

June 21, 2007

FITNESS

## They Take the Bounce Out of Bowser

By DAVID SHEFF

FILLED with trepidation about being tied down, Mary Turner and her husband, Richard Stein, decided to put off parenthood awhile and see how they did with a dog. Ms. Turner, a lawyer, found Bingo, “a darling cinnamon-colored puppy,” trembling in a cage at an animal shelter near their home in San Bernardino, Calif.

Mr. Shein, an investment banker, said, “We were smitten, but six months later the cute and meek puppy was the size and had the demeanor of a full grown male cougar.”

Bingo was an insomniac who routinely broke out of his crate around 4 a.m. He would find a chew toy or mouse — a live one — and plop it onto the sleeping head of Ms. Turner or Mr. Shein.

“Another night he escaped and then tore up hundreds of toilet paper rolls into tiny bits that covered the house,” she said.

“We thought ‘dog tired’ referred to the dog, but no,” Mr. Shein said.

The couple consulted a veterinarian, explaining that they took Bingo on morning and evening walks and that a dog walker came at noon, but the vet said: “Walks aren’t enough for many dogs. Big, energetic dogs need lots of exercise. Bingo needs to run.”

The Shein-Turners were not runners, but a neighbor, a college student, was. Mr. Shein begged him to take Bingo out.

“Now Bingo runs with him almost every day,” he said. “We pay \$20, which is double the cost of the dog walker, but after his run Bingo has dinner and falls into a deep, luxurious sleep.”

“And so do we,” Ms. Turner said.

The couple found their own dog runner, but in a growing number of cities one merely has to ask around a dog park or search Google to find one. At a time when affluent dog owners coddle their pets with massage, antidepressants and spa vacations, it’s not surprising that dogs have the equivalent of personal trainers.

“Dog running went from unheard of to über-hip,” said William Sharp, a part-time dog walker in San Francisco. “People like telling their friends, ‘I have to leave a key for Fifi’s dog runner.’ It’s far more sexy than ‘dog walker,’ which is so yesterday.” His business is down because, he said, “The runners are literally leaving me in the dust.”

HIRING a dog runner isn’t merely fashionable. “Many people have come to understand that their dog needs

more exercise than they can provide,” said Dr. Monica Clare, a critical care specialist at the Animal Surgical and Emergency Center in Los Angeles. “Dog walking is fine, but some dogs need more exercise. Dog runners provide it.”

Seth Chodosh, a founder of Running Paws in Manhattan, has 150 dog-running clients a week, and his business is increasing 20 percent a year. “Some people call us because their dog is overweight and needs to lose pounds,” Mr. Chodosh said. “Others’ dogs are too hyper and need to run off excess energy.”

Some deskbound owners dispatch their pets to run miles that they can’t. “In some cases people do for their dogs what they don’t do for themselves,” said Josh Schermer, the founder of [nycdogrunners.com](http://nycdogrunners.com), also in Manhattan. “They know they should go to the gym. They should eat better. They should run. So they have their dog do it.”

Mr. Schermer’s nycdogrunners employs seven runners. Running Paws has 24. Many are marathoners. Unsurprisingly, they are also actors, novelists, students and singers. “We have a fledgling playwright,” Mr. Chodosh boasted.

“It’s a good part-time job for people who work at night, people who run and people who love dogs,” he said. They typically make \$20 to \$35 per dog per run. Both companies charge \$28 to \$40, depending on the time. (Runs last from 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the dog.) Freelance runners are often cheaper.

For safety’s sake, running companies tend to allow a maximum of two dogs on a run. “You always have to be watching out for your dogs, other dogs and passers-by,” said Roy Scranton, 30, who works for Running Paws. “If you’re a guy running full speed through New York City with a bloodhound and a Weimaraner, there’s the potential of all sorts of accidents.”

Not everyone is sanguine about outsourcing a pet’s exercise. “One of the joys of having dogs is that they get you outside,” said Miles Richards, a Manhattan advertising executive who says that he would never have anyone else run with Corky, his Dalmatian. Mr. Richards, a long-distance runner, said, “If you’re too busy to spend time with a dog and give it the exercise it needs, maybe you shouldn’t have it in the first place.”

But dog runners — like dog walkers before them — provide viable alternatives to day care for working owners. “Many doggy day cares coop up a bunch of dogs in a small space,” Mr. Schermer said. “Some of these places mentally exhaust your dog because of the stress. A dog runner, however, exhausts your dog physically. It’s only an hour or so break, but dogs come back healthier, happier and far more content.”

Barbara Stratton, the owner of Gracie, a Portuguese water dog, agreed. She used to leave her pet in her Manhattan apartment during the day. “Gracie developed some really bad habits,” she said. “She learned how to do things like open kitchen drawers and cabinets, find her food and binge. She discovered where I kept the Mother Hubbard cookies.”

Ms. Stratton called Running Paws, which now sends a runner to pick up Gracie for her daily two-mile run. “She’s a really active 12-year-old wonder who needs a lot of exercise,” she said. “I tried dog walkers, but it wasn’t enough exercise for Gracie.”

But there are potential problems with dog running. Dr. Clare, the veterinarian in Los Angeles, said, “Big

stupid young dogs — Labs, Dalmatians, goldens — can never get enough exercise, but dog runners aren't for every dog." English bulldogs, for example, aren't built to run much, she said.

In addition, she warned, "Dogs with orthopedic problems or airway diseases called laryngeal paralysis — the airway doesn't open adequately — can be harmed if they are run too much."

Before hiring a dog runner, Dr. Clare says, pet owners should have dogs examined by a vet, who should check for bad knees, bad backs, bad hips and breathing problems. "Dogs with these problems shouldn't be run," she said. "Hard running can exacerbate them."

Pet owners should send their dogs only to runners who are trained to monitor their charges, especially in scorching weather. "Dogs can burn their paws and wear them down, especially if they are run on hot asphalt," Dr. Clare said. "We see a lot of cases of heatstroke, especially when the weather warms up. Some people run their dogs up canyons until they collapse. They hear the loud breathing and they think, Oh, how cute."

Running Paws runners carry water for the dogs and are taught to look out for signs of overheating. "The runners check a dog's paws before, during and after runs," Mr. Chodosh said. "We start out ridiculously slow. We don't want dogs' tongues hanging out and dragging on the ground."

Mr. Scranton, who has been running dogs for more than a year since he left the Army (he served in Iraq), found running dogs to be an ideal part-time job. "I needed a job that allowed time for studying and writing," he said, explaining that he is enrolled at the [New School](#) and shopping a novel set in Iraq.

Mr. Scranton also wanted to stay in shape. "Here was a job made for me," he said. "In the Army we ran in the heat and the ice and snow. Before that, back home I grew up with dogs and always had dogs. Those two things qualified me."

There have been some unanticipated challenges, Mr. Scranton admitted. "Some dogs go after bikes," he said. "You're running through the park and a hundred-pound Lab takes off in one direction and a bull mastiff in another."

Nate Steinwachs, a former Army lieutenant who graduated from [West Point](#), runs about 10 dogs a week in New York when he isn't studying alternative medicine. "The thing you don't expect about this job is that you get attached to the dogs," said Mr. Steinwachs, 32. "One dog would growl at me. He had been abused at one point in his life. He didn't trust anyone. Now we're buddies. He can't wait for me to show up so we can go running. He's come so far."

But the job, like any, has its downsides. "Weather can be a hindrance," Mr. Scranton said. "And then there's another thing that you don't necessarily want to deal with that comes with this work. It's the least glamorous part of being a dog runner, but it's expected of your clients. They poop and vomit a lot."

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)