

The debate on electronic barriers continues.

Faux Fences

By Tracy Krulik

ELEVEN YEARS AGO, Linda Teasley and her husband wanted to give their two puppies — Goldendoodle Noodles and English Bulldog Sheba — access to their yard so the dogs could run around and play. But in order to do so, they wanted to make their half-acre property safe.

Having previously suffered through their local association's laborious design-review process when they planned to build an addition to their Northern Virginia home, Teasley didn't want to revisit the process to build a fence. "They just make it very difficult if you do something they don't like," she says.



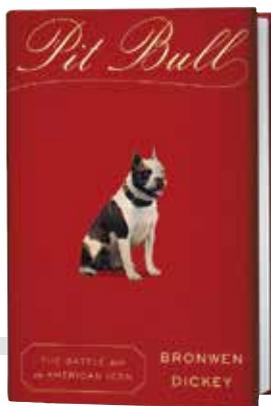
Ted Gough/Willowpix



**“THE ‘PIT BULL’
IS A LEGEND,
A FEAR, AN EXAGGERATION,
A BÊTE NOIRE.**

Dickey does this misunderstood animal the great service of looking beyond the myth. What she finds are dogs who deserve better than we’ve been giving them.”

—ALEXANDRA HOROWITZ,
author of *Inside of a Dog*



Pit Bull
**THE BATTLE OVER
AN AMERICAN ICON
BRONWEN DICKEY**

Read an excerpt from
the book on page 67



So, instead, the couple installed an electronic fence—a so-called containment system in which dogs wear collars that send electric shocks to their necks if they attempt to cross a buried wire.

Today, many pet owners in the U.S. are making the same choice, as an increasing number of homeowners’ associations, as well as cities and counties, are putting restrictions on the types of fencing allowed—physical and electronic alike—and where they can be built.

Interestingly, there’s a pretty fierce debate as to the safety and efficacy of these systems. Thousands of American pet owners swear by them, but many others would like to ban shock collars, which would effectively end the use of electronic fences. Shock collars are already illegal in a number of other countries, including Sweden, Switzerland, Germany and Wales, and in some states in Australia.

Let’s look at how the system works.

Electronic containment systems can range from a DIY kit that costs a few hundred dollars to more than \$1,000 if you go with a full-service product that includes professional installation and dog training.

To start, the sensor wire is buried along the perimeter of the area in which the dog is to be contained. Then, little flags are placed along that line so that the dog can see the boundaries. Different techniques are used to teach the dog to stay in the yard, but basically, for the first few days, the shock feature on the collar isn’t used. Instead, the dog hears a warning beep from the collar and then the owner shouts, dances, sings—whatever it takes to get the dog to retreat from the line and go to his person for some tasty treats and praise. Essentially, the dog is being trained to do a recall when he hears the beep.

Once the dog is reliably retreating from the beep, a consequence for ignoring it is added: if he ignores the beep and crosses the wire, he will receive a shock. Ideally, the dog only has to be shocked a handful of times before learning to respect the beep and retreat.

But, no matter how well the dog learns to stop when he hears the warning beep, for the system to be effective, the collar must be worn at all times when the dog is in the yard.

Sounds simple enough, right? Well, let’s peek behind the curtain.

Shock collars are an aversive tool, which means they use pain and/or fear to motivate the dog to stay in the yard.

Proponents describe the shock the dog feels as similar to the zap we get when we touch a TV after walking on carpet. They say the dog isn’t hurt, that the sensation is minimal. But pain and fear threshold levels are different for each animal, just as they are for each person.

So the question isn’t whether that sensation scares or hurts us, it’s whether the shock scares or hurts the dog enough to keep him from leaving the yard. That pain or that fear has to mean more to the dog than chasing squirrels or feral cats or kids playing soccer or whatever exciting adventure lies beyond the invisible line. That’s how aversive the shock has to be.

Some dogs are motivated to stay put, some dogs become so afraid of the shocks that they won’t go out in the yard at all, and some dogs don’t care a bit and fly through the shock.

Sighthounds tend to fall into the “fly right through” category, says Michael McCann, who has worked with Greyhound adoption and rescue groups for 25 years. “Sighthounds will chase anything they see,” he says, “plastic bags, leaves, rabbits, pretty much anything.” And because Greyhounds are fast—40-miles-per-hour fast—by the time they hear the shock collar’s warning beep, they are likely to be on the other side of the boundary before they come to a stop, if they do at all.

The Teasleys ended up scrapping their electronic fence about two weeks after it was installed, because Sheba ran and hid upstairs when the collar was put on her and Noodles just trotted through the “barrier,” ignoring the shocks. “I call it my folly,” says Teasley, a music therapist. “I didn’t train them,” she says.

“That was a big part of the problem.”

Beyond the system not working out, any time a dog feels pain or is hurt, there’s a risk of fallout behaviors developing, says Niki Tudge, certified dog trainer and behavior consultant and president of the Pet Professional Guild.

“What happens is that dogs start to generalize the pain to what they see and hear around them,” she says. “Then you end up with dogs who become reactive and aggressive towards children going past on bikes or people walking by.”

For this reason, cities like Overland Park, Kansas, stipulate that electronic fences cannot be used in front yards, and they have to be at least 10 feet from public walkways or neighboring property lines. Council Bluffs, Iowa, goes even further. Not only can the system not be used in the front yard, but the owner must be with the dog when the dog is outside.

Of equal concern is that electronic fences are not actually fences. No physical barrier secures a dog inside the perimeter or keeps other animals or people out. “Generally speaking, the electronic containment system is something that is an illusion of containment,” says Kenneth Phillips, an attorney who specializes in dog-bite cases.

In fact, “electronic containment systems usually are not considered to be any type of boundary fence as required

by the ordinances of various cities and counties all over the country,” Phillips says. Municipalities that do include information on electronic fences generally state that they cannot be used for any dog with a history of aggression.

Not having a physical fence in place can spell danger, not only for people and animals passing by, but also for the dog in the yard.

In December 2015, McCann—who has led many a Greyhound search-and-rescue mission—got a call from his veterinarian to help find Dimitri, her 15-year-old Terrier mix. Dimitri was out in his yard with his two siblings when a

coyote entered the yard and dragged him away. McCann grabbed his infrared camera and set out to look for Dimitri; after more than an hour, the search party found the little black pup gravely injured a couple of hundred yards from his home. He died two days later.

More recently, in April of this year, a man in Anchorage, Alaska, shot and killed a seven-year-old chocolate Labrador Retriever named Skhoop, also “contained” by an electronic fence. Jason Mellerstig had just moved into the neighborhood and told police he felt threatened by the dog, who was loose in her yard.

DOG CHEER

When I’m depressed and barely slog
through daily life my loving dog
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in ways we should let him arrange.
To cope with life so harsh and stark
it’s time that we all learned to bark.

—Tom Greening

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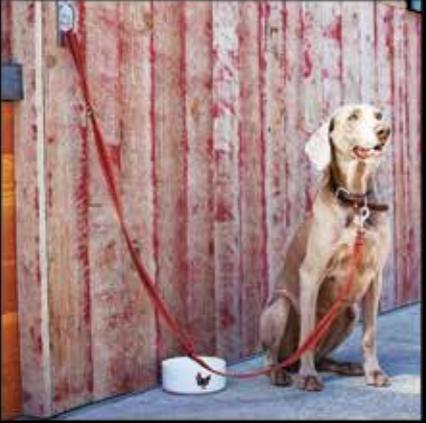
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“My dog was in a radio-collar fence,” Skhoop’s owner, Dave Brailey, told Anchorage reporter Craig Medred. “The dog does not come out of the yard. If she comes out of the yard, she gets shocked. She knows exactly where the shock-collar line is. It worked like a charm. She was like a little queen. She’d sit in the front yard and just be happy.”

Given accounts such as these, as well as the basic question of whether it is ever okay to use pain or fear to train a dog, it’s unsurprising that the collars are banned in other countries. While groups, including the Pet Professional Guild, lobby to ban shock collars in the United States, some rescue organizations — Sighthound groups among them — will not adopt any dog to a home that uses an electronic fence.

Jody Karow offers a unique perspective on the debate. From 2007 to 2011, before becoming a certified dog trainer, she was a salesperson and then sales manager for Invisible Fence in

Minnesota. Now surrounded by voices of the force-free-training movement, she’s heard countless arguments against using shock collars for containment.

“The thing that makes my perspective so different is that I sat with people in their homes and I listened to thousands of stories,” she says. “I can’t shake those stories no matter how much knowledge I have.”

One client who was scheduled for an installation had to cancel because his dog was on a tie-out and ran in pursuit of an animal. When the dog’s leash tightened, the collar pressed into his throat so hard that it collapsed his trachea, and he died. “I would rather see a dog on Invisible Fence than a tie-out any day,” says Karow.

So it seems that, as is the norm, there is no black-or-white absolute to this issue.

The Humane Society of the United States (humanesociety.org) adds another layer of gray to the equation.

“We certainly want people to be cognizant of the pros and cons and safety concerns of electronic fencing,” says Cory Smith, director of pet protection and policy, “but at the end of the day, if an electronic fence is what is going to allow somebody to keep their pet by eliminating some kind of problem, then we want them to do it.”

Val Moranto and her husband are in the pro-electronic-fence camp. “We love it,” she says. “It has saved our pups from running into the country road where cars speed by.” The dogs are scared by the shocks, she says, but that has kept them safely on the property.

“We do not want a physical fence around the yard. We bought in an open, country setting so that we wouldn’t be fenced in,” Moranto says. For this couple, the electronic fence was the preferred choice. “I feel like it is selfish and selfless all at the same time, if that makes sense.”

Well said. It does. **B**



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