

Toy Dogs

Find out why the wonderful world of toy dogs is just better.

By D. Caroline Coile, Ph.D.

You can't. You're just too little. Tell that to "Corporal" Smoky, a 4-pound Yorkshire Terrier. Smoky was found in a foxhole, accompanied her owner on 12 missions during World War II, and became a war hero. Smoky saved the day when she pulled a wire through an 8-inch culvert under a runway to make an airstrip operational. She pulled the wire through the long tunnel, guided by her owner's calls from the opposite end.

Tell that to Ransom, a 6-pound Pomeranian. Ransom's owner, Julie Clemen of Olympia, Washington, decided to give herding a try with Ransom. "Boy, did I get a ton of ridicule and mocking from those Border Collie and Aussie owners," Clemen says. "Well, Joe Kapelos [a noted trainer and judge of herding dogs] took Ransom in with six sheep for me and that little dog drove those sheep and gathered them. When he got done, those diehard Border Collie and Aussie owners had to admit he was pretty amazing — especially because those sheep were 40 times his size!"

Tell that to the toy service dogs, heroes and helpers who have one thing in common: When somebody said, "You can't" they said, "Oh, yes, I can!" Toy dogs are the dog world's little engines that could.

If You Can't Join 'Em ...

It's been said time and again that toy dogs are big dogs in little bodies. But most toys would be offended at such a low estimate of their abilities. Toys consider themselves giants among dogs. When it comes to big dogs and little dogs, the motto of most little dogs is: "If you can't join 'em, beat 'em — or at least make a show of it."

Toys rule. It's not uncommon for homes with both toys and big dogs to acknowledge the toy dog is the boss. When Jayne McDaniel's husband brought a Labrador Retriever pup into the household, 6-year-old Chihuahua Little Girl took charge of his training. "She taught him not to rear up, don't sniff, don't slobber, don't touch her toys, and for god's sake, don't bump her," says McDaniel, who is from Claremore, Oklahoma.

"Max [the Lab] absolutely adored her and would do anything to get her attention," McDaniel continues. "Little Girl would sometimes jump down out of my lap and bark at him like she wanted to play and take off running, with him galloping along behind her. She would run into the dining room and around the table going under the rungs of the chairs, with him trying to follow, thump, thump, thump. Then she'd go into the kitchen with the slick vinyl flooring, and he would crash into the cabinets, then the entry hall which was ceramic tile, then make the turn and back into the living room and onto my lap," McDaniel says.

"By about this time, we would hear the crash of him sliding into the wall," McDaniel says. "We always said she was taking him on a suicide run, and the bad part is he always fell for it. This early training Max received from her made him the most reliable dog I had ever seen around anything small."

Although this confident attitude can border on foolhardiness, that big-dog persona is one reason people from all walks are drawn to toy dogs. More than any other group of dogs, toy dog owners come from a wide variety of experience with other breeds. Although many toy owners have always been toy owners, many more have gravitated to toys after living with larger breeds. That was the case with McDaniel, who grew up with large dogs.

She recalls the day, soon after her children had left home, that the toy dog bug bit. "I saw a Chihuahua sitting on the back of a car seat, watching for its owner to come back. I decided that was what I needed, something tiny to baby and coddle."

Chihuahuas were the perfect cure for her empty-nest syndrome, but they proved to be even more. “The reason that I stuck with them all these years is I found they truly were a big dog in a small package,” McDaniel says. “I think that if they had been wimpy little babies, I would have gotten away from toys after passing that phase of my life.”

Toys have an unfair advantage when it comes to making people fall for them. It’s not just their small size that stirs maternal instincts. Many toy breeds have neotanzied features, meaning that even as adults they retain certain characteristics of babies. The young of most species have a rounded head and big Bambi eyes, both traits seen in many toy breeds. These traits elicit caring behavior in people of either sex. It gives toy dogs a get-out-of-trouble-free pass for those irksome times they get caught acting like real dogs.

At least when toy dogs do bad things, the results are seldom as drastic as when big dogs do the same thing. There’s a reason the movie *Cujo* starred a Saint Bernard as the crazed dog rather than a Pekingese; somehow the effect would have been lessened were it a Peke throwing itself rabidly against a car. The shrapnel from a toy dog chewing frenzy is more likely to be overlooked as the work of industrious mice, and there’s a simple solution to countersurfing: Don’t lift the dog up there. Even barfing, pooping and peeing are toy sized (if there is such a thing).