

CANINE CONTAINMENT

Hope for Your Canine Houdini

Excerpt by Nicole Wilde, author of *Living With WOLFDOGS*

Part I

You give Ranger a “see you later” scratch, toss him a cookie, and head for the market. An hour later, you return only to find Ranger gone—again. Is Ranger some sort of mutt magician? Or is this a case of alien-canine abduction you’ll be seeing on this week’s X-Files? Hardly. Ranger is one of thousands of dogs that manage to get out of their yards each year. The sad part is that many of them don’t make it back.

Responsible pet ownership entails keeping your dog safely contained. Protecting your dog from the dangers of the outside world can literally be a matter of life and death. Stray dogs may be injured or killed by passing vehicles, attacked by other strays, pick up diseases, or even be permanently “adopted” by passersby, never to be seen again.

Proper containment also protects the outside world from your dog. Even the friendliest of dogs may bite when forced into a defensive situation (i.e. cornered), or when disoriented or panicked. If your male is unneutered (we’ll get to that in a minute) while roaming, he may impregnate stray female dogs, creating more unwanted puppies. On a less severe, but just as valid, note your dog may become a nuisance by urinating or defecating on neighbors’ lawns or getting into their garbage cans.

Dangerous Liaisons

Let’s talk about why your dog wants out in the first place. First on the hot list is unneutered males. A male dog can smell a female in heat up to five miles



away. Female dogs usually cycle (come into estrus) twice a year, and not always at consistent times. So very often, a female may be in heat within Romeo’s radius. This will inevitably result in Romeo ... well, roaming to do what Romeos do best.

Get your male dog neutered! We just know that with pet overpopulation being what it is, you’re probably not considering breeding. So why keep him intact? In addition to negating that ‘urge to merge,’ neutering decreases and often eliminates the chance of your dog contracting certain diseases that an intact male might be prone to later in life. These include diseases of the prostate, testicles (including testicular cancer) and other tissues influenced by male hormones.

Testicular cancer is the second most frequently diagnosed tumor in older male dogs. Until you’ve watched an elderly man turn his long-time companion in to the shelter to be put down because of testicular cancer, tears streaming down his face because he could have prevented it, you don’t realize what your own future guilt might look like.

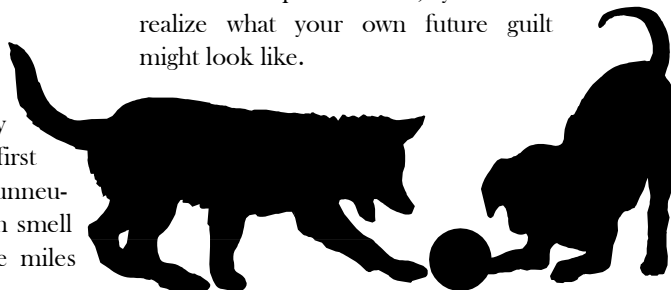
Another benefit of neutering your male dog is that neutered males tend to be less dominant and less likely to fight. If your dog injures another dog, harms someone’s child, or kills someone’s cat while he is roaming, you are responsible. From an ethical point of view, you don’t want to be the cause of someone else’s grief. From a legal standpoint, you don’t want to be on the receiving end of a lawsuit.

Intact females (i.e., unspayed females) that are in heat may take off for parts unknown to find their own canine Casanovas, so spay your female! This will also prevent future diseases of the ovaries and uterus, and if performed before the first or second heat, drastically reduces the chance of mammary gland cancer, which is very common in older intact females.

Female Seeks Companionship

Let’s say your dog is altered. What else might cause them to roam? Loneliness, for one thing. Dogs are descended from wolves and retain a strong pack instinct. They have a serious need for social interaction. If your dog is an “only dog” and you are gone most of the day, chances are your dog is simply lonely. Many dogs experience separation anxiety when their owners are gone, while others suffer from a simple lack of companionship and stimulation.

In addition to roaming, boredom and anxiety can result in destructive behaviors such as digging, chewing and, in some very extreme cases, self-mutilation. Loneliness



can also cause barking or howling, which will not make you especially popular with your neighbors. A bored dog perceives the world beyond the backyard fence to be infinitely more exciting—so many new sights, sounds, and smells (well, we won't go into those). So off Buffy the Cocker goes to explore and maybe to find someone to play with. Who could blame her?

Instead of taking chances with your dog's safety, consider these solutions for the "home alone" dog:

- Adopt another dog to keep her company. An altered canine of the opposite sex is preferable. In addition to being more likely to stay put, the dogs will likely tire each other out in play; you will come home to two mellow dogs rather than one hyperactive dog who demands your undivided attention.
- Is there a student or neighbor you could ask to come by to play with Buffy for a short period each day? If not, consider hiring a pet sitter. Pet sitters will spend time with your dog at your home or take them for a walk, if desired. Get recommendations from friends, veterinarians, or trainers.
- What about your friends who have dogs? Is there a canine friend who lives nearby, or on your route to work, who would enjoy having Buffy for a playmate during the day? You could easily drop her off and pick her up on your way back—if not daily, then a few times a week.
- Another option is doggie daycare! At these centers, dogs run and play together off leash in a safe, supervised environment. Owners pick their dogs up at the end of the day to find them mellow and well worn out from romping and playing. Check to see if one exists in your area.

If none of these is a possibility, and there is no option other than to leave

your dog home alone, contact an animal behaviorist on lessening separation anxiety. The solutions they offer might be easier than you think.

Okay, so now we know why they do it. But how do they do it? One reason frequently given by those reclaiming their dogs from the shelter is "the gardener left the gate open." You can have the Fort Knox of backyards, but if you can't get service people to properly close your gate, it's worthless. One solution is to keep your dog inside on the day service is scheduled. Another is to contain your dog in a dog run or pen within the yard on those days.

What kind of run and how to build one? Funny you should ask; in Part II of this article, we'll discuss just that. For now, let's get your gate problem fixed.

First, explain to service people the importance of your dog not getting out. Make sure they understand. If they



don't, find someone who does. If you can't or don't want to keep your dog indoors while you're gone, put a lock on the gate. Yes, it's that simple. This way, surprise visits can't happen. Tell service personnel that you will need to be contacted when they show up (if you work nearby), or you can refer them to a trusted neighbor who will unlock the gate for them when they come in and lock it as they leave.

Children are another common cause of gates being left open. You might wonder which is harder, training your dog to stay put or training your kids to close the gate. The bottom line is that neither kids nor dogs are always going to do what you would like, and it's your responsibility to supervise and double-check.

So now we know some of the reasons dogs want out of their safe, secure yards. We've discussed some solutions to remove that desire; but in reality, there are some natural-born canine Houdinis that are just going to want out no matter what. In Part II, we will discuss solutions, which include dig-proofing and jump-proofing your fencing, and how to build a dog run that even a grizzly bear would be hard-pressed to escape!

Part II

In Part I of this article, we examined some of the reasons your dog might want to roam in the first place. Some common ones were separation anxiety, boredom, or, to borrow a song title, "Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places." We discussed some initial solutions such as neutering, and various options for daytime canine companionship. Now let's get down to the nitty-gritty of containment.

There are three ways your dog can get out of your yard (besides someone leaving the gate open, which was discussed in Part I). Digging under, jumping over, and chewing through your fencing.

If your dog is chewing his way through 9-gauge chain link, you need to reassess whether you have a dog or a grizzly bear. There are two common thicknesses of chain link: eleven gauge, which is the most common; and nine gauge, which is thicker and stronger, but also more expensive. Most dogs will not be able to chew through 9-gauge chain link.

If you have wooden fencing and your dog is chewing through, check the slats and replace those that are weak or worn. You may have to switch to chain link, or alternately, erect an escape-proof pen. How does one go about this? Glad you asked.

There are many good reasons to go to the trouble of building an escape-proof dog run. The most obvious one is that you can leave your four-footed

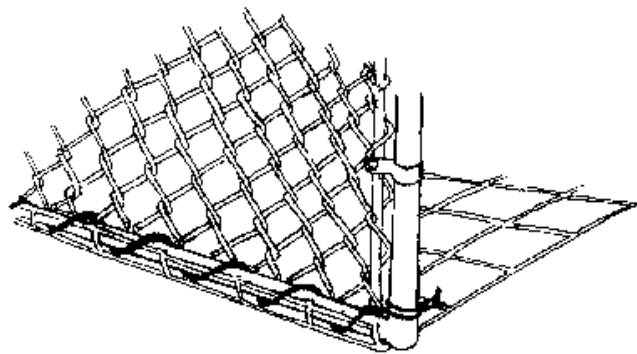
Houdini home alone and know that he'll be there, safe and sound, when you return. No more frantic searches of the neighborhood, no shrill complaints from the neighbors. It will also stop him from getting into anything he shouldn't or digging up your yard. And, last but not least, there will be no chance of children teasing him through your fence and possibly getting bitten, or worse, someone poisoning or stealing him.

With a small financial investment and some elbow grease, you can build an escape-proof dog run. Don't be intimidated by the construction or feel that you can't do it. You can. It's easier than it sounds on paper, though it takes time and effort. Just remember, you only have to build it once, and it's worth it. Let's get started.

A dog run refers to a four-sided chain-linked enclosure. In this case, the run will be six-sided, as we will add a top and bottom.

First, the chain link. If you can afford to use 9-gauge fencing, use it. If not, 11 gauge will be fine. Chain-link panels come in different lengths and widths. You'll want to buy panels that are at least 6' high, and 6' or 12' long. If you plan to make the run 12' wide, 12' panels are a good choice. You may purchase these at building supply outlets, or look for used panels or a second-hand dog runs in your area. Great deals can be found this way.

Once you have the panels, decide where the run will be built. Choose a flat area, set back at least two feet from your perimeter yard fencing. Using clamps and nuts, set up the four sides of the run first. Length depends on how much room you have available, but a good size would be 12' x 18', and 12' x 24' or longer is even better. If you can't go this large, don't worry. A good minimum size would be 6' x 12'. Any smaller is too small to expect your dog to



Fencing wired to upright chain-link using the "sewing" technique

spend long periods of time in it.

Now we move on to the dig-proof bottom. If you own your home or can build something permanent, concrete may be poured. If you're lucky enough to already have a concreted patio area, you might consider building the dog run over it. If either of these is an option, you can skip this section. But if you rent your home or want a run that can be dismantled, read on.

An effective way to dig-proof the bottom is with wire. Rolls of semi-flexible wire can be purchased at any building supply store (soon your local Home Depot really will feel like home). The rolls usually measure 4' across, have rectangular openings in the wire, and sometimes go under the name "Economy Wire." Lay the wire out lengthwise in the pen.

If your pen is 12' wide, lay three lengths of it side by side. Attach these to the chain link panels by looping wire (the thin wire that comes in a spool) around the bottom rail of the chain link and through the Economy Wire over and over, as though you were sewing it. Then attach the lengths of Economy Wire to each other by either "sewing" them with the thin wire again, or using hog rings (small metal rings that clamp things to each other).

Now, I can see you sitting there thinking, "no way am I going to be able to do this; forget it." No,

no, no! Hang in there. This stuff sounds more complicated than it is, I promise. Once you get going, it's easy. A word of caution: **WEAR GLOVES!!** Bare hands blister quickly when working with wire. Yours truly found out the hard way.

After your wire is lying flat and has been attached, you can cover it with dirt, or if you really want to go wild, paver stones (those square, cement-like stones found at your local builder's supply). Another option is to pour pea gravel (small, round stones that do *not* hurt a dog's feet) for flooring. Just be sure to put bricks or large rocks around the outsides of the pen first so the pea gravel doesn't spill out.

Now that we've got the bottom dig-proofed, let's move on to the top—this part is simple. How strong the top has to be really depends on your dog.

You can lay chicken wire across the top and wire it down for dogs that are not physically strong enough to push out of it. For bigger, stronger dogs, the best option is to place chain-link panels across the top of the pen and wire them down securely. If your run is 6' wide, the 6' panels will cover it. If the width is 12', your 12' panels will fit neatly across the top.

After the panels are laid out and wired down, an old garage door can be laid over a portion of them to provide shelter from rain, and a shaded area. A



Pavers help keep this pen clean and attractive

cautionary note: garage doors are extremely heavy, and you will need help to get them hoisted up. They can be easily secured by drilling holes along the sides and wiring them down to the top chain link panels.

So, do you feel like that guy from *Home Improvement* yet? Finish by putting a dog house inside, and tada! You've got a dog run that should keep Duke safe, and your neighbors happy. Just be sure that the latch to the gate is secure so all your hard work isn't wasted when Duke figures out how to open it. You may want to put a chain around the opening and latch it closed with a metal clip or a padlock.

It may be that you do not want to, or cannot afford to, construct a dog run. Maybe you can just improve on the fencing you have. If you have the ubiquitous 6' chain link, you can attach "lean-ins" at the top.

Lean-ins are metal (or wooden) arms slanted inward at a 45° angle, with wire stretched between them. They are commonly used in zoos, and give the animal inside the illusion that the fence is impossible to get over. They work. You can even buy lean-ins already made from a building materials supplier. Attach them at intervals to the top of the fencing, stretching chicken wire or other non-barbed wire tautly between the arms and securing it with hog rings or wire.

Dig This

Even without constructing a dog run, it is still possible to prevent dig-outs. To accomplish this you will need a roll of chain link. Cut the chain link so that it is only 2'-3' wide, and the length of one side of your yard (or buy a roll this width if you can find one).

For example, if your yard is fifty feet

deep, you would use a roll of chain link that is 2'-3' wide by 50' long. You can also cut it into smaller lengths for easier handling. Dig a shallow trench that is 2'-3' wide along the inside of your fence line and lay the wire out along it. A great benefit of the much-maligned El Nino is that the ground is much softer after it rains, making digging so much easier—now aren't you sorry you made those nasty weather remarks? Okay, back to our trench.

You are effectively burying the chain link all around the inside of your fence line. Now wire it to the existing fence (and don't forget your gloves) using the "sewing technique." Cover with dirt and you now have a skirt of chain link that no normal canine should be able to dig out of. There, wasn't that simple?

If you don't want to go to the trouble of burying chain link, you can try piling heavy rocks and bricks around the inside perimeter first. This is sometimes enough to deter dogs. However, it usually isn't.

Simply Shocking!

Another option to keep your dog away from your fence altogether is hot-wire. Hot-wire comes in different forms and can be set up in different configurations. Some people go the whole hog and install two or three horizontal rows of hot wire directly on their fencing. For the purposes of this article, we will discuss the easiest method.

There are complete systems you can buy, from the least expensive Fido Shock to the more expensive, more powerful, pulsing Red Snapper. Fido Shock is typically not as good as Red Snapper, so spending your money on the better option the first time around is my recommendation.

Now, I can just see you sitting there frowning and thinking, "a whole

'system', hmm, it sounds expensive." I thought so too, but guess what? It is surprisingly affordable. Included are a variety of stakes and/or rings. The stakes can be planted a yard or two from each other, all along your fence line (about 2' in). The rings and various other attachments simply screw into or clip on your existing fencing. The wire (which is provided) then gets strung through the stakes and/or rings; the actual unit attaches easily with screws to the side of your house. A piece of rebar is also needed to act as a ground. Once you have everything connected and the wire strung, plug the box in and you're done.

The wire should be at chest-level to your dog, so he won't be likely to go under or over it. When your dog touches the wire, a mild electrical shock is delivered. Don't worry, it's nothing that will fling him across the yard or injure him in any way; but it will likely deter him from going near it again.

The nice thing about this system (besides the low cost), is that it is extremely easy to install and covers a large area. I personally share my life with a canine Houdini, and in addition to erecting the aforementioned dog run for when I'm away from home, I have also installed an electrical system and have found it very effective.

So you see, there really are a variety of options for containing your canine Houdini. They may take some money, time and effort to set up, but the safety of your dog and your own peace of mind is assured.

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