

Dogs mix, cats get fixed

FOR POOCHES, A NEW PARK; FOR FERAL FELINES, FREEDOM

Joe Rodriguez

In the eternal war between cats and dogs, Saturday was a big day for Fido, or so it seemed. Dozens of pooches, big and small, romped up and down and around a smart new exercise park built just for them by the city of Santa Clara. The mayor and parks director delivered speeches. They dedicated a bronze plaque. A town beauty princess, a lovely alto soprano, sang the national anthem.

However, later that night, the kindly folks up the road at the Humane Society were going to trap feral cats in two fetid feline colonies. Then they would have the wild fuzz balls sedated and sterilized. In other words, Fido got a par course while Fifi got spayed.

At first glance, this contrast in official treatment appears to be a tail of inequality, but there's more to it than that.

"Dogs need a place to run, to stretch out," said Ken Winland of Santa Clara. He brought Sammy, a 105-pound chocolate Labrador, and Kyle, his 40-pound son, to the opening. "He'll get too anxious at home if we don't get him to a park like this once in a while." He meant the dog.

Sammy was one of the more mellow dogs on an exciting day. Others weren't so cooperative. A few snarling fights broke out before, during and after the dedication.

Not to worry, said Antje Morris, an agent with the Silicon Valley Animal Control Authority. She said the dogs were just working through "dominance issues." Dog fights usually break out at new parks because the more aggressive animals are unfamiliar with one another and compete for the new territory.

"Right now they're establishing their standing in the pack," Morris said as several owners attempted to snag the collars of their quarreling, growling pets.

"They have different opinions of each other. . . . Like humans, they'll just punch each other and then that's that."

Dan Soszynski, executive director of the animal control authority, was on hand for the opening. He said dog parks help "socialize" dogs and reduce the number of bites, street fights and animal abandonment by overwhelmed owners.

"They get to know each and make friends," Corina Garcia said. She and her husband, George Delima, live in San Jose and used to take their Chihuahuas, Zera and Zeaus, to Watson Park until it was closed after the discovery of toxic soil.

Admiring the new Santa Clara park, Delima said, "You can bring your dog here in winter because the berms are raised and drained. Dogs get more exercise that way. This town did a good job." Santa Clara spent three years and \$280,000 on the park, which sits at Reed and Lafayette streets in a light-industrial zone. The park replaces an older dog park in town.

“Between this park and the senior center, I've never seen so many people come to town hall for meetings,” said parks and recreation director Larry Wolfe.

On feral-cat duty

A few hours later on Saturday at the Humane Society Silicon Valley, Cathy Grovenburg pulled a cat trap from a shelf. Cats enter the cages for tidbits of food and, once inside, step on a release that drops and locks the door behind them.

Saturday night's roundup would be the agency's first trapping in its attempt to reduce the population of undomesticated cats in the county from an estimated 125,000. That's not a typo.

“If there were 125,000 wild dogs running loose in the county, people would be up in arms,” said Humane Society spokeswoman Laura Fulda. “It's just that a cat's life is seen as not equal to a dog's. Cats are seen as second-class animals.”

In the old days, feral cats were caught and euthanized, Grovenburg said, but that method has fallen out of favor because it was impossible to catch them all. The remaining cats simply multiplied too quickly. The new strategy is to sterilize feral cats and release them back to their colonies. She hoped to catch 25 Saturday night with a goal of catching, fixing and releasing 4,800 by the end of the year.

“By sending them back sterilized, and from attrition, we can put a dent in the overall population.”

The captured cats are also screened for diseases like feline leukemia, given antibiotics if needed, and treated for fleas. The friendly cats and kittens are recommended for adoption.

So at the end of a long day, Saturday wasn't just a good day for Fido. Fifi got to keep her independence. a story idea for East Side/West Side? Contact Joe Rodriguez at (408) 920-5767 or jrodriguez@mercurynews.com.