, an experienced dog owner and professional dog trainer certified by the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, wasn't looking for another dog. She had a pack of dogs at home. Her walk through the shelter was more out of curiosity than purpose, until her eyes fell upon a long legged mass of puppyhood who quietly looked back at her. Cute pup, she thought. Kate continued through the shelter, but came back to the unusual looking mix with the warm brown eyes and seal brown, wire-haired coat. Something about this dog stirred her

soul. She debated the notion of adopting the hound mix and talked herself out of the whim. She left the shelter knowing her life was full enough with four great dogs at home.

When she couldn't stop obsessing about the pup, Kate returned to the shelter. There sat the forlorn looking pup, waiting for Kate. Her soulful eyes and sweet disposition once again immediately fetched Kate's heart.

As soon as she got her home, Briar began growing. She grew into a gentle giant that looked almost like a Wolfhound. She was tall, yet graceful and she loved to run with the wind. Her shelter meekness disappeared and she became a mischievously, creative young dog. She had an adorable fondness for collecting unusual household items like counter top butcher knives and pot holders. Kate would laugh and rescue the canine collector from her hazardous hobby. Briar's all-time favorite activity, however, was creating a splash frenzy from the slightest amount of water. No yard puddle was safe from Briar's enthusiasm. Mud became her middle name and a common coat accessory. This amused Kate. She thought she had adopted a turf dog, a Sight Hound. She enjoyed land-loving dogs like her Scotties and Boxers. Swimming was not on Kate's list of fun summertime activities. In fact, water sports made her wince.

When Briar was five months old a neighbor invited Kate over for a puppy play session in her large back yard, which also had a beautiful in-ground pool. Kate, busy in conversation with her neighbor, heard the splash. There was Briar, swimming confidently around the pool like a sea otter. It was the dog's first encounter with water over her head! She calmly called Briar over to the steps, praying she didn't have to go in after the want-a-be Otter Hound. The sopping wet pup obediently climbed out of the pool, shook herself off and returned to racing around the yard as if nothing significant had occurred.

Since fate had given Briar a purpose, Kate felt obliged to encourage and support Briar's water attraction. She bought her a kiddie pool, filled it with water and toys, and let Briar out to play. Briar was no wader. She leaped in and out of the pool. She dove in and flipped her toys in the air. She thrust her entire

head underwater, mouth wide open like a whale catching a morning meal. She splashed and thrashed the water right out of the pool. When she was exhausted she parked her large body down in the middle of the small pool and soaked in the remaining wetness. She was a tongue hanging, happy dog! Kate watched from a window and smiled. "How did I ever get a water dog?" she asked herself.

Cynthia and Kate met when they enrolled in a Canine Water Sports (CWS) training workshop. They both wanted to share a recreational activity with their water-loving dogs. They knew that setting aside "dog time" served to foster another degree of trust, playfulness, good health and team work. The organized workshops gave them that opportunity plus feedback, support and training knowledge.

The workshop took place at a small, spring-fed lake that was used for swimming and non motorized boating. The training area had a clear gradual entrance and the lake bottom was made sound with sand that extended from the shore to swim depth. Hazards consisted of water wasps, an occasional enticing goose, and small fish who sometimes plucked at the arms and legs of swimmers.

At the beginning of the workshop the instructor discussed safety regulations, including the requirement that both human and canines wear a life jacket during water training. Life jackets equalize breeds, so all kinds of dogs, even ones with a low buoyancy factor, have an opportunity to enjoy the freedom and pleasure of swimming. Floatation devices also foster confidence and enable learning by supporting the dog until he or she



Cynthia Fox and her Afghan Hound, Victor, stand ready for a water work training session.

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masters difficult water conditions, obstacles, and sport demands.

The instructor explained that CWS encourages trainers to abandon the physical controls commonly used in land-based activities. In fact, collars, leashes and long lines are restricted for safety reasons. They pose a potential risk of airway obstruction through accidental entanglement. However, a short floating lead attached to the dog's life jacket is an acceptable alternative.

Cynthia and Kate's first water assignment was simply to walk into shallow water and play with their dog. Kate was not real excited about stepping into a lake. Goodness knows what might be swimming around in there with you, she thought. But she was willing to make the sacrifice for Briar's enrichment. She gathered up a bunch of Briar's favorite toys and treats and headed for the lake. Cynthia was prepared for her outdoor adventure and was looking forward to relaxing in the water.

Most water dog owners are unaccustomed to joining their dog in the water. Some dogs become agitated by the apparent "sinking" of their owner and excitedly



Cynthia waits to reward Victor for a great retrieve effort.



Cynthia and Victor work together, both in the water, on their Team Swim skills.



Briar works a water retrieve.

charge, paw or climb over their handler. So it was important that Cynthia's and Kate's first water lesson afford the dogs time to relax and have fun while adapting to humans moving about with them in the water.

Briar and Victor were immediately attracted to the lake, but Cynthia and Kate required them to wait for permission to enter the water. They worked on their dog's swim duration, coordination and focus. They dogs were taught to swim alongside their handlers when moving and to circle when their human was treading water or just standing. Short, energized retrieves were also a part of the team swim training. Cynthia and Kate stood in waist deep water to toss a valued toy ten feet away. A few tosses with greater distance were gradually incorporated into the game. Each trainer eventually backed further out of the water and up onto shore as the dog became reliable doing longer retrieves.

By summer's end Victor was chasing down a 50 ft retrieve and returning it to Cynthia on shore. Briar, while able to complete a long retrieve, was sometimes over stimulated by the sight of a butterfly dancing over the water. Kate, ever the professional and patient trainer, knew Briar was still a young dog and never let the training detours frustrate her. Sometimes, however, there was nothing better for a Sight Hound than a good old-fashioned butterfly chase. Kate would shake her head and calmly follow the leaping and zig zagging Briar to the end of her foolishness.

With weekly practice Briar and Victor were soon ready to learn how to team swim a water obstacle course. Three ball shaped markers, anchored 20 feet apart in a straight row, made up the course. As dog and human practiced between two markers they began to synchronize as a team. Fishermen floating by in rowboats looked on in amazement as the unusual looking dogs paddled around with their

swimmers. Passing groups of chatty teens splashing and goofing around on rubber rafts fell into silence at the sight of the big Hounds working with purpose and confidence. Imagine that, Sight Hounds swimming for pleasure!

By the time autumn arrived, Victor was able to swim a three marker water weave course. He was on his way to becoming the first Afghan Hound to earn a Team Swim Merit from Canine Water Sports. Cynthia was very proud of his progress and his unique love of water. Kate, too, had achieved her goal — quality enrichment time with Briar. She knew she had a very special dog with very special water talents. Both teams knew they would be back for more water fun as soon as the butterflies were again dancing over the lake.

*Dogs have been part of Deborah Lee's life since before she could crawl. A professional dog trainer for over ten years, she has been training and exhibiting her Portuguese Water Dogs in Conformation, Agility, Obedience, Lure Coursing, and Water Sports since 1987. Deborah Lee helped develop the first national PWD water trial and currently serves as a national PWDCA and Canine Water Sports water trial judge. She is the founder and director of Canine Water Sports — an organization that provides water fun for all kinds of dogs. For more info go to: [www.caninewatersports.com](http://www.caninewatersports.com) or e-mail: [K9WaterFun@aol.com](mailto:K9WaterFun@aol.com).*

