

In praise of exercise hounds

Dog owners get nearly twice as much physical activity as those who don't own pets, UVic study shows

By SANDRA MCCULLOCH
Times Colonist staff

Dogs are the best personal trainers for those who are reluctant to exercise on their own, two UVic researchers have learned.

It's certainly true for Barbara Bernard, owner of an 18-month-old Rottweiler, Achilles.

"I walk him an hour every morning before I go to work," said Bernard on Tuesday from the off-leash area of Beacon Hill Park. "Mostly it's because of him but I had a hip replacement last July so it keeps me going and motivated, too.

"Today is my day off and I would love to be at home on the couch watching my soaps, but I'm down here freezing," said Bernard, a hairdresser.

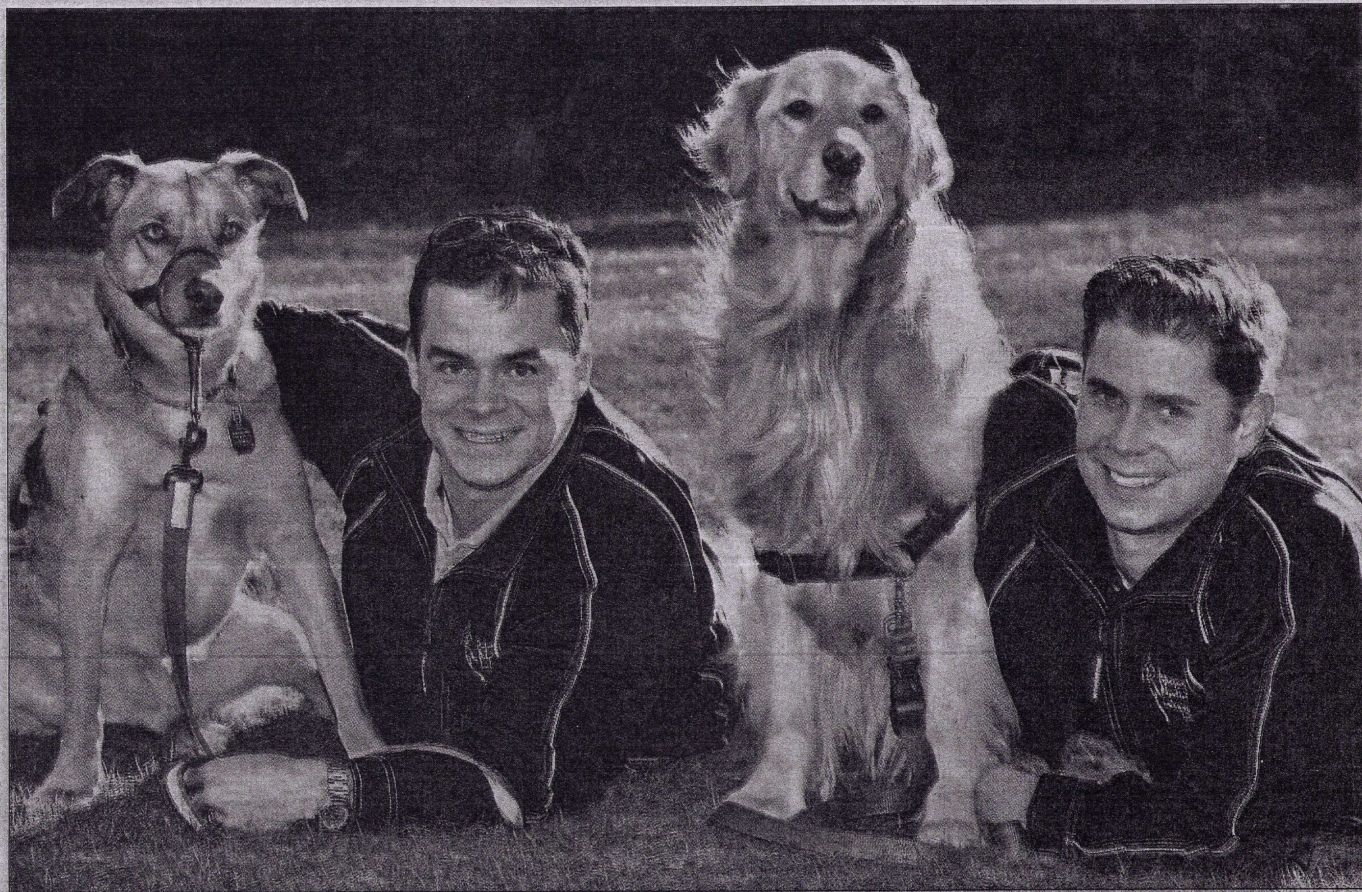
Ryan Rhodes, a professor of kinesiology, and student Shane Brown have had their findings published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

"What we found [was] that people who owned dogs were completing almost twice the amount of physical activity as the people who did not own dogs," Brown said in a recent interview.

Dog owners got out more because of their pets and rarely exercised on their own, said Rhodes.

"When we subtracted the actual dog-walking, the people with dogs were doing less [exercise] so when people with dogs are choosing to be active, they're doing it with their dogs," he said.

"We speculated that it's a sense of responsibility and obligation for being a pet owner. That was clearly the factor that was getting people out and doing things.



Results of research by University of Victoria Prof. Ryan Rhodes, far right, with his dog Sydney, and student Shane Brown, with pet Charlie, show that owning a dog can put people on the road to better health.

Bruce Stotesbury/Times Colonist

"We were able to show that it was as important as the intention to go out and walk. When people who look outside and it's not that nice, it's the ones who have dogs who are the ones who go out and [exercise]."

While 75 per cent of dog owners were

active, the rest were not, the study found.

"It was the people who felt responsible for their dog who were getting out."

Owning a dog puts you on the road to good health but only if you take its exercise seriously, said the two scholars.

There are various factors at play

behind the study results, said Rhodes.

"One possibility is the dog is the impetus for being physically active. The other possibility is physically active people who like to get out and walk go and buy dogs."

The two started with a random survey

in September 2004 of 1,000 Greater Victoria residents. They received 351 responses: 177 men and 174 women between 20 and 80 years of age. Seventy dog owners walked an average of 300 minutes a week compared to 168 minutes a week for those who did not have dogs.