



Little Paws Pet Resort co-owner, Terry Driskill, spends time with some of his canine clients.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STACEY SULLIVAN

Doggie Daycare

While you're away, your pooch can play

BY EMILY VOLMAN AND HEATHER DAVIS

Many dog parents are familiar with that pitiful, sad-eyed look as they head off to work each morning. Maybe your pooch pouts as you tell them good-bye, or maybe he howls until long after you've made it to your car. And, if you're like many dog guardians, he may still be at it when you get back home, just in time to catch him taking out his lonely frustration on your living room sofa.

Fortunately, doggie daycare can help. The first professional facilities made their debuts in California in the late 1980's, but today they abound in nearly every city across America—and Middle Tennessee is no exception. The greater Nashville area is home to a plethora of daytime doggie retreats, which may present another problem in itself: trying to pick just one!

One Dog's Happy Tail

After a long, hard day at work, the last thing many of us have the energy to do is to come home and exercise with our pooch pals. But even when we make the effort, it's not always enough to rid our canine companions of all the excess energy they've stored up throughout the day.

Stacey Sullivan, a local resident who shares her home with Molly, a Labrador Retriever / Blue Heeler mix, may understand that better than anyone. After adopting Molly as a puppy, it didn't take long for Sullivan to realize that she had a serious problem on her hands. "I basically had begun to think that I had a psycho dog," she laughs. "Molly was the most difficult dog we'd ever had... she was super hyper, chewed holes in the carpet, ate everything in sight and barked all the time. The minute I got home from work she would jump all over me... she'd nearly knock us down. We went through puppy and obedience training with her but nothing seemed to help. We got to the point where we just didn't know what to do anymore."

That's when Sullivan decided to try her luck with the doggie day camp program at Little Paws Pet Resort in Mt. Juliet. She began dropping Molly off before work each day, and it didn't take long to realize that it was the solution she'd been seeking all along. "The change was unbelievable," she says. "It's been two months now, and Molly has become an entirely different dog. She's calm and happy when I pick her up after work, and she behaves really well at home. She sits politely when guests come over. In

fact, she's so relaxed now that she has starting cuddling with us, which is something she never did before. It's really been amazing."

Sullivan says that looking back, it's clear that Molly's training wasn't in vain after all; it was just a matter of all her excess energy hindering her performance. Now that her energy is worked off in a healthy manner on a regular basis, Molly is finally able to focus and to put into practice everything she's learned along the way.

Sullivan adds that it's also been a great relief knowing that her canine kid is in such a caring environment throughout the day. "The staff at Little Paws is just incredible," she says. "You can tell that they really love the dogs and care about their wellbeing.

And Molly just loves it... in fact, when she hears me turn on the blow-dryer each morning, she knows it's almost time to leave. She looks at me like, 'I'm ready to go!' and races to the door to sit by her leash. She's always so excited to get there."

Deborah Driskill, owner of Little Paws Pet Resort, says she gets a lot of dogs like Molly. In fact, it's one reason why she loves what she does so much. "The dogs just have a heyday here," she says. "It's a lot of fun to see them just enjoy being dogs and playing together. And knowing that their time here helps them live happier, healthier lives at home... it just makes us really happy."

When the pooches finally poop out—as even the most energetic inevitably do—they spend their time lounging together on various indoor chairs, sofas and dog beds. According to Driskill, they also receive their fair share of pampering. "We give them homemade treats [upon guardian approval] and purified water," she says. Driskill also mentions that a full-time groomer is available to give dogs a rub in the tub at the end of the day. And what could be better than taking home a dog that's tired and clean?



Stacey Ethridge, owner of Bark-O-Lounge, gets her game on with a few doggie clients.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BARK-O-LOUNGE

A Business Built on Personal Experience

If there's one thing that dog daycare owners seem to have in common, it's the experience that, at some point, they have needed it for their own pooch pals.

"I was working at Vanderbilt eight or nine hours a day, and when I got home, my dog was rearing to go but
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I certainly wasn't," says Darryl Ward, owner of Paw Pals Dog Daycare in Franklin. That's when Ward knew he'd found his calling. "We wanted to start a daycare program for him and dogs like him... something that would wear them out and offer them plenty of exercise and socialization." Like Little Paws and many other facilities, Paw Pals also offers overnight boarding.

Stacey Ethridge, owner of the brand new Bark-O-Lounge in Berry Hill, began with a very similar experience. "I was working very long hours in film production and I wanted a place to take my Boston Terrier, Yoda. When I quit film, I worked for a while at various dog daycares around town. It was such a great thing for Yoda that I decided I had to open my own."

There are numerous benefits for canines that regularly attend dog daycare sessions, including increased physical and mental health resulting from daily exercise as well as the opportunity to socialize through a variety of human and canine interactions. And, of course, it's just plain fun!

"Socialization is vital for your dog," says Ethridge. "Dogs learn from one another and, as pack animals, they truly enjoy the company of other dogs. If for no other reason, dog daycare is worth the social aspect alone. Of course, you can take your dog to the dog park for an hour, but they get so much more out of being with other dogs throughout the day."

"A lot of dogs live [solely] with their humans and, after a while, it seems like they're acting human, too," says Ward. "They don't know what to do when they see another dog. Dog daycare offers your dog the chance to be a dog"—to play and interact on an in-



Pooch pals take a time out at Bark-O-Lounge in Berry Hill.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BARK-O-LOUNGE

Jansen, owner of Boone's Creek Dog Care, a daycare and boarding facility in Greenbrier. "If she's stuck at home alone all day, she's not going to get the exercise she needs."

And, as Ward points out, it's not just young dogs that benefit from increased activity. "I've seen older dogs that get great fulfillment from being here," he says. "Even though they may not play as much anymore, just being in the environment with other dogs fills a social need and helps them to return home content and tired."

In fact, even a slight increase in exercise can help older dogs—especially those with arthritis—to gain greater mobility and strength, which can go a long way toward reducing inflammation and pain.

If your dog is one of the many that suffer from separation anxiety, routine daycare may very well be the solution you've been searching for. While prescription drugs such as Clomicalm can help anxious pets overcome house soiling, chewing, chronic barking and other symptoms of separation anxiety, the cure is oftentimes as simple as relieving your pet's boredom and loneliness through supervised interaction.

Of course, your dog isn't the only one who will reap the benefits of increased playtime. "It's just so nice to come home to a calm, loving dog," Sullivan beams. "We're all a lot happier."

Choosing the Right Facility

For good reason, dog daycares have gained immense popularity in recent years. Take a good look around Middle Tennessee and

you'll find more doggie daycares than Fido can shake a stick at—which, of course, begs the question: how do you choose?

While you may be tempted to go with the facility closest to home or with the cheapest rates, it's a good idea to try out a few different programs so that you can pick the one that's truly right for your pet. Some daycares only accept small dogs, while others are open to all sizes. Some may offer boarding and grooming, while others keep their focus on weekday playtimes. Finding a facility that meets your individual needs may be worth driving a few extra miles or spending a few more dollars when you know you're providing the best for your pet.

When meeting with potential daycare facilities, pay attention to their level of interest in your pet. The staff should ask plenty of questions: Has your pet ever been around other dogs? Has he ever shown signs of aggression? Does he have any health problems they should know about? Most facilities also require that your pooch is current on vaccinations as well as spayed or neutered in order to avoid potential complications within the group.

Most daycares offer a free trial visit, which gives your dog an opportunity to try out the experience and also allows the staff to observe your pet's temperament and play style. "We do the temperament tests for two reasons," explains Ward. "First, for the safety of the dogs in our care, we need to prevent any aggressive dog from being introduced to the play group. Secondly, I never want to subject a dog to this environment if they don't want to be here." After all, while many dogs enjoy being a part of a pack environment, some just aren't comfortable in a large group of dogs. However, according to Ward, most uncertainties are worked out fairly quickly. "Even if they don't like it at first, it usually doesn't take

more than a day for them to realize that this is a fun place to be."

If you're not sure how your dog is going to react in a group play environment, most daycares suggest you simply give it a try and feel it out. "I had a dog that had never been around other dogs," recalls Jansen. "The first day he was very shy and didn't know how to behave. When he came back the next day, he played and had a good time and clearly felt much more comfortable."

Beyond how much your dog will enjoy herself, it's important to also take a close look at the daycare facility. Is it a safe environment, with secure fences and double gated entries? Does the staff seem knowledgeable about dog behavior and do they genuinely enjoy interacting with the dogs in their care?

It's also important to make sure that the facility isn't overcrowded. "The main thing I look for in a daycare is space," says Ethridge. "The amount of space available for the dogs to run and play in is parallel to how many fights there will be. When dogs are on top of each other, they get grumpy."

That's why at Red Rover Pet Services in East Nashville, owner Heidi Dixner offers various groups and activities to suit a variety of dogs and personality styles. "We have groups for the big, active dogs that like to play, as well as the more laid-back dogs who just want to lounge and snuggle up with the staff. Young or old, there's something for every dog."

Ward offers similar advice. "There should be enough space for the dogs to run around and have a good time, but also enough space where older or more lethargic dogs can rest and lie around without being trampled on. This can include temperature-controlled indoor and outdoor areas, as well as separate areas for smaller dogs."

Another thing to watch for? "Check out the person-to-dog ratio," suggests Ward. "Most reputable facilities have no more than 12 dogs per each staff member to ensure that the dogs are being carefully monitored at all times."

Of course, you should complete a thorough tour of each potential facility prior to making a final decision. The facility should be clean and well kept and there should be plenty of fresh water available for the dogs at all times. And, of course, pay particular attention to the dogs: are they enjoying themselves? Do they seem happy or do they appear nervous?

"I actually prefer potential clients to drop in unannounced," says Ward. "I tell them our hours and suggest that they come in anytime, rather than scheduling an appointment and having them feel like I'm preparing for their visit."

Most importantly, feel free to ask plenty of questions while you're there. After all, a reputable facility will want you to make an informed decision and will be more than happy to answer them.

So, it all sounds great—but what about your wallet? Thankfully, doggie daycare doesn't cost as much as you might think. Throughout the greater Nashville area, prices range anywhere from \$13.00 to \$23.00 a day, and many offer discounts for multiple dogs as well as weekly rates. However, if you're on a tight budget and can't swing daily visits, don't fret. Keep in mind that even one or two play days per week can go a long way toward increasing your canine companion's health and happiness. And you just can't put a price on that!

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