

Hop the fence – the great outdoors is calling

By Rick Maier

You've seen the accounts of how much technology has advanced in the past thirty years – personal computers, cell phones, digital music and video. But they fail to mention one of my favorite modern developments – the invisible pet fence. These devices have dramatically changed our relationship with the only life form on the planet crazy enough to form an alliance with humans – the family dog.

My childhood buddy was a shaggy mutt named Buttons. Except for rabies shots and an occasional flea dip, he led a pretty natural and comfortable life. Once in a while he ran off, but would return a few days later covered in briars or smelling like a skunk. One time he ran off and didn't come back. A man who lived along a distant highway called to tell us that Buttons had been run over by a car.

I can still remember how gut wrenching it was to hear that Buttons was gone, and I can only imagine how tough it was on my parents to tell us kids. To avoid this kind of trauma for my kids, I installed an invisible fence in my yard. True, we have not lost a dog, but sometimes I wonder if we haven't taken things a little too far.

I've had two widely varied experiences with electric fences. Smokey the black lab was an obedient dog, but there wasn't a day that went by that she didn't test the condition of the fence. If the electric was off for an hour, she was gone. And once in a while she was so determined to escape that she'd put her head down, twist her neck like a charging bull and make a mad dash through the shock line. An hour later she'd be sitting on the other side, whimpering to get back into her yard.

Abbey, isn't so adventurous. After a series of warning chirps and one zap, she now stays in the yard without her battery-powered collar.

My neighbor, who I can't name because he's a very high-ranking Bibb County official, has not had such good luck with his underground fence. His Shitzu dog, Nicki Bond, got zapped one time, and now won't go to the bathroom outside unless Ed picks him up and carries him out of the shock zone to do his business in a neighbor's yard.

Sam and Sissy Macfie's dog Skipper is a cute little white dog with one ear up and one ear down. The first time Skipper hit that electric fence, he jumped two feet straight up in the air, hid in the house for days and hasn't been right since.

Don't get me wrong, invisible fences are marvelous inventions, but aren't they just a little over the top? Don't they reflect our over indulgence in facing the simplest of life's challenges?

The way we're going, man's best friend may soon be wearing pull-ups and drinking bottled water, and kids could be sporting battery-powered necklaces to track their global position.

American dogs today – like their owners – often live longer, are overweight and have perfect teeth. But modern medical technologies, drugs and special diets shouldn't replace regular outdoor activity.

If dogs and their owners do indeed begin to resemble each other, maybe we should change directions by borrowing a page out of the canine play book. On these beautiful spring weekends we should go out to a field, trail or beach, void of any AC or DC power sources, and just romp around for a few hours without the fear of getting zapped.

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