

Pendleton man is leader of the pack

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Steve Hart swears he is not a dog whisperer. Evidence, however, is to the contrary.

Each morning, the Pendleton man takes five Labrador retrievers for a walk in Community Park. The dogs travel in a pack led by Hart. When they come across another park user, Hart waves his brood off the path where the dogs wait until the way is clear. Sometimes people approach and scratch the dogs behind the ears or pat them on their glossy heads.

Sometime during each walk, Hart usually directs the affable Labs onto a park bench. They obligingly hop up, always in the same order, with a yellow at each end, the black in the middle and the chocolates in between.

“They are always color coordinated,” he said during a recent outing.

Hart can leave the quintet of canines, walk out of sight and know they will stay there until he returns or gives them the signal to come. Often, he strolls to his home at the edge of the park where he whistles. They come running.

This canine harmony persists even at home.

“My yard isn’t fenced,” he said. “They never leave.”

Meet Blondie and Sunshine, both 11, and Brown, Cocoa and Belle, 4 — all females. Two of the dogs, Sunshine and Belle, belong to his grown daughter, Tara Hart, and one, Blondie, goes back and forth between houses. Steve cares for all five during the day.

Hart rarely speaks to the dogs. If he feels the need to correct one of them, “I growl,” he said.

He gave a soft growl to illustrate and looked a tad embarrassed. It works, he said.

With all this kumbaya between Hart and the dogs, one might think he spends hours training and conditioning them from puppyhood. They would be wrong.

Hart said his family’s pooches grow up pack-style, learning all they need to know from the adult dogs.

“These are dogs trained by dogs that have been trained by dogs,” he said.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Sunshine, Brown, Belle, Cocoa and Blondie sit patiently at Community Park on Tuesday morning waiting for Steve Hart to signal them to hop down. Hart doesn’t need leashes or a raised voice to control the Labrador retrievers.

“We don’t house train them. We don’t have to break them not to get into the garbage.”

The “we” refers to Steve and his wife, Sonja, director of the Eastern Oregon Alcoholism Foundation. When one of the dogs gives birth, the Harts wait eight months before giving them away to another family.

“By six to eight months, a puppy is pretty well trained,” he said.

One of the Labs, Cocoa, has a little MacGyver in her soul. She has figured out how to open the sunroom door and let all the dogs into the back yard where McKay Creek bubbles by. The coffee-colored canine jumps up, braces herself with one paw and clamps down on the round metal doorknob with her teeth, turns it and pulls the door open, Hart said, as the other dogs watch.

“She takes them all out to swim in the creek,” he said.

Obviously, Hart’s breed of choice is the Labrador. During the Harts’ 42-year marriage, “we’ve always had a Lab around.” Hart also hunts ducks and upland game. His dogs respond to both hand signals and whistles.

From puppyhood, the dogs’ personalities gradually emerge. Cocoa is the

hunter. Brown, the runt of her litter, is timid. Sunshine is the lover. She and Blondie often endearingly pose like Koala bears reaching for eucalyptus.

The Harts feed the pack canned food mixed with kibble once a day, after the couple has eaten. They observe pack pecking order at feeding time — first Blondie, then Brown, then Cocoa. At his daughter’s house, Blondie goes to the bottom of the order after Sunshine and Belle.

The two packs merge each day into one. As you might expect, Hart’s gang of pooches attract attention. He grants plenty of requests for photos, though the camera-shy, retired construction worker refuses to pose in any of them.

On this day, he smiled happily at his five canine buddies cavorting on the grass. The temperature hovered around 70 degrees, under a bright sun. Life was good.

Hart motioned for the dogs to stay and sauntered the about 60 yards to his house. The Labs watched Hart’s every movement. The man turned, paused a beat and whistled. They ran to Hart as if shot from a cannon.

Not a dog whisperer?
Hmmmm.

SALES: Will be tax-free until Jan.

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just after midnight to get a head start on sales.

One store is offering a goody bag with T-shirts, but no free marijuana. Another will have a live band and 10 percent discounts. The marijuana review site Leafly will set up with food trucks at a handful of stores, giving away free meals to anyone who promotes the service on social media.

Several stores have erected billboards in Portland. A shop in Merlin is advertising on the radio.

Shoppers have one more incentive to buy early and often: Under Oregon law, pot purchases will be tax-free until January — a savings of up to 20 percent.

Under the state law approved last year by voters, possession of marijuana in limited quantities has been permitted since July 1. But there’s been no legal way to buy it.

In Washington and Colorado, which preceded Oregon in allowing legal marijuana sales, the first day of sales brought massive crowds, severe shortages and high prices.

More than 250 medical marijuana dispensaries in Oregon have told the state they’ll sell to recreational customers. By contrast, Colorado had 24 stores on Day 1. Washington had just four, and a year later, still has fewer than Oregon.

Oregon also has a robust supply of marijuana that’s grown to support medical marijuana users and for the black market. Companies have invested in massive warehouses in Portland to grow the drug indoors, and southern Oregon has some of the nation’s best conditions for outdoor cultivation of marijuana.

Growers don’t face strict regulations yet, so the supply can more easily flow into retail stores than it did in Washington and Colorado.

Still, there’s concern. Summer has historically been a time of marijuana shortages in Oregon, and most of the outdoor crop isn’t ready to harvest. Indoor growers have had minimal time to ramp up production, since lawmakers only approved the Oct. 1 start date three months ago.

“I think there’s going to be a lack of supply for indoor flower,” said Shane McKee, co-founder of Shango Premium Cannabis, which has three stores in metro Portland that will open at midnight. He expects recreational customers to demand indoor-grown marijuana, which can be tightly controlled to maximize the high and the flavor.

“There’s a lot of highly educated buyers here who have been spoiled with high-grade cannabis for years,” McKee said.

ONION: Umatilla is only AgSource lab that tests pungency

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The color is then measured as a wavelength of light using a small electronic device known as a spectrophotometer.

Payton takes those values and runs one final calculation to come up with a number somewhere between 0-8. The lower the number, the less pungent the onion. The less pungent the onion, the more money a grower can potentially make off the crop.

“They get pretty ecstatic when it’s between a 1 and 4,” Payton said.

A different test, known as a Brix test, measures the sugar content of onions and can be done in seconds, as opposed to hours. Payton places a small amount of onion juice on a Brix reader, which resembles a long kaleidoscope, to come up with the reading.

Occasionally farmers disagree with the results of the test. That doesn’t come as a surprise to Craig Simson, business agronomy manager at AgSource, who has seen how competitive onion growers can be.

“We had one fairly large client stay here all day and watch us from beginning to end,” Simson said. “This pungency is a very personal thing to an onion grower.”

AgSource is a large farmer-owned cooperative with seven labs nationwide, primarily in the Midwest. Umatilla is the co-op’s western-most location, and the only lab that does onion pungency testing. Most samples come from around the Columbia and Walla Walla basins, Simson said, but sometimes are sent in from out of the region.

The test is used mostly for marketing, but can also be used in a variety of ways, Simson said.

“By testing at the end of the year, they can compare their secrets and growing techniques to the final result,” he said. “What people are looking for is high sugar and low pyruvic acid ... People don’t want something that makes you cry and burn.”

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Lab technician Debbie Payton pours a ground onion into a filter to remove the pulp for sampling Thursday at AgSource Laboratories in Umatilla.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Lab technician Debbie Payton loads a sample into a refractometer to perform a Brix reading, or sugar content, of an onion sample Thursday at AgSource Laboratories in Umatilla.

STAIRS: Replacement would utilize steel stairs

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Corbett is out of the office, said signs have been placed by the top of the 13th Street stairs that redirect children to access the bus stop at the Pendleton Early Learning Center via the stairs at Southwest 10th Street.

But the other public stairs in Pendleton, like the ones on 10th Street, Southwest Seventh Street and Southwest Isaac Avenue, aren’t in good condition either.

Walking up or down those stairs, it’s not uncommon to come across large chunks missing from steps, creating an uneven surface for pedestrians. City officials that evaluated the city’s other staircases after the 13th Street incident concluded that those stairs were in need of improvement, but not in need of closure.

Kerns said that evaluations of the city’s stair system cleared further liability concerns because it proved that the city isn’t negligent.

Public Works Director Bob Patterson said the city would look into adding more treads to the stairs that are repairable, but replacing the 13th Street set will be a much tougher task.

City engineers are currently working on a design for a replacement

staircase, which would use steel stairs instead of concrete ones, but it’s too late in construction season to build it this year.

Patterson said city staff could seek out grants in the meantime to fund the project and would discuss it further with the city council at its next work session Oct. 13.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

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