

# On Dog Parks

As I ease the car to the curb, Barney presses his nose against the passenger window, leaving a large smudge. He whines, then yips out a sharp bark. I chuckle; does my 11-month-old pit bull think I don't know this is the dog park? I clip a leash to his collar for the 50-yard dash to the double gate just to be safe. I doubt he'd run anywhere but toward the fenced dedicated off-leash area, but I don't take a chance.

Twenty years ago, when I began walking dogs in Portland, this scenario wasn't possible. Portland didn't have official off-leash areas for dogs to run and play. Fences did not separate dogs from playgrounds, joggers or traffic speeding by. Not that dog owners and companions didn't let dogs off leash, we did. But it wasn't sanctioned by the city or even always safe.

On a lovely spring morning in 1994, I unclipped leashes, allowing my two Lab mixes to romp at Wilshire Park in Northeast Portland. The east portion of the park—today a sanctioned area for liberated dog use at certain times—was an unofficial meet-up area for dogs and dog owners. My girls raced around, sniffing butts with other canines and treeing squirrels. Suddenly, something outside the park caught the attention of one dog, who raced out of sight. The other dog followed and soon a loud metallic clatter cracked the air. I thought perhaps a car had hit a telephone pole or a stop



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BY MARY MANDEVILLE, DC

sign until I heard the sharp, unmistakable cry of a wounded dog.

With heart in throat, I sprinted toward the sound. When I rounded the corner, my beloved black Lab, Molly, fell to her right with each attempted step, followed by a man whose abandoned red Honda Civic sat in the street, door hanging open. Her white-ringed eyes told of fear and pain. In one crashing moment, I ached for Molly, felt sympathy for the driver who hit her, cringed at the medical procedures to come, the bills, my own culpability in this state of affairs, and the daily challenge of trying to let the dogs I loved have a semblance of a dog's life in the midst of a city.

The injury damaged a nerve, causing complete and incurable paralysis. Molly eventually lost her leg. She went on to live another 14 years as a three-legged dog. She lifted me out of self-pity when I was diagnosed with cancer a year after her injury, she inspired me to seek training in animal chiropractic, she demonstrated unconditional forgiveness to adopted children, and her hobbling about on three legs with head bobbing made it challenging to whine about life's daily annoyances.

Maybe everything really does happen for a reason.

As much as having a three-legged dog for all those years taught me everything important about living, surviving, parenting and not sweating the small stuff, I swore never to put another dog at similar risk. I began seeking places where dog and human companion could exercise fully and enjoy each other's company unfettered by the leash. It would be more than a decade before the city of Portland determined the issue of sufficient importance to designate a few official areas for off-leash dog exercise and recreation. In fact, it took the deaths of several dogs at Laurelhurst Park and the resultant hue and cry of dog owners and dog haters alike to stir bureaucratic action. The conversation was vitriolic for a time, but the outcome a delight.

Today there are seven full-time designated and fenced recreation areas for dogs in Portland. More if you add those in Beaverton, Tigard, Tualatin, Wilsonville, Troutdale, Vancouver and Washougal—more still if you count areas like Wilshire Park where a portion of a park is allotted for off-leash dogs to use at certain times. The website portlandpooch.com

lists 55, replete with maps, directions and descriptions of amenities.

The dog parks are imperfect. All within Portland city limits are smaller than two acres, making poor hiking for humans. Some have few or no trees. Galloping canine claws tend to tear up grass so sand, bark chips and mud often greet your feet. At times a dog group becomes unruly, but in my experience that is the exception and not the rule.

Despite their flaws, designated dog parks are a boon for dog owners, providing a place for pups to learn doggie manners safe from passing traffic. Dogs who thrive on games of fetch can easily be satisfied by a trip to the closest dog park, where they can race after a frisbee or an orange ball till their tongue hangs on the ground. A human companion never has to worry about an errant squirrel seducing the canine, surrounded by a fence, into harm's way.

Over the next months, I plan to visit each of Portland's dog parks, as well as those in the surrounding suburbs. I'll post a review of each trip on my "Dead Dog Walking" blog, which you can find at onedogstory.blogspot.com. ☐

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