

VELCRO DOG

by Lee Netzler

Living in various parts of the country means adjusting life to different landscapes and climates. Sometimes these local conditions can create problems.

I've lived most of my life in the northern part of the country where winters bring freezing temperatures. After repeatedly encountering snow, ice, and sub-zero weather, I felt I was aware of all the problems winter could present. All, I discovered, except one.

For the past seven years, my Scottie, Angus, has attended doggy daycare every Wednesday at Mrs. Doolittle's Doggy Daycare. His "pack" of fifteen dogs is his "other" family. Every Wednesday that he has spent at doggy daycare has entertained him, taught him new inter-relational skills, and has served as the most important ritual of his canine social life. He loves it when Wednesday rolls around, and can hardly wait for me to drive him to his favorite activity.

A few weeks ago, the temperature was cold—well below freezing—so I decided that Angus should wear his new coat to doggy daycare. We had special-ordered the coat through the mail. It is a good quality, heavy cloth, semi-waterproof, wind resistant, brick-colored coat that fastens securely with wide velcro-lined straps. It is exactly what a dog needs to keep warm in frigid winter weather, especially if he is going to be outside for an extended time, hard playing in the harsh elements with his pack buddies.

Since he had worn his new coat once on a "trial outing" to a park near home, I already knew it was the right size. It fit snugly, and once fastened on him with the broad double-stitched straps, it was a sure bet that it would stay in place until we took it off at the end of the day. So, on that particular Wednesday, just before we got into the car to drive to doggy daycare, I dressed him in his sturdy stylish coat.

We drove to the doggy daycare facility, parked, and strode up to the entrance. Just inside the chain link enclosure is a small area where Esther, the proprietor, welcomes dogs and their owners. We accomplish the transfer of our dog by handing our leash to her over the fence gate. Then she carefully opens the gate and guides the newly arrived dog into the small inner area. Since I choose to be among the last to arrive, she is always surrounded by ten or more dogs that have arrived ahead of us.

On this particular day, everything went along routinely as expected. As she stood encircled by a dozen dogs gathered in the small enclosure, I transferred the leash to her hand. She opened the gate and guided Angus in. Then she and I began a conversation, which we often do, as the dogs compressed around her. They pressed inward, mingled with Angus, and all of them crowded closely together.

When we concluded our discussion, Esther tried to move the dogs out of the small enclosure through another gate into the large adjacent play area. None of them wanted to move. She finally resorted to using her hands to send them off, one by one, to the play area. She managed to send all except Angus and one other dog. For some reason, they both refused to move. They stood rock solid, side by side, nose to tail and tail to nose, and absolutely refused to budge.

I watched as she urged them and gently prodded each one, but with no success. Finally, she placed one hand down between them, and with obvious difficulty, she pried open some space.

That was when we saw what had happened. Both dogs were wearing coats. Both coats had wide straps to bind them to the dogs. Velcro strips were attached to all of the straps as well as to several panels of the coats in order to fasten them. At several places where the dogs had come into contact with each other, their coats were tightly velcroed together. Neither dog could move without the other dog moving at the same time in the same direction.

Esther peeled them apart, separating the velcro parts where they had become connected and clung together. As she did so, the dogs regained their ability to move independently. They soon cooperated and eagerly raced into the large play yard to join the rest of the pack.

We have not had a recurrence of *velcro paralysis* since then. We are not sure if the dogs learned to avoid touching coats with each other, but no further intervention has been necessary. Esther and I still have short conversations at the entrance gate, but if it is a dog-coat kind of day, we keep it non-contact and watchfully brief.