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Heads they win, tails they win

These days our pampered pooches just can't lose since their rank in the human 'pack' has never been higher

By Jenifer Goodwin

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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In late January, a golden retriever strangled 6-year-old Kaitlyn Hassard by dragging her by a scarf around her neck. At the family's request, the dog was sent from its Long Island, N.Y., home on an all-expense-paid trip to the Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe.

There, a team of pet advocates saw to the dog's every need: Behaviorists assessed its personality, a doggie foster family took the animal home at night to ease its feelings of loss, and more than 250 people applied to adopt the dog, named Jessie.



DAVID MCNEW / Getty Images

Every time a pet in jeopardy makes the news – whether it's the wretched-looking creatures stranded by Hurricane Katrina or the dogs wandering the Iraq war zone – Americans clamor to help. Pet lovers send checks, arrange for chartered jets to fly the animals out of harm's way and volunteer to feed them, shelter them and love them forever.

To dog lovers, there's nothing more heartbreaking than puppies in peril. Some 200 animals flew on a chartered jet from the Gulf Coast to Los Angeles International Airport on Sept. 19. TV news crews gathered around to get the scoop on one dog that was separated from its owner and later rescued.

The boundless compassion extends even to a dog responsible for the death of a child.

Laws vary among cities and states, but it's common to euthanize dogs that kill humans. Jessie got off because of an acceptance, on the part of

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police and the girl's parents, that Kaitlyn's death wasn't the dog's fault. "It was a very tragic accident," said Paul Dodorico, a homicide detective with the Suffolk County Police Department. "I don't think the dog knew what it was doing."

Whether or not a dog can ever be blamed for anything, the attention being paid to the golden retriever sheds light on pets' increasingly exalted position in American culture and the tendency for anthropomorphism to run amok.

More and more Americans consider their dogs honored family members, deserving of the best food and medical care money can buy. With their status on the rise, dogs are the beneficiaries of a movement to give pets legal rights more on par with humans.

The belief that every dog is precious was evident with the treatment of the castoff golden retriever. Pet advocates leapt at the chance to save Jessie, orphaned by forces outside of her control.

Jessie, to be sure, is no murderous mastiff like the kind that mauled Diane Whipple in San Francisco five years ago. But the result, a dead human, was the same.

The conclusion by pet experts that the dog poses no threat isn't sitting well with Kenneth Phillips, a Los Angeles attorney who exclusively represents dog bite victims. A dog that kills, even during rough play, is a dangerous dog and should be put down, he said.

"What we're balancing here is the life of a dog versus the life of another child," Phillips said. "I'm not willing to risk another freak accident. I'm not willing to risk that (the behaviorist) was having a bad day and made a mistake" in determining Jessie's tugging habit isn't a fatal flaw.



DAN TREVAN / Union-Tribune
Jessie the golden retriever met his new brother, Buster the beagle, during the adoption process at the Helen Woodward Animal Center.

Pets in America have never had it so good. Many pet owners – scratch that – pet guardians, see their pets, and dogs in particular, as surrogate children. "Dogs are seen as pitiful and abused, or as adorable and needy," said John Katz, author of 14 books on dogs, including "Katz on Dogs: A Commonsense Guide to Training and Living With Dogs." (Villard, 2005) "They're seen as children with furs."

With dogs elevated to the status of babies with four paws, no indulgence is too good for them. In the last decade, U.S. spending on pets doubled to \$36 billion, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, surpassing spending on children's toys by nearly \$16 billion.

Dogs now routinely get gourmet food and Christmas gifts, kidney dialysis and chemotherapy. The adoration also can be measured in

time and attention: Dogs owners share their beds, include dogs in wedding ceremonies, take their dogs to day care, wage civic battles for off-leash parks and refer to themselves as their pet's mommy and daddy. ("Baby" is the 12th most popular name for a dog, according to an American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals survey.)

Dogster.com says more than 140,000 people have signed up for its Web site, where dog owners write online diaries, in the personas of their dogs, about their pets' thoughts and daily activities. This year, the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association is peddling a calendar with photos of pets reading books and lounging in hammocks, to "depict one of the biggest trends: the humanization of pets."

"When I was a kid in the '60s, dogs hung out in the back yard," said Cameron Woo, publisher of *Bark* magazine, which bills itself as "the voice of modern dog culture." "Now you have hundreds of different toys you can get for your dog. You can take them to special camps, dog parks and all kinds of activities, from dog dancing to Frisbee catching. In the last 20 years, and particularly the last 10 years, there's been a major shift. Dogs have become integrated into society."

And thousands of people are involved in the pet rescue movement. The largest groups are well-funded and well-organized. After 9/11, a report found animal rescue teams on the scene the next day, while the elderly and people with disabilities living near the twin towers were left stranded in their homes for as much as a week.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

Spending on pets is soaring. At Muttropolis in Solana Beach, Tom Sharrit and his dog Elliott got help from Christy Shikiya.

After Katrina, news reports said that 50 dogs were evacuated from a pet hospital on air-conditioned buses while humans were stranded on rooftops and at the convention center. "The Humane Society has an animal rescue coordinator who is dispatched to disasters to rescue animals," said Nora O'Brien, who authored the 9/11 study for the International Longevity Center-USA in New York City. "We don't have one for older people or disabled people in this country."

What is it about dogs that humans find so irresistible?

Dogs love unconditionally, dog owners say. They're good listeners. They don't talk back, and don't criticize. They're loyal, forgiving and always happy to see you.

"If some advertiser or political consultant could figure out just what it is in human psychology that makes us willing to believe that dogs are

loyal, trustworthy, selfless, loving, courageous, noble, and obedient, he could retire to his own island in the Caribbean in about a week with what he would make peddling that secret," wrote Stephen Budiansky in a 1999 Atlantic Monthly article, "The Truth About Dogs." ". . . Dogs take from the rich, they take from the poor, and they keep it all. They lie on top of the air-conditioning vent in the summer; they curl up by the fireplace in the winter; they commit outrages against our property too varied and unspeakable to name . . . If we had roommates who behaved like this, we'd be calling a lawyer, or the police."

But we don't call the police. Instead, more and more people react to a misbehaving dog by getting a second dog, to keep the first company.

In 1960, there were 15 million pet dogs in America, Katz said. Today there are nearly 74 million, not to mention 90 million cats, according to an American Pet Products Manufacturers Association survey. Dog ownership increased by 12 percent from 2002 to 2004, the most recent figures available. During those same years, the percentage of people who owned two or more dogs rose from 31 percent to 39 percent.

Americans who have pets outnumber those who don't – 63 percent of American households own a pet, according to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association.

Not only has selling feather beds and organic food and acupuncture to all those pets become big business, but pushing the pets themselves has, too. In commercials, TV and movies, dogs are being marketed, along with SUVs, stainless steel appliances and big houses in the 'burbs. Call it the puppy-industrial complex.

"Getting a dog has become part of the American dream," said Katz, owner of four dogs and a farm in upstate New York. "It's part of the package. Part of the happy American life is getting a house, a bit of space, a yard, a nice car and a dog."



DAN TREVAN / Union-Tribune

Shari and Gerald Boyd cried tears of joy when they found out Benji the movie star dog chose them to adopt the forsaken golden retriever Jessie.

Still, from a strictly cost-benefit standpoint, owning a pet doesn't make much sense. "For years I've been trying to understand why people who keep these animals are prepared to invest so much money, time and emotional resources," said James Serpell, a professor of animal welfare and director of the Center for Interaction of Animals and Society at University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. "Superficially, there's no apparent gain from it."

Researchers have come up with all sorts of hypotheses to explain the deepening attachment. Budiansky, one of the most polemical figures in

the doggie debates, calls dogs “social parasites,” master con-artists who have evolved to manipulate their human caretakers.

Others who study the role of pets in society see more modern factors at work.

Society is fragmented. People feel isolated. Divorce rates are high. Close relatives and friends live farther away, and community ties have broken down. Marriages, and children, happen later or not at all.

Animals, helped along by our tendency to anthropomorphize – that is, attribute human behaviors and thought processes to animals – are filling the void. The demographic groups most likely to become new dog owners are young married couples without children, and empty nesters, Katz said.

“Because they don't speak, people are free to project all sorts of ideas onto them,” Katz said. “People are always telling you what dogs are thinking . . . But dogs don't think like people. We're beginning to lose sight of that in our neediness.”

There's little question that pets can have a positive effect on psychological well-being. Studies show pets provide companionship and affection, and can ease loneliness, especially in the elderly. Some studies have shown fleeting decreases in blood pressure and heart rate in the presence of pets as lowly as the aquarium fish.

But pets can have negative public health consequences, too, Serpell said. A dozen people in the United States die from dog attacks each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. To put it in perspective, you have a greater chance of being struck and killed by lightning (32 deaths in 2004), says the National Weather Service.



Kaitlyn Hassard

Still, the CDC estimates more than 4.7 million people are bitten by dogs every year, 800,000 of them serious enough to require medical attention. About half are children.

“The dog bite epidemic is a serious public health issue,” Katz said. With dog owners so emotionally involved with their pets, dog owners often blame the child who's been bitten. “They'll say, 'The child shouldn't have done this or that,' or the child should be taught more about how to deal with dogs,” Katz said.

And how about those famous last words? Don't worry, he's friendly. “Any dog is capable of biting,” Katz said. “When you're getting a dog, you're getting an animal with teeth. They are naturally predatory creatures.”

Exercising its prey drive is likely what the golden retriever was doing when it tugged on Kaitlyn Hassard's scarf, said Gregory Ackland, senior research associate at the James A. Baker Institute for Animal

Health at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

At play in the wild, wolf puppies tug and shake things to practice the adult behavior of tearing apart carcasses, Ackland said. Today's domestic dogs have been bred to continue such puppy behaviors into adulthood. At 18 months, Jessie the golden retriever is an adult. "What the golden retriever is doing is playing as an adult, with the strength of an adult," Ackland said.

The popularity of the breed may have played a role in the lenient treatment, he added. "If this was a pit bull terrier or a Rottweiler there would be thousands of people clamoring to put it to sleep. The fact that it's a cute, blond golden retriever that wags its tail ... The presumption is that it's innocent."

There were no witnesses to Kaitlyn's death. According to police, her mother found her lying in the back yard, with one end of her scarf in tatters, an abrasion around her neck, and her pants and coat streaked with dirt from being dragged.

Dog experts say young children shouldn't be left alone with a dog even for a short time – advice that's a lot easier said than done.

A rep from the New York shelter chaperoned the dog on its cross country flight, paid for by an anonymous donor, so that Jessie would see a familiar face when the plane landed, said John Van Zante, the Rancho Santa Fe center's public relations manager.

In San Diego, Jessie went on play dates in the yard "with the other kids," he said.

Shelter workers first planned to train Jessie to stop tugging, but after a trainer and animal behaviorist determined the tugging wasn't out of the ordinary, the plan was scrapped.

The center invited the media to attend a ceremony in which the movie-star dog that played Benji on the big screen plucked cards with the names of the top three contenders from a bowl with its teeth.

"We were laughing and crying in disbelief," said winner Shari Boyd about the moment she found out Benji chose her to take Jessie home.

Boyd, who has two dogs, three cats and six grown stepsons, lives on a half-acre in Hesperia. Before the center would agree to adoption, Boyd underwent a home inspection, had her second dog neutered, and brought the dogs to meet Jessie in Rancho Santa Fe.

"The Hassards have been through so much," Van Zante said. "They'll think about their beautiful 6-year-old daughter that died in a tragic accident every day for the rest of their lives. Fortunately they were able to see beyond it and realize their other baby, their golden retriever, while part of it, wasn't a bad dog. It was an accident. And they did not want to lose another one of their children."

Phillips, the dog bite attorney, called the spectacle “grotesque.” A dog is not a child. It's not a victim. And it's not a hero.

“When a dog kills a girl and the dog becomes a celebrity, at that point, the silent majority is going to take notice,” he said. “Things have gone too far with the position dogs have taken.”

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