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**Getting Into Day Care Is Becoming Harder For Today's Dogs**

Cousteau Had an Accident At His Interview, but He Did Pass the Lick Test

By John Hechinger, The Wall Street Journal, 1076 words
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HOUSTON -- Mari Lawson worried that Cousteau, her Great Dane, lacked social skills. So she tried to get him admitted to Urban Tails, a day-care center that encourages dogs to mingle and play.

Ms. Lawson could hardly believe the admissions process. She had to fill out a four-page "dog personality profile," in which she disclosed that Cousteau barks at the mailman and dislikes "bums with shopping carts." She also wrote he has "sharing issues." He becomes "aggressive with toys and other dogs."

At the start of his interview, Cousteau failed to impress, leaving a puddle on the floor of Urban Tails' lobby. And he still awaited the heart of the evaluation: a "peer session" with other dogs that would test his "temperament" with sniffs, licks and the occasional roll on the ground.

"I'm freaking out," said Ms. Lawson, a small-business consultant. "I feel like we're trying to get Cousteau into college here."

More doggie day cares actually are starting to take their cues from Harvard and Yale. They are instituting rigorous admissions standards as they strive to put together classes or play groups of well-behaved animals that don't growl, nip or bite. Day cares, selective and otherwise, are multiplying as more two-career families are unwilling to leave their pets home alone all day. The North American Dog Daycare Association counts 1,100 members in the U.S., up from 100 in 1999. High-end day cares can charge more than \$30 a day, or twice the average cost of boarding a dog at a kennel.

Unlike kennels, which tend to keep dogs in solitary confinement most of the time, day cares promote mixing on lawns or in big playrooms because it enriches their social lives. Of course, that freedom can lead to mayhem if the dogs aren't carefully screened.

When she started a day care in Camarillo, Calif., last year, Judy Arnold had open admissions for neighborhood pets -- until vicious fights started breaking out. "One minute, you're admiring the dogs, the next minute, you have one dog down," she said. "All you see is fur flying." Now, only half of all applicants get into Judy's Paw Spa.

As more of these operations take the selective route, pet owners are starting to feel the sting of rejection. "It's like not getting into the right preschool," said Judy Scholhamer, owner of Rookie, a springer spaniel spurned by Miss Daisy's Dog Camp in Tomball, Texas, after she ran over other dogs during her interview.

Breeds can count for a lot. At some selective centers such as Mile High Mutts in Denver, pit bulls are *canis non gratus*, while well-trained Labrador retrievers are likely to sail through the admissions process like football stars with perfect SAT scores.

Few tout their selectivity more than Dog Day Afternoons Country Day Prep in Boston, which declares it caters to "New England's canine smart set." The day care says it turns down half the dogs interviewed for its 35 slots. Dog Day requires two letters of reference from a trainer, camp counselor, vet or family friend, as well as a seven-page application and interview.

On a recent weekday, owner Nora Meiners, wielding leashes, picked up two "students" from the swank Ritz-Carlton residences, including T.J., a Portuguese water dog owned by John Nelson, the retired chairman of the company that operates the T.J. Maxx discount stores. Along with rejecting dogs who bite, Ms. Meiners said she seeks pets with unusual poise. "I'd want a Yorkshire terrier to be able to play with a Great Dane," she said.

Most state kennel rules don't allow boarding unrelated dogs together without cages, but the rules usually apply only to overnight stays. Last year, Iowa required that day cares keep no more than 15 dogs in a "play group" and that they have some kind of screening. Illinois is considering rules, too. To head off worries about day care and to pre-empt more government regulation, the American Boarding Kennels Association is drawing up voluntary accreditation standards for day cares.

Houston has become the center of the effort, led by Susan Briggs, co-owner of Urban Tails, the day care vetting Cousteau, the Great Dane. A draft proposal by Ms. Briggs recommends a "formal dog acceptance policy that includes temperament testing/evaluation that screens for inappropriate behavior, aggression and general appropriateness for daycare." She also favors a dog profile like the one she obtains from each owner, including "sections on dog personality, social and training history."

There are no grades or standardized tests. So watching dogs interact with their peers remains the key to assessment.

During his peer session, Cousteau met Zeb, a Rottweiler-bloodhound mix. At first, Cousteau, who weighs 165 pounds and stands 6 feet 4 inches tall on his hind legs, tried to mount Zeb, and the two dogs had to be pulled apart. Then Cousteau unfurled a tongue the size of a hand towel and gave Zeb a few licks in unmentionable places, a sign of friendliness among dogs.

The verdict: Cousteau was in.

Nearby, in Tomball, three other candidates vied for admission to Miss Daisy's Dog Camp: Ghillie, an exuberant wheaten terrier; Molly, a laid-back cocker spaniel; and Chablis, a dainty bichon frise. Along with Urban Tails, Miss Daisy's serves as a model for the kennel association's proposed standards.

During the mandatory daylong interview, both Molly and Chablis, who have little experience in crowds, started out

withdrawn, with their tails between their legs. But by the end of the day, they walked with the pack, giving other "campers" the occasional sniff. They won acceptance.

Ghillie, with a cream-colored mop of curly hair, at first showed promise, sniffing a beagle in that friendly, familiar way. But, then, she stuck her snout in the face of a grouchy miniature dachshund and refused to back off even when the smaller dog barked fiercely. Later, Ghillie charged onto Miss Daisy's lawn, knocking over a Tibetan terrier that, at 13, is getting on in years. Soon, the 22 small dogs, once mellow and ambling around the yard, were running in snarling circles, nipping at one another.

After an hour, Debbie Oliver, who runs the day care with her husband, Duane, broke the bad news to Ghillie's owner. "We can't take the chance she might hurt a little dog," Ms. Oliver said, adding that wheatens tend to be stubborn and ill-suited to day care.

Ghillie's owner, Ann Hester, had suspected her dog might not make the cut. "She's not gifted," Ms. Hester said. Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

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