

## Escapes

# A Pa. park with real wagging rights

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

“Do one scary thing a day,” I jotted in my notebook.

Then I turned my attention back to Jeff Woods. I was paying him \$45 for a 30-minute behavioral consultation, and he was teaching me about fear and coping mechanisms.

“Does he like cheese?” Woods asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh, yes,” I said, looking down at the scared beagle at my feet. As Woods walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed a huge bag of cheddar cheese cubes, I considered the idea that we should all be incentivized by food in difficult situations. But my reward would look a lot more like a chocolate chip cookie.

Between the second-to-last and final snow of this long winter, my beagle, Hamilton, and I emerged from hibernation and hit the road. We headed west, through the Allegheny Mountains and toward Pittsburgh, ending up at Misty Pines Dog Park, about 20 minutes north of the city. This is no ordinary dog park. It’s an epic dog park, with a dock-diving pond, hiking trails, indoor and outdoor agility courses, a pet store and classes including canine first aid and therapy dog training.

I was tempted by the classes, but I knew that my hound — like a lot of rescue dogs — needed some individual attention. In July, Hammy was released from a testing laboratory in Virginia through an organization called the Beagle Freedom Project. Most animals in labs are euthanized at the end of testing, but Hammy was lucky — and so was I.

On his first day after four years in captivity, Hammy curled up on a dog bed in my house and barely moved for weeks. He refused to walk into my office, where a mobile spun ever so slightly, and outdoor ventures were curtailed by a swaying branch or a slamming door. Everything was new, and everything was traumatic.

With time, Hammy has grown more self-assured, but changes continue to be stressful. This is a dog who still looks askance at a flier hanging from our doorknob when we return from a walk and won’t come anywhere near the door until I remove the offending object.

Through the cold winter months, I taught Hammy how to run through a nylon tunnel, jump through a hula hoop and start using his poorly developed sense of smell. I could tell that each little triumph was doing wonders for his confidence. But I was also reaching my limit of being homebound. As much as new situations and adventures terrify Hammy, they are my salvation.

So we showed up at Misty Pines on a Saturday morning in March and waited for our appointment with Woods. The main building of this 25-acre park houses an office, a grooming area, a pet store and a giant wood-paneled training center.

From the balcony, I watched an agility class and saw dogs learning to soar over jumps, negotiate wide balance beams and weave between posts. One tiny dog was practicing standing on a big exercise ball, stabilized atop a tire.

Woods, the park’s founder, joined me on the balcony, walking with a cane because of recent hip surgery. In the class below, an instructor spoke into a microphone, music blared and dogs barked. My sensitive guy was way out of his comfort zone, trembling with fear.

Woods got to work. He talked about counter-conditioning, which means offsetting the stress-inducing elements with positive rewards. “But you need stimulus control,” he said. “So if you have 10 levels of noise, work through the low levels first. If he’s so scared he can’t take a treat, the level is too high.”

I was worried that Hammy would be at that too-scared level, but Woods worked magic with the cheese. Every time he



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

**Doggie treat:** At Misty Pines Dog Park, your pooch can scramble over A-frames, above left, or spend his time swimming, hiking or undergoing training. The author’s beagle, Hamilton, top, started out fearful but slowly gained the confidence to conquer the agility stations — with tail upright.

tossed a piece of cheddar, it would momentarily distract Hammy from his nerves. Then he would return to skittishly looking around the room for signs of threat.

“I look at food as a drug,” Woods said, noting that it’s just like humans eating for emotional reasons. (Of course, I had no idea what he was talking about.) “The

*I saw dogs learning to soar over jumps, negotiate wide balance beams and weave between posts.*

higher the palatability, the stronger the drug,” he said. That’s why cheese was getting Ham’s attention, but my Trader Joe’s dog treats wouldn’t have passed muster in this environment.

As Woods talked about using recorded sounds to familiarize dogs with things like sirens and motorcycles, he stuffed

cheese into a hollow bone. “You also want high-value treats, like a raw femur bone with marrow, that they have to work at. It’s a prolonged-release interactive food-dispensing device,” he said, adding, straight-faced, “I need an acronym for that.” He put the cheddar-stuffed bone on the floor, and Hammy went to work.

We talked about beefing up Hammy’s confidence by exposing him to new things, which, because he was bred as a lab dog, hadn’t happened enough when he was a puppy. Woods referred to dog expert Carmen Battaglia’s Rules of 7’s, which help puppies relate to the world around them: For example, walk on seven different surfaces and eat out of seven types of bowls.

“Start the 7’s” Woods said. “Get him used to seven yards, seven children, seven women, seven men.” I scratched “More men” in my notebook. “But get him used to something before you change. You don’t want to make him neurotic.”

Woods invited us to use the agility course throughout the day but warned me to do it in small doses. “Take lots of

breaks, rather than flooding the dog with information,” he said, tossing more cheese on the floor. “Okay,” he said. “I’ve got puppy preschool.” He shook my hand and hobbled off.

I took Hammy to the outdoor playground, where there were several agility stations. One woman pointed out her black Irish water spaniel named Atlas. “The one that looks like Rick James,” she said, nodding at the romping black dog with the seemingly Jheri-curl fur.

Then we explored the indoor agility stations. Hammy zipped over a small A-frame, across a horizontal ladder and even up and down the seesaw. He panted and yawned occasionally — signs of stress — but I helped him along, encouraging him and rewarding him handsomely with treats.

We alternated between activities and breaks, including a hilly three-quarter-mile hike around the property, during which we saw deer and heard a rooster. Hammy took catnaps in the car while I observed classes from the balcony, picking up training tips. The space was bustling, and I got the feeling that this was the

### IF YOU GO

#### GETTING THERE

Misty Pines Dog Park is about 270 miles from Washington and 16 miles north of Pittsburgh. Take Interstate 270 north to Interstate 70 west to Interstate 76 west to Interstate 79 south. Take Exit 73 to Wexford Bayne Road. Misty Pines is 1.5 miles from the exit, on the right.

#### STAYING THERE

##### Westin Convention Center Pittsburgh

1000 Penn Ave.  
412-281-3700

[www.starwoodhotels.com/westin](http://www.starwoodhotels.com/westin)

A short walk from Point State Park, a great place to walk dogs. Pets welcome, no fee. Standard rooms start at \$250.

##### Nemacolin Woodlands Resort

1001 Lafayette Dr.  
Farmington

866-344-6957

[www.nemacolin.com](http://www.nemacolin.com)

High-end resort with its own high-end canine resort, Wooflands. Human rooms (not pet-friendly) start at \$249 during the week, plus \$20 resort fee; dog lodging starts at \$33 per night.

#### EATING THERE

##### Soergel Orchards Market

2573 Brandt School Rd.  
Wexford

724-935-1743

[www.soergels.com](http://www.soergels.com)

Made-to-order wraps and sandwiches starting at \$4.29, pulled pork and smoked turkey barbecue, salads, homegrown fruits and vegetables, homemade pies and bread.

##### T-Bones Marketplace

100 VIP Drive and Route 910  
Wexford

724-935-0530

[www.tbonesmarketplace.com](http://www.tbonesmarketplace.com)

Full deli, calzones, stromboli, deli salads and weekday soup and sandwich specials (chicken bacon ranch on pretzel bun \$4.49, mini pierogies \$3.99/lb.).

#### PLAYING THERE

##### Misty Pines Dog Park

2523 Wexford Bayne Rd.

Sewickley

412-364-4122

[www.mistypinesdogpark.com](http://www.mistypinesdogpark.com)

Monday-Saturday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. for those with park passes or by appointment. \$6 per dog. Regular group classes on Saturdays \$15. Upcoming specialty classes include dog first aid (June 7, \$25), agility (second and fourth Saturdays of every month, \$17) and swimming (first and third Saturday of summer months, \$15).

#### INFORMATION

[www.visitpittsburgh.com](http://www.visitpittsburgh.com)

— M.D.G.K.

canine version of soccer-parent Saturday.

As the day progressed, Hammy’s tail was increasingly upright (even wagging on the hike), and he was more curious than scared. By midafternoon, he was doing most of the dozen agility stations, and I was a proud mama.

On the drive home, listening to quiet beagle snores in the back, I thought about how we could both expand our horizons this summer, with seven different challenges. First order of business, I decided, was to stock up on cheese. And chocolate chip cookies.

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