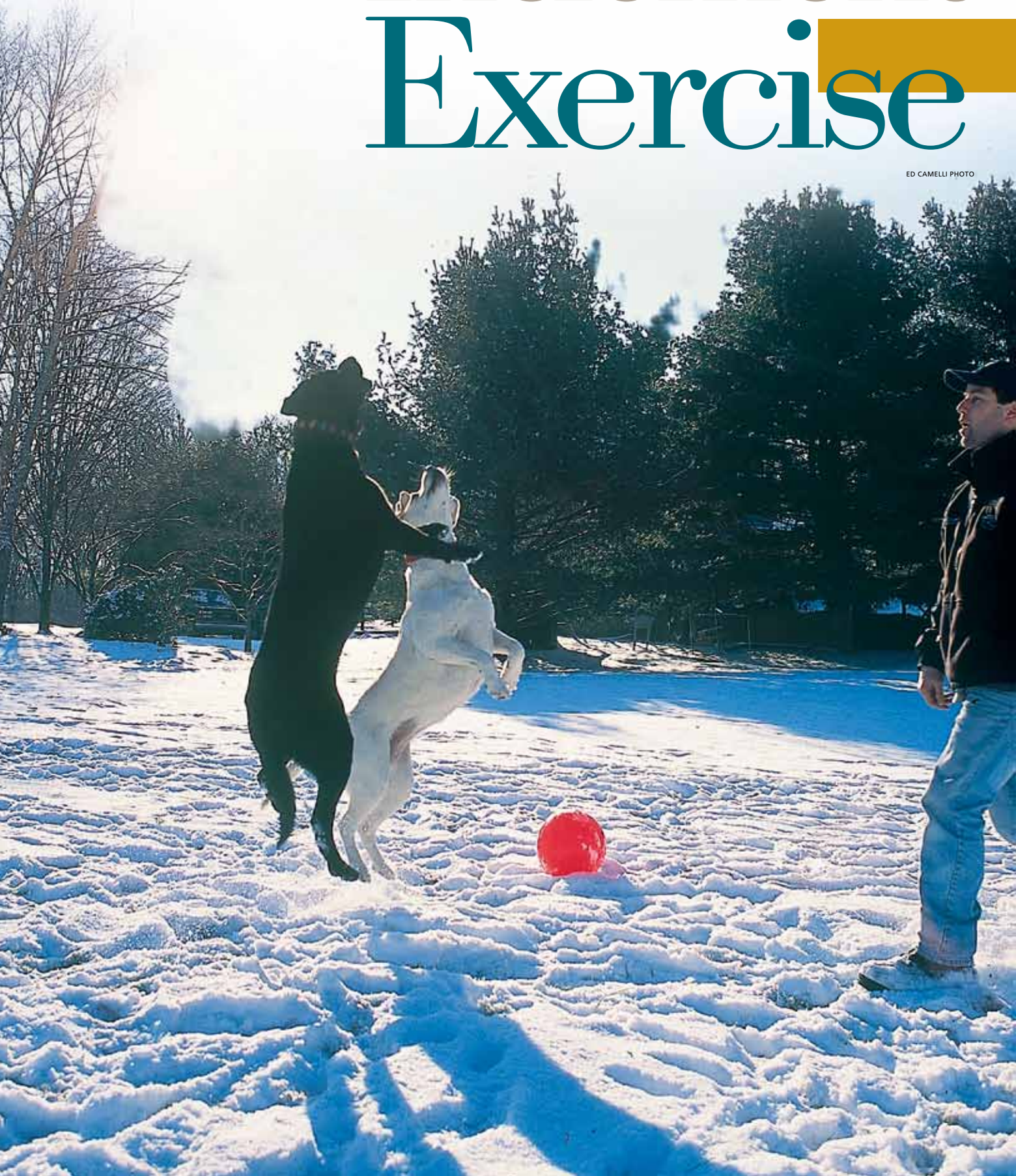


# Inclement Exercise

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# Cautions and advice from the experts.

by Jason Smith

**In some parts of the country, winter is winding down by the time this magazine will find your hands. In others (like here in Michigan), late February/early March can see some of the coldest days of the whole season. In either case – unless you're in the Deep South and have been experiencing moderate temperatures and sun all through the holidays (sigh...) – the weather outside isn't so much frightful anymore as it is spiteful. As in it's just bad enough to annoy, offend, and try to prevent you from doing what you know you should be doing.**

With the warm weather on the horizon, it's easy to just say, "You know what? We haven't done much all winter anyway, what's another month or two until we hit April and May? Then I'll start exercising the Lab." But in doing that, you spend April and May trying to get the dog into shape, by which time the temperatures often become too *hot* and you go back indoors. In reality, the spring and the fall are the best times to be outside working and playing with your dog. Do you want to waste that time with an out-of-shape Lab that can only go for a half-hour?

In last issue's editorial, I talked a little about winter exercise, and we even had our popular "The BBS Says...!" column in which we asked readers about their Lab's favorite wintertime activity. I decided in this issue to explore the idea of winter exercise a little more by talking to a couple of people who are very active with active dogs: Dr. Peter Lotsikas, a board-certified surgeon with the Veterinary Orthopedic and Sports Medicine (VOSM) Group in Ellicott City, Maryland; and Dr. M. Christine Zink, Ph.D, a canine sports medicine trainer affiliated with VOSM.

**Just Labs: What would you recommend people do for exercise in the winter?**

*Dr. Zink:* "There are lots of indoor exercises that you

can do to strengthen the rear legs and core muscles – having the dog beg, then stand up, then go back down into a beg without putting the front legs on the ground is a great one. To make it even tougher, have the dog do it on an uneven surface like a bed or couch pillow. Another good core exercise is to lift diagonal legs and have the dog balance on the remaining two legs. Again, an uneven surface makes this a better workout. You can strengthen the front limbs by having the dog wave, holding its front legs (one at a time) in the air as long as possible.

"These exercises will serve to strengthen the back and abdominal muscles, which can help prevent back injuries. Any basic trick can be made into an indoor exercise, if you modify it for strengthening value."

**Just Labs: We've heard that lunging through deep snow is not good on a dog's joints. Is this true? If so, why is it not good – what is happening?**

*Dr. Zink:* "Lunging in snow is not necessarily bad on the joints. However, the sudden (unpracticed) muscular effort associated with moving the limbs against the force of the snow can cause muscle tearing and [muscle] death, which can result in significant muscle pain for several days afterward."

**Just Labs: If we can get our dogs out for walks, is there a problem with salt that plow trucks put on the road, or that we may put on our driveways/sidewalks?**

*Dr. Lotsikas:* "Most compounds used to melt ice are salt-based. Some states have gone away from salt and moved toward sand, which is safer for animals and the environment. There are three problems with salt: (1) It can get in the microscopic cracks in the footpads and can be quite painful (hence the term 'pouring salt in a wound'). (2) It will draw moisture from the skin and can actually increase the number of cracks in the footpad and deteriorate the quality of the footpad skin. (3) Road salt can be toxic if the dog licks an excessive amount from the paws (most often produces gastrointestinal upset and vomiting)."



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**Just Labs: Would getting your dog used to a pair of hunting boots help in walking on icy sidewalks?**

*Dr. Lotsikas:* “I have had limited success with keeping hunting boots on dogs’ feet, especially in areas where there is mixed footing (snow and mud or slush). Currently, the best product we have found to protect dogs’ feet from ice and salt are called *Pawz*. *Pawz* [www.pawzdogboots.com] look like balloons with the necks cut off. They easily slip over the dog’s feet and stay on well. They are longer lasting than latex balloons, though, because they are made of rubber. They can be rinsed off and used several times, then discarded.”

**Just Labs: What kinds of problems can clogs of snowballs between the toes, if left unchecked, cause in a dog’s paw or joints?**

*Dr. Zink:* “Ice balls can be as irritating to a dog’s foot as a pebble in a shoe can be for a human. Ice balls cause friction on the webbing between the dog’s pads. Along with the moisture from the ice melting, this can breach the skin of the foot,

which can result in bleeding and possibly infections. In addition, the balls can put undue pressure on the tendons and ligaments of the foot, resulting in sprains or strains, particularly of the *superficial digital flexor tendon*, which can result in flattened toes or feet, reducing the ability of the foot to resist impact.”

**Just Labs: What are other winter exercise concerns that people may forget about?**

*Dr. Lotsikas:* “There are several things to consider with cold-weather exercise:

“Dehydration. Dogs do not sweat like humans; however, they do lose a large amount of water through panting. Therefore,

**We might have to get creative in finding ways to get our Labs active in inclement weather. But the hassles of trying to do that will pale next to the benefits when, come springtime, your Lab isn’t laboring in the May sunshine after only a few minutes of chasing a tennis ball.**

replacing electrolytes is not an issue for dogs, but replacing water is. We recommend carrying fresh water for your dog during heavy outdoor activity in the winter. Remember, though, that individual water consumption will vary between dogs and different breeds. A Labrador is more likely to finish a bowl than a sheltie.

“Falls. Many dogs become injured from slipping on ice. Typically, they can strain their *iliopsoas tendons* (a muscle that runs the length of their back and inserts in the groin region), which can take a significant amount of time to heal, even with aggressive rehabilitation therapy.

“Abrasions. Slipping through thick, ice-covered snow can cause cuts, sprains, and strains of the lower limbs and the body. For dogs that will be doing a lot of running through brush or in icy water, we recommend neoprene vests. While dogs typically do not suffer from hypothermia because of muscle contraction, the vests can help protect against cuts and help provide an insulated barrier to wind.”

**Just Labs: Have you ever tried teaching a dog to walk on a treadmill? Would this be a good alternative to outdoor winter exercise?**

*Dr. Zink:* “Treadmills are a great tool for indoor endurance training. However, before you put your dog on the treadmill in the basement, there are a few things to consider:

“1. The treadmill must be long enough that the dog doesn’t feel he is going to step off of it. A good rule of thumb is that the treadmill should be two- to three-times the length of the dog’s body from the front of the chest to the back of the butt. This rules out most human

treadmills for large and giant breed dogs. ‘Double-wide’ treadmills also allow you to walk next to your dog.

“2. The treadmill should not face a wall or object that is closer than 12 feet or so. This may cause your dog to alter his stride length from concern of ‘running into an object.’

“3. The trot is the best pace for a total body workout. It is the only gait that is symmetrical and thus exercises the dog’s right and left side evenly. Remember that a treadmill will never match the training of the outdoors, as it does not vary the terrain, incline, or pace.

“4. A dog should never be tied or harnessed to a treadmill in case he falls or trips during exercise.

“5. Finally, not all dogs will tolerate a treadmill and some find them boring (just like their human counterparts!). We would recommend trying one out first prior to making the investment.”

**A**s I stated in my editorial last issue, we might have to get creative in finding ways to get our Labs active in inclement weather. But the hassles of trying to do that will pale next to the benefits when, come springtime, your Lab isn’t laboring in the May sunshine after only a few minutes of chasing a tennis ball. The spring and summer sun is meant to be soaked up!



## About the Veterinarians

**Dr. Peter Lotsikas** is an ACVS board-certified surgeon with the Veterinary Orthopedic and Sports Medicine Group (VOSM) in Ellicott City, Maryland. Dr. Lotsikas and VOSM specialize in orthopedic injuries of the performance dog. His clinical focus is on minimally invasive surgery (arthroscopy), joint preservation, and fracture management.

**Dr. M. Christine Zink**, Ph.D, DACVP is a canine Sports Medicine Trainer affiliated with VOSM in Ellicott City, Maryland. Her expertise is in evaluating canine locomotion and designing individualized retraining and conditioning programs for canine athletes. She is the award-winning author of *Peak Performance: Coaching the Canine Athlete*; *Dog Health and Nutrition for Dummies*; and *The Agility Advantage*. She is the co-author of *Jumping From A to Z: Teach Your Dog to Soar*, and the DVD *Building the Canine Athlete*.

