

# How a "happy little otter" named Juno learned to dunk

By Jacob Bogage, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.13.19

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Juno, a 5-year-old rescued southern sea otter, risks being called for a technical foul for hanging on the rim at the Oregon Zoo. Photo by: Shervin Hess/Oregon Zoo via The Washington Post

Hello, would you like to read about an otter dunking a basketball? Well, you have come to the right place.

The otter in question is Juno, a 5-year-old southern sea otter. She was rescued as a pup near Monterey Bay in California, after her mom went missing. She is a good otter, according to the person whose job it is to evaluate otters.

"She's just a sweet, awesome otter. I can't say enough great things about her," marine life keeper Amy Hash said. "She's high-energy. She loves to train. She's a happy little otter."

The dunks are happening at the Oregon Zoo in Portland. More specifically, at a hoop that is in a behind-the-scenes area of the facility. There is a Portland Trail Blazers sticker in the middle of the backboard. Juno earned it when she learned to dunk in April.

This is the story of how Juno the otter learned to dunk, a two-month-long process that has concluded with triumph and many fish snacks.

Before Juno, there was Eddie the otter, who in 2012, at age 14, learned to dunk. Otters rarely live past 15. In his old age, Eddie had developed arthritis in his elbows and shoulders.

Veterinarians prescribed physical therapy for Eddie, who needed to keep his shoulders and elbows active and strong. Eddie's keepers turned to basketball. Otters love to manipulate things with their surprisingly dexterous paws. The activity required Eddie to reach up and out, flexing both troublesome joints.

Eddie already knew how to retrieve an object and bring it to keepers, so keepers tossed a ball into his enclosure and positioned their hands above a plastic rim. Soon, he was jamming like a pro. He became Internet-famous when footage of his slam dunks went viral.

He was considered one of the longest-living otters ever when he died in December 2018, at nearly 21.

"We get so attached to these animals in the zoo," Hash said. "It was hard when he died, and in memoriam, we decided someone needs to learn to dunk a basketball."

Keepers chose Juno — spunky, eager to please and the oldest of the zoo's sea otters. Juno does not have arthritis, but the activity is good exercise — both physical and mental — and could be a useful therapy for joint issues as she ages.

The training started with a simple game of catch, Hash said. Hash handed the otter a ball and rewarded Juno with a fish snack when she gave it back. When Juno began mastering that task, they moved their game toward the hoop, and Hash encouraged her to rise up in the water and lift the ball over her head.

"The minute the animal starts do to what you want, like she puts her arms up to the basket, she gets heavily rewarded," Hash said.

After a while, Juno started to get the hang of dunking the ball. Well, not entirely, but she was close. Juno rose out of the water in the middle of the hoop and jammed the ball down on the outside; it took a few more training sessions before she figured it out.

But to Hash, the otter's basketball skills weren't complete.

"I wanted her to be like Damian Lillard, because he's so awesome," she said, alluding to the star guard for the Trail Blazers. "She has a roll behavior where she'll roll in the water with the ball and a spin behavior, because she has to be able to spin and roll to get to the basket."

Now, Juno can carve up defenses like a sushi chef working with fresh tuna, and she's ready to show the world.

Juno's next lesson, Hash said, will be point guard training.

"One day," she said, "I'll get her to throw the ball to me, and then I'll regret it, because I'll have an otter tossing things at me all the time."