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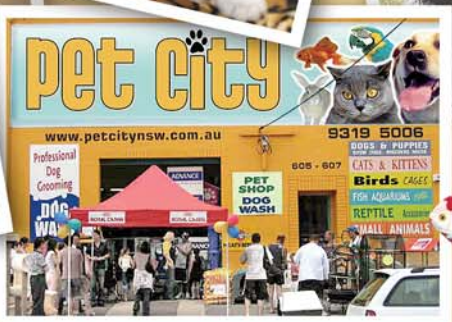


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Driving your dog to distraction

By Lisa Treen

Every dog feels happy when they have a job—Greyhounds love to race; Border Collies need to herd and run; Maremmas guard their livestock; Retrievers, well they retrieve and some breeds were created to look beautiful and laze on laps. So we were bowled over when we discovered a giant Schnauzer, named Tom, who loves to pull a purpose-built sulky that his owner rides.

James Walsh, from Regal Mini Sulkies, was originally asked to build a cart small and light enough for a miniature horse to comfortably tow an adult off-road. After some research and several designs he came up with the Mini—a cart able to be towed by a mini horse or big dog. The sulky is made of tubular stainless steel which has a higher strength-to-weight ratio than other materials like wood. James' mission was to keep the weight of the sulky down and have independent suspension and wheel movement.

The carts are not designed for racing—they're purely for recreational use and James believes many larger breed dogs enjoy this activity. Although not as popular here as in the US, James believes that many people will be drawn to carting and their dogs will enjoy the exercise.

So is this activity just for the larger, more powerful breeds? James gives an example of the rule, "Generally, the load should not exceed three times the weight of the dog or dogs pulling. My dog, for example, weighs 43kg, I weigh 96kg and the cart weighs 18kg. So the load in my case is 2.65 times the dog's weight. You can hitch up to five dogs abreast to a Mini, so, if I had five dogs weighing an average of 8.6 kg each, they could pull me just as well." Mush little Jack Russells. Mush!

The best weather for carting should be cool to prevent overheating the dog—so a crisp Sydney winter day seems the perfect opportunity for us to head to Centennial Park and put Tom and James through their paces. It's a busy day at the park (school holidays) and even mid morning the place is teeming with Eastern suburbs yummy mummies, kids and dogs—lots and lots of dogs. All the excitement and unfamiliar smells means that Tom the Schnauzer is having trouble focussing. We decide to take the Wookiee-like Tom—he makes a call similar to Chewie and has lovely facial hair to match—into a quiet part of the park. This seems to be a smart decision as James mentions to us (and we can clearly see) that Tom gets rather excited and distracted around other dogs and horses. At this point, we're starting to rethink this idea of putting Tom through his paces in Sydney's biggest and busiest park with an equestrian facility.

We press on and James is able to harness Tom with a minimum of fuss and within minutes dog and driver are off. The sulky is a quiet ride and Tom is happy to explore the long stretch of road ahead.

James estimates that Tom has logged over 600km since they started in January this year. They make it a daily practice of hitching up and hitting the roads in their neighbourhood. Tom can reach an enthusiastic 30km per hour (there's a speedometer attached to the sulky) and they generally work out for half an hour a day. On weekends or holidays, these two enthusiasts can be trotting around for an hour or two, depending on how keen James is. Tom, on the other hand, is always keen to keep going.

James is quick to point out that a lot of people have trouble giving their large breed dogs enough exercise. "Dog carting is a fun way to achieve that. The pooch can run, trot or walk as the fancy takes them and they're able to cover much more territory in a given time than you could on an average walk."

We left Tom and James to have a well earned run around Grand Drive only for them to be flagged down by a friendly ranger who informed James that a dog pulling a cart was prohibited in the park. James wanted to know if the ranger had seen a dog pulling a sulky before and the ranger was at a loss and explained that they'd never seen it before. "How can there be a rule against something that hasn't previously existed?", questioned James. The ranger seemed baffled and suggested that James make enquiries with the park's administration. With only a secretary in attendance, it was suggested that James write a letter to the Trust and armed with his research and full of purpose, that's exactly what James did. We're still awaiting their response.

In closing we would like to say that we admire the dedication of James and the power of Tom. If you build it—they will run!

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