

Healthwise continued from page 6

had that insurance," says Mr. Wright, adding that reimbursement for other, non-knee-related medical expenses already had exceeded the premiums he'd paid.

Unlike human knees, dog knees don't lock -- their back legs are always bent. That means the ligaments of the joint are tense whenever the animal is standing.

This helps explain why canine cruciate tears often occur over time in middle-aged dogs, while human ruptures can happen at any age, and almost always result from an acute twisting or turning of the joint. As in humans, the dog knee contains two cruciate ligaments, and the front-most ligament is likeliest to tear. In humans this is called the anterior ligament, in dogs the cranial ligament.

Few warnings exist for puppy purchasers or dog owners. The Web sites of breeding clubs typically make no mention of cruciate-ligament injuries while offering warnings and advice about screening for hip problems in dogs. The Web site of PetSmart Inc., the nation's largest retailer of pet supplies and services, offers advice about problematic hips in dogs, but not knees.



In the bluebonnets is
"Texas Trace Angelina Angel"
Ginger Hurley, Texas

Diane Dahm, an orthopedic surgeon at the Mayo Clinic renowned for her knowledge of cruciate-ligament troubles in humans, says she isn't familiar with similar canine issues. "I'm aware of hip dysplasia in dogs," she says.

In fact, hips troubles aren't as common as canine knee problems. But hip problems have received attention in part because of a proven genetic component. Puppy buyers can demand certification of a family history free of hip dysplasia, a debilitating condition in which the ball and socket don't fit well together.

Some research suggests that cruciate-ligament tears also bear a genetic component. There always had been anecdotal evidence: For instance, Mr. Wright's two affected dogs are half siblings. An article in the January issue of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association identified a gene that appears to predispose Newfoundlands to cruciate tears.

Eventually, this discovery could lead to a test that would identify carriers of

that gene, ideally enabling breeders to screen out problematic dogs.

Even now, some doctors say purchasers of puppies belonging to the larger, more at-risk breeds -- Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds and such -- should ask about family history of cruciate-ligament disease.

"Unfortunately, there's little you can do at this point except ask about it," says Dr. Conzemius.

For many pet owners, the thought of spending thousands of dollars on a dog knee remains laughable. "I'd never spend more than \$300 on a dog, no matter how much I loved it," says Roger Holwick, whose eastern Kansas farm is home to eight dogs.

The fastest, an Australian Shepherd, has a bum leg that Mr. Holwick never considered getting fixed. "She rules the roost, and she doesn't even know she has a disability," he says.

Write to Kevin Helliker at kevin.helliker@wsj.com

LEND ME A PUP

I will lend to you for a while, a beautiful pup God said,
For you to love while they live and mourn for them when they're dead.

Maybe for twelve or fourteen years, or maybe two or three,
But will you, until I call them back, take care of them for me.
They'll bring their charms to gladden you and should their stay be brief
You'll always have their memories as solace for your grief.

I cannot promise they will stay, since all from earth return,
But there are lessons taught below I want this pup to learn.
I've looked the whole world over in search of teachers true,
And from the folk that crowd life's land I have chosen you.
Now will you give all your love, nor think the labour vain,
Nor hate me when I come to take my pup back again.

I fancied that I heard them say Dear Lord Thy Will be Done
For all the joys this pup will bring, The risk of grief we will run,
We will shelter them with tenderness; we will love them while we may,
And for the happiness we've known, forever grateful stay.

But should you call them back, much sooner than we've planned,
We'll brave the bitter grief that comes, and try and understand.

If, by our love, we've managed, your wishes to achieve
In memory of them we loved, to help us while we grieve.

Author Unknown

Shake, Rattle and Roll

An ordinary pill bottle is the secret to this playful method for avoiding hardmouth



The simplest yet most unusual aid ever to arrive on my doorstep was a plastic pill bottle filled with small rocks. Not surprisingly, it came from amateur trainer Don Goodwin, Jr., who teaches dogs with fun and games.

The bottle is the essential ingredient in a two-step method for getting a soft-mouthed retriever without force training.

Step one starts on the pup's first day in its new home. Goodwin begins preconditioning with variations of the food-bowl techniques outlined in my book *Speed Train Your Own Retriever*. His sequence is sit, heel, sit-stay, come.

During heel, he shakes the food bowl, which rattles the kibbles and captivates the pup. After a short heel, he slips the leash around a table leg and does a sit-stay, holding little Duke in place as he seats himself on the floor with the bowl in his lap. Being on the dog's level makes the pup want to come to him, so when Duke settles into a short held-in-place sit-stay, he releases the leash with a come command and shakes the bowl again. Duke eats

his meal as Goodwin runs his fingers in and out of the bowl, teaching that a hand around the mouth is a normal thing when something important is going on.

As the pup eats, Goodwin takes advantage of the time to establish pack dominance. He simply leans forward over Duke and strokes him, saying, "Good boy".

Step two starts after Duke has learned sit-stay without restraint and as he tries his first clumsy retrieves. Goodwin introduces the bottle of rocks.

Shaking it sounds like the kibbles

RATTLE TRAINING IN 2 EASY STEPS

1 Use feeding time to train for sit, heel, sit-stay and come. During heel, shake the food bowl so that the kibbles rattle, becoming a sound that excites the pup.

2 When the pup attempts to fetch, switch to a rock-filled pill bottle for the rattling sound. When the pup is overcome with excitement, let him grab the bottle and mouth it. Eventually, the plastic cracks and the pup is mildly scolded. The game teaches that hard-mouth is unacceptable.

rattling in the bowl. Duke comes running, all pumped up by Goodwin's excitement and the rattling bottle. When the dog is totally focused on the bottle, Goodwin says "fetch" and opens his hand flat to allow Duke to grab it. Duke runs around a bit, rolling the bottle in his mouth, but a leash assures that Goodwin can quickly take it again as he says, "Leave it". Lavish praise follows.

There will be few repetitions of this shake, rattle and roll before Duke bites down and Goodwin hears plastic crack. He instantly scolds his pup but quickly makes up and goes on with the game. Duke soon realizes that chewing on the bottle displeases his pack leader and is on his way to becoming a soft-mouthed retriever.

By the time Duke is ready for formal fetch training, Goodwin already has a buddy that wants to please, won't go through the "I got the dummy/bird; try to catch me" phase, accepts hands around the mouth and finds delivery to be a natural extension of the ongoing game. Finally, that game will include retrieving ducks reliably and without teeth marks. Rarely if ever will this fun-trained pup and his owner need to face confrontational force training.



POPSICLE CURE Dummies are firm enough to discourage hard mouth habits in most dogs. But a soft, fresh-killed duck is a whole new level of temptation. It's wiser to introduce duck scent through fetch practice with a hard frozen bird. But avid duck hunter Don Goodwin's latest dog, Pete, a Chessie, adamantly refused to take cold objects in his mouth. So Goodwin got a popsicle, seated Pete, and teased him mercilessly, bringing it near but then jerking it out of his reach. When Pete wanted it so badly he was drooling, Goodwin brought it close. Pete knocked it off the stick and devoured it. At the rate of just one day of his favorite flavor, banana, Pete was soon ready to fetch frozen ducks.

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