

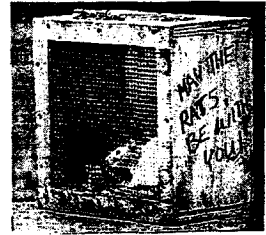
OH, RATS !!

OWNERS OF CANINES MADE TO TUNNEL FOR VARMINTS PUT THEM THROUGH THEIR PACES IN NARROW SPACES--

Back before dogs were necessarily man's best friend--and fussed over like newborn babies--a lot of mutts actually worked for a living.

And not always under the best of circumstances.

Consider the case of the dachshund, that slender, long-snouted pooch commonly called the wiener dog. In older times, when varmints dug pesky tunnels on farmland, the dachshund was dispatched into the tunnel to either trap the quarry or to flush the digger out so another, bigger dog could make the kill.



Needless to say, not all dachshunds survived their missions. Those dogs had a job that was probably as dangerous as a human working in a coal mine. The dogs weren't pets. Their job was to root out varmints, and not all survived. The dog had to be smart and not pick on the wrong quarry.

These days, most folks don't have varmints burrowing in their back yards. But many do own dachshunds or other earth-tunneling animals, such as small working terriers. And just for kicks, some dog owners want to see how much of that go-to-ground instinct survives.

In earth dog tests, beginning tunnelers have two minutes to find the end of a 10-ft. underground tunnel or "den", while top-dog tunnelers must traverse a 30-foot tunnel over obstacles and work the quarry for 90 seconds.

The quarry is two caged rats that are further protected by a wall of steel bars. Dogs work the quarry by barking at the rat cage. The dog's nose might nuzzle the rodent cage, but the rats are never in danger.

"One of our challenges is keeping the rats alert". After they realize they're safe, they almost stand up at the bars, sticking their tongues out at the dogs."

Dogs are judged on how quickly they reach the quarry and how well they work it once there. To demonstrate what earth dogs can do, Julie Nielsen and Lynn Niebur (members of the Portland, Oregon Dachshund Club) set up an above-ground 20-foot tunnel in the back yard. The tunnel is 9 inches high, has two 90-degree turns and is made of wood on either end and Plexiglas in the middle (so observers can witness how well the dog negotiates the turn.)

In real competition, the tunnel is made of wood and buried underground. Also, rat scent is sprayed throughout competition tunnels to spur the dogs into action.

Niebur positions her 3-year-old smooth-haired dachshund, Apollo, at the tunnel's start, yells "hunt 'em up!" and watches her wiener dog maneuver to the rat cage in mere seconds.

But when Nielsen sends her long-haired dachshund, Cameo, into the hole, the 2-year-old dog does what any youngster scared of the dark would do--she scoots backward out of the hole.

"Sometimes," says Nielsen, "it takes the dogs a while to catch on."

[We thank Jeanie Kolstadt for sending in this story. Taken from a newspaper clipping by Michelle Mandel for the Oregonian paper. A.M.]