

Non-Surgical Options for Canine CCL Injuries

By Jennifer M. Brauns

OrthoPets has been a client of Mile High Dog for the past three years, but recently we turned the tables and became one of their clients. We've repeatedly been amazed and captivated by the success stories that this caring and compassionate team has created and we've featured several stories about some of their more profound transformations. Our long-time readers might remember the story about Dare, a two-legged Sheltie with both legs on the same side of his body who was helped by OrthoPets. Then there was Jasmine who came to Denver from Ohio to get a prosthetic foot, and last but not least, Jake, a beautiful yellow lab who tore his Cranial Cruciate Ligament (CCL)—the canine equivalent of a human ACL—but was not a candidate for surgery because he was undergoing chemotherapy for cancer.

It is one thing to write about other people's experiences; it is another matter entirely when it is your own furry friend. Our Border collie, Atta, like most Border collies, is a fetching machine. She loves to run, go on hikes, leap off the dock at a nearby lake and fly as far as she can before splashing into the water to retrieve a stick. She is by far the happiest when she is in full motion. It was during one of her many summer runs, hikes or swims that she managed to tear her CCL. It is a common injury in active dogs and fortunately hers was not as bad as some CCL injuries.

When Atta began to limp, we eased up on the hard exercise and let her take a few days off followed by short easy walks instead. We also did a lot of massage work which seemed to help. At this point, lessening her exercise load seemed to help, but after every walk or run, she would have a few difficult days. As time went on, Atta began to have more problems, some days not being able to put any weight on the leg at all and limping around on three legs looking miserable. While she did better in the warmer months, cold weather made things much worse.

We took Atta to our family veterinarian who took several X-rays of her hip and knee. The x-rays showed that she had in fact torn her CCL. Unfortunately, this type of injury can't repair itself. To further the difficulty, at age nine she was also developing some arthritis in her hips and knees. Her veterinarian prescribed Rimadyl® to help with the pain and inflammation which helped a little at first and then seemed to fail her altogether. She had some good days, but it was really hard to watch our beautiful girl having so much pain and stiffness on her bad days. She still wanted to play fetch even though it hurt her terribly to walk, much less run.

Veterinarians generally recommend surgery to repair torn ligaments if the pain or limitations impair the quality of a dog's



life to a significant degree. While it is wonderful that this type of procedure exists for animals these days, the downside is that following a CCL surgery, your pet usually needs to be kenneled around the clock for at least eight to ten weeks, except for potty breaks, to allow the ligament to heal.

If you've ever spent any time around a Border collie, you know that trying to get these fetch-a-holics to stay still can be quite a task. They need to have a job in order to be happy and in the case of our Atta, several of her jobs involve helping with outdoor chores such as snow plowing, making regular perimeter checks of the property, helping with yard work and keeping the neighborhood squirrels in line. These activities were always accompanied by numerous rounds of fetch and the words "let's go to work." More to the point, there was no way that we could subject Atta to two months or more of kenneling in order to recover from surgery. Fortunately, we were well aware of the biomechanically correct veterinary prosthetic limbs and orthotic braces that OrthoPets makes for their furry clients. We believed that an orthotic brace might give Atta's leg the additional support it was no longer getting from the torn CCL.

We scheduled an appointment with Dr. Patrice Mich, DVM, at OrthoPets who evaluated the X-rays and performed numerous tests on Atta's hip, knee, ankle and paw. Dr. Mich was incredibly thorough in her exam, also checking every other aspect of our girl to be sure there was no other underlying problem exacerbating her injury. She asked numerous questions about Atta's lifestyle, her exercise, rest habits and what our goal was in seeking an OrthoPets solution. After her extensive evaluation, Dr. Mich concluded that an orthotic brace might be an excellent noninvasive solution to manage Atta's injury. As a side note, our family veterinarian was not fully aware of the true success of modern-day pet orthotics and so had only recommended trying to keep her comfortable with less

exercise and medication or surgery if the problem got worse. Luckily, we already knew how custom orthotics were being employed to provide solutions for numerous dogs with injuries just like this.

Dr. Mich made a cast of Atta's leg and the following week we came back to get her new custom brace. They showed us some physical therapy exercises to do with Atta at home to help build up the muscles that she had ceased to use when she became injured.

Just as we had heard from other OrthoPet's clients, Atta was almost oblivious to the brace being on her body even the first time. As with any prosthetic or orthotic, the device must be broken in slowly. You wouldn't buy a brand new pair of hiking boots and then take a 30 mile hike with them the same day. The same goes for custom orthotic braces. So, for the first few weeks we slowly increased Atta's time in the brace twice a day until she was completely comfortable wearing it, even for longer walks.

Although Atta doesn't need to wear her brace all day, she does wear it for walks, hikes, swimming and around the house for the more active part of her day. What we can tell you is that the added support of the brace has allowed Atta to return to most of her previous activities including her favorite, fetching the frisbee, which gives her a really good run. The brace has made a big difference in Atta's life and has allowed her to once again be the active dog she wants and needs to be. Compared to the days before her brace, she is much happier and in much less pain and we are thrilled that no surgery was required.

If you have a dog who has sustained a ligament or other injury, you should definitely visit with Dr. Mich at OrthoPets before opting for surgery. While their solutions can't help every dog, they are changing lives daily. In fact, OrthoPets has a client who is the first dog ever with four prosthetic legs. He runs, jumps

and plays and is truly happy and appreciative. They also have a canine client in California who surfs using two prosthetic front legs. Their clients are truly amazing.

OrthoPets was founded by Martin Kaufmann in 2003. Martin, who holds a degree in prosthetics and orthotics, had spent a number of years working in the field of human orthotics and prosthetics. Martin's cousin's dog, Walt, had suffered a stroke and was left without the use of one of his front legs. He could only knuckle it over and drag it. Walt's veterinarian recommended that the leg be amputated, but Martin was sure that he could devise a brace to put Walt's leg into the proper position so that he could walk again. Working in his garage, Martin fashioned an orthotic brace for Walt and it worked wonders. From there, he began working with other dogs creating both prosthetic limbs and orthotic braces. He has even made custom devices for a llama, an orangutan, cats and other animals.

Today, OrthoPets offers back leg braces for stifles (knees), hocks (ankles) and paws as well as hind limb prosthetics. They also offer elbow, carpus (wrist) and paw braces and fore limb prosthetics for front legs. Other solutions include custom adaptive devices such as the "hoppy vest" for dogs missing both front legs and wheelchair devices to assist clients missing both rear legs. The best part is that the devices are not overly expensive. Most of their braces cost between \$400 and \$700, which is a fraction of what a surgery would cost. If you have a dog being considered for a limb amputation, please consult OrthoPets first. Orthopets can often provide better solutions for dogs with a partial amputation and a prosthetic, rather than a full limb amputation.

OrthoPets is located at 886 East 78th Avenue in Denver. For more information, please visit www.orthopets.com or call 303-953-2545.

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