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Pet Connection: Captivating canine trivia for dog lovers

By Dr. Marty Becker and Gina Spadafori - Universal Press Syndicate

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This week, we're again sharing excerpts from two of our three new books. We're going to the dogs with fun canine facts from "BowWow: Curiously Compelling Facts, True Tales & Trivia Even Your Own Cat Won't Know" (HCI, \$15, 224 pages). Enjoy!

- The phrase "Beware of Dog" is so old that its Latin equivalent – cave canem – has been found on signs in Roman ruins. The word "watchdog" isn't quite so old; the first mention of it is by Shakespeare, in "The Tempest."
- Dogs have always gone to war, serving as everything from spike- collared attack forces to munitions haulers, from messengers to modern-day sentries and bomb- and drug-sniffers. The dogs really stepped up in World War I, when more than 15,000 of them served as guard dogs, messengers, sentries and rat-killers for Allied forces.

Many a soldier has owed his life to a dog, and many have never forgotten that debt. Organizations of former military dog handlers remain active, and among their goals is the construction of memorials to the animals that served so bravely.

- President Harry S. Truman once said, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog." There's no doubt U.S. presidents have always gravitated toward the canine set, probably both for reasons of companionship and politics. (The latter because Americans have always seemed to appreciate a man who can appreciate a good dog.) The father of the country set the tone for this canine adoration: President George Washington was known for his love of foxhounds, and the genes of his prized pack are probably in some of these hounds even today.
- Dogs today are more likely to be given human names: Sam, Sadie, Molly, Max. But it wasn't always so. At least two names – Rover and Fido – were once so popular that they now serve as synonyms for the word "dog." These names were of the descriptive variety, revealing the traits a dog had – or those his owners hoped he'd have. Rover is obvious, a term from the days before leash laws became common. But Fido? Its roots are Latin and suggest a dog of unflinching loyalty and courage (rather like the motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, semper fidelis, for "always faithful").
- The idea that a dog's saliva has healing powers has been around at least since the ancient Greeks and Romans, whose physicians believed it to be an antidote for poisoning. Later, St. Roch was often pictured with a dog licking a sore, reflecting the belief that the patron saint of plague victims knew something about a cure and that his dog's saliva made him healthy.

Modern medicine, no surprise, doesn't look kindly on such theories. And by the way: Dogs are attracted to open wounds because the serum from them is tasty to them.

But listen to your doctor: Soap and water, a dab of topical antiseptic and a Band-Aid are much better treatments for any cut.

* * *

We can't come to your home to autograph our new books, but we're offering the next best thing.

For a free cardstock bookmark autographed by Dr. Marty Becker and Gina Spadafori, send a self-addressed, stamped, legal-size envelope to Pet Connection, Universal Press Syndicate, 4520

Main St., Kansas City, MO 64111.

Please indicate if you'd like a "MeowWow" or "BowWow" bookmark and allow six weeks for delivery.

Raising a stink about dog's bad habit

No one is really sure why dogs like to roll in the stinky stuff, but it's thought to be related to the natural behavior of the wild relatives of our pets.

If you catch your dog in the act of rolling in stinky matter, interrupt the behavior and then ask him to do something else, such as sitting or coming to you, so you can reward the behavior you prefer. Don't yell at your dog for rolling; remember that negative attention is still attention.

If your dog is off leash and you see him heading for some foul target and you don't think he'll come to you when called, whoop it up and run in the opposite direction to get him intrigued enough to follow. Once he is running toward you, say, "Come," praise him, and pull a treat from your pocket. Then put the leash on him until you're both far away from his intended target.

If he leaves the stench to come to you when called, ignore the recent bad behavior and praise the current good response. Generally, once a dog is already going in for a stinky landing, there is no stopping him. But if you can get his attention during the "thinking about it" phase, you might get him to avoid the stink.

Walking your dog with a head halter will make it easier to interrupt the rolling before it starts. Otherwise, be prepared for the occasional bath after the fact. --Susan and Dr. Rolan Tripp

Q&A

Keeping pup from the litter box

Q: We adopted a great beagle mix from our shelter. She loves the kids and they love her. But I'm about ready to take her back! The problem is she eats cat poop from the litter box and at the park. I've never heard of such a thing. It's disgusting, and I don't want her around the kids after she does it. Who knows what disease she could give them? We've spanked her, but she just sneaks in anyway when we're not looking. -- W.P., via e-mail

A: Litter boxes are irresistible to many if not most dogs: They're drawn to the undigested protein that remains in feline feces. Faced with a constant supply and ready access, no dog will be able to resist for long, which is why efforts to train your pet haven't been successful.

The better plan would be to restrict access, which can be accomplished in many ways, including:

Covered litter boxes. You can find litter boxes with lids at almost any pet-supply store, and this might fix the problem. Cats who have asthma shouldn't use them, some cats won't use them, and some dogs are strong enough (or small enough) to get to the box anyway. But for some households, a covered box will solve the problem.

Change the litter box location. Make any change slowly, so as not to discourage litter box use by your cat. But it doesn't hurt to experiment with such things as moving the litter box to a location above the dog's reach.

Provide barriers. One way is to rig a door so it stays open wide enough for the cat but not for the dog. One friend of mine did this by putting hooks on the edge of a door and the door jamb, and then by putting a length of chain between them to allow the door to stay open wide enough for the cat, but not for the dog. Another possibility is to cut a cat-sized hole through the door to the litter box room. For a small dog who's able to fit through any opening a cat can, a baby gate is an alternative: The cat can jump over, but the dog cannot. As for the park, keeping her on leash is most effective, although you can also try getting a trainer's help to teach her the "don't touch" or "leave it" command.

Experiment with what works, and realize that punishment doesn't work when the reward is as wonderful (to your dog) as the litter box contents. This is one case in which training the family to

make adjustments usually works much better than trying to train the dog. -- Gina Spadafori

(Do you have a pet question? Send it to petconnection@gmail.com.)

PET BUZZ

Cats at higher risk for rabies than dogs

Rabid dogs, foaming at the mouth and baring their fangs, figure prominently in the popular imagination. But while the world's leading rabies threat is from dogs, the United States faces a larger problem from cats. Cats accounted for 318 confirmed cases of rabies in 2006, compared with 79 dogs, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Vaccination has proven to be a success in dogs: Confirmed cases of rabies in dogs dropped from 6,949 in 1947 to 117 in 2003.

About one in every 15 dogs seen at the more than 600 Banfield, The Pet Hospitals has a disease of the eye. Breed type increases the risk, according to the hospital chain, noting that eyelid problems are common in the bloodhound, English bulldog, cane corso, Great Dane, English cocker spaniel, Neapolitan mastiff, Newfoundland, St. Bernard and shar-pei.

DVM Newsmagazine reports there are an estimated 50,000 attorneys working on cases related to animals.

The late Charles Schulz, creator of the wildly popular "Peanuts" comic strip, found the inspiration for Snoopy in Spike, the mixed-breed pal of his youth. The September issue of Vanity Fair reports that Schulz called Spike "the wildest and the smartest dog I've ever encountered." His Snoopy marked the first time in comics that an animal had trumped the humans. "It did more than change 'Peanuts,'" said Walter Cronkite, "it changed all comics." -- Dr. Marty Becker

PET TIP

Keep pets away from antifreeze

Pet lovers have two ways to protect their animal companions from lapping away at deadly antifreeze -- one relatively foolproof, the other not.

Not foolproof: Use a safer antifreeze made from a different formulation than the more popular variety, store chemicals properly, and wipe up spills promptly. While this should eliminate most of the risk for dogs, these strategies are not foolproof for free-roaming cats because you cannot control what your neighbors will do when it comes to using or storing deadly chemicals.

Foolproof: Keep cats inside. Free-roaming cats have relatively short life spans because the outside world is full of deadly hazards. To antifreeze, add cars, coyotes (even in cities!) and even cat-hating neighbors to the list of things that can kill a free-roaming cat.

If you even suspect that your pet has gotten into some antifreeze, get him to the veterinary clinic immediately. There's no "wait-and-see" period with this stuff. -- Gina Spadafori

PETS BY THE BOOK

Groundbreaking book makes case for 'no-kill nation'

Why are pets being killed in America's shelters? Ask most shelter managers, and they'll blame irresponsible pet owners. Pets are just another casualty in a throw-away society, they'll say.

But Nathan Winograd makes a different case. In "Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No-Kill Revolution in America" (Almaden, \$17), the attorney, shelter manager and longtime animal advocate blames the killing not on irresponsible owners but on a wrong turn taken by shelters and by national animal groups that can't jump out of their money-raising ruts to try something new. Killing animals, he argues, has become institutionalized and unquestioned.

In questioning the killing, he lays out the path to a different outcome.

The road to a "no-kill nation," says Winograd, begins with shelters that no longer view killing adoptable pets as acceptable work for nonprofits formed to advance the humane treatment of animals. Shelters must enlist the pet lovers in the community as partners -- not as enemies who must be punished with ever-harsher pet limit and neutering laws. Working harder to make a bad system work won't fix it, he argues.

His vision isn't just theoretical. "Redemption" advances strategies that have worked in progressive shelters and offers point-by-point answers to those who have every excuse for why such plans won't travel. City shelter? Done it. Rural shelter? Done it. Management of feral cats? Been there, done that, too.

Can a shelter go from a one-way door to the euthanasia room to 90 percent adoption rates? The answer is "yes" for any community willing to try, says Winograd, and the only thing stopping change is unquestioning acceptance of the way things have always been. -- Christie Keith and Gina Spadafori

PETS BY THE NUMBERS

Avian pet popularity

Cockatiels and budgerigars (commonly but incorrectly known as "parakeets") are by far the most popular birds kept as pets. According to a 2006 survey, here are the top birds among people keeping one avian pet:

Cockatiel 34 percent

Budgie 29 percent

Conure 7 percent

Lovebird 5 percent

Amazon 5 percent

Macaw 4 percent

Other small parrot 4 percent

Canary 3 percent

Cockatoo 2 percent

Other large parrot 2 percent

African grey 2 percent

Other 3 percent

Source: American Pet Products Manufacturers Association

ON THE WEB

Merit badges for good dogs

Dog Scouts of America has to be one of the more clever ideas I've ever seen, with a Web site (www.dogscouts.com) that lives up to its potential.

The idea behind the site is that dogs don't get enough exercise of their minds and their bodies (true), and that doing things with your pet can be great fun for you both (doubly true). As one might guess, the site offers guides for plenty of wonderful activities, from backpacking to obstacle courses and "naked obedience" (the dog is naked, not the person).

Of course, adorable merit badges mark each skill mastered at each progressively more difficult level. The entire DSA manual is online and free to access. There's also lots of practical advice on training and problem-solving.

Troops can be found in many states, as well as Canada and Japan. Join the fun! -- Gina Spadafori

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