



Poised for Reentry

How a canine sports camp is gearing up for life as the pandemic wanes.

Frustrated that she had to leave her dog, Jessie, behind for frequent work-related travel, Janice Costa came up with the idea of a dog-friendly vacation. Friends and family were skeptical, in part because the timing could not have been worse—the Great Recession of 2008 was underway. Undeterred, she launched Canine Camp Getaway of New York in 2009. Twice a year since then, between 60 and 100 guests and their dogs have met at the Roaring Brook Ranch Resort & Conference Center, in Lake George, New York, for a weeklong camp.

“I still remember that first year, everyone thought I was crazy. Even my own mom was like, ‘Who would pay money to take their dogs on vacation?’” Costa reminisces. “To me, it sounded like a dream vacation and I kept repeating the mantra, *if we build it, they will come.*”

Even she had doubts at the start, but each year more people and dogs came.

Then the coronavirus arrived. When news of the pandemic broke, her phone

stopped ringing with inquiries about the June and September camps.

She expected a flood of cancellation emails. Surprising, when the emails rolled in, it was the opposite of what she expected: People were pleading for her not to cancel.

“It was surprising to me the number of people who asked me to hold it,” she says. “People underestimate the emotional pain and stress of us all be-

ing apart, and camp is a much-needed time to come together.”

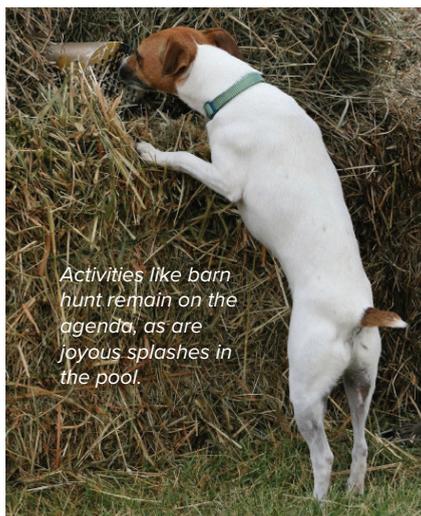
Traditionally, the first session is held in late June, but respecting social distancing and health concerns, Costa had to planned to move that session to early August. Then, because of delays in some preparations at the hotel, Costa made the difficult decision to offer just one session in September.

She’s learned a hard rule about restarting a business in the age of COVID-19: There are no guarantees. Given the rapid changes in the world situation, you have to be adaptable, creative, and keep your fingers crossed.

“Things are so chaotic everywhere,” Costa says. “These are such difficult times.”

Patty and Bill Oehrlein were among the group of returning campers who encouraged Costa to move forward with the 2020 session.

“Now with the pandemic and everyone’s so socially distant, I think the social aspect of camp is going to be so important,” Patty says. “Janice expressed to me that she didn’t want



Activities like barn hunt remain on the agenda, as are joyous splashes in the pool.



Outdoor agility practice is an old standby at the camp.

to do anything that was unsafe, and we knew she would put people's health first."

Costa began focusing on changes to protect the health and safety of attendees while providing them the sanctuary they so craved.

SAFETY FIRST

As the hostess, Costa always feels an immense responsibility to make sure guests are safe and enjoying the experience. This year is no different—except that she is taking extra steps to ensure the event follows social-distancing guidelines, and will abide by all government regulations regarding such safety steps as masks and physical distancing.

Here are a few of the additional safety measures she is taking:

- Campers can expect significant changes to meals and campwide gatherings in an effort to maintain social-distancing recommendations. Instead of buffet-style meals, food will be plated and served, the number of

guests per table will decrease, and the space between tables will increase.

- The venue will be regularly sanitized.

- Canine Camp Getaway of New York is widely known for offering a plethora of activities from "barks and crafts" to educational sessions with the camp's two veterinarians and diverse dog sport-training sessions. The daily schedule has always included six to eight simultaneous activities. Originally intended to give

attendees choices for their individual interests, it also keeps each group size small. Costa plans on dividing staff into "teams," which will also allow guests to enjoy camp while keeping social-distancing practices in place.

- Fortunately, countless outdoor activities are built into every camp experience. Agility classes, barn hunt, canine freestyle dance, tracking, lure coursing, hiking, and more are already an integral part of the routine. "We'll be moving more of our activities outside so that people can space out," she adds. "While guests tend to be divided up into smaller groups anyway, the hotel has made some additional space available to us. We also rent a couple of fields from the town, all of which help us to keep the groups smaller and people more spread out."

- Unfortunately, the camp will be eliminating full-group activities like opening-day orientation, but it is a sacrifice campers say they are willing

to make.

GATHERING FOR A CAUSE

While Canine Camp Getaway is an opportunity for people to enjoy uninterrupted time with their dogs, the event also supports charitable efforts. Since the camp's inception, more than \$45,000 has been raised for charity.

"People are very generous in their bidding and by bringing items to the silent auctions," says Denise Oldenhoff. She has attended camp every year for the past decade with her two toy Poodles.

The chosen charities often reflect where the need is greatest that year. A few years ago, funds were donated to rescues helping dogs displaced by hurricanes. Contributions have also gone to a variety of causes from a special-needs rescue to an organization that buys bullet- and stab-proof vests for police and military dogs, and a charity that provides low- or no-cost boarding to dogs of deployed military.

Although the 2020 charities had not been chosen by the time FD went to press, Costa is monitoring the impact of the coronavirus.

By the time camp kicks off, Costa anticipates the chosen charities will reflect dogs most in need as a result of the pandemic.

FINDING HAPPINESS

Guests are grateful Costa is being nimble by making adjustments that protect their health while allowing camp to go on. The reunion with friends will be even more meaningful this year following long periods of social isolation.

"I get a thrill just going up the driveway of the resort and my dogs recognize the area too," Oldenhoff says. "It's our happy place." **FD**

Katie Navarra is an award-winning writer who has covered pets, horses, farming, and other topics for magazines, newspapers, and other publications for nearly 20 years.