



playthings, By Roxanne Hawn then and now

A rope, a bone, a stick. Time was, that was it for dog toys. Times have changed.



Penelope Grace, my Dalmatian, approached dog toys like a challenge thrown at her feet. Not a single plaything purchased throughout her 14-plus years lasted more than two minutes. Every toy, every time, torn to shreds.

One holiday season, she put her skill at the kill on display during a photo shoot with Santa. Nothing trumps a young Dal, sporting a red sweatshirt. People flocked to see her.

I didn't notice the squeaky turtle in the stock-boy-turned-photographer's hand until it was too late.

Penelope flew off Santa's lap, ricocheted across the sleigh's front lip, and flew straight at the toy. She nabbed the turtle, and took out the camera and tripod, too.

The crowd that had assembled to see an angel instead witnessed a turtle massacre.

It's a shame toys available today weren't around back then. Maybe, just maybe, one might have survived.

Thank goodness dog toys have evolved.

Birth of a Market

The history of dog keeping in America shares watershed moments with industrialization. Dogs as companions and a form of leisure gained strength as we moved from a rural to an urban culture. Incomes grew. Store-bought products multiplied as manufacturing improved, and marketing efforts built excitement.

Much of what we consider normal about loving our dogs comes from an increasingly advertising-soaked America that began in the mid-to-late 1800s. Fancy dog furniture, holiday gifts, and even treadmills date back nearly 100 years.

And, for that basketful of dog toys, you can thank Victorian-era bird keepers, since the first pet toys were for caged songbirds, not dogs. "People became really interested in what we would now call 'enrichment,'" explains Katherine C. Grier, Ph.D., author of *Pets in America: A History* (2006, The University of North Carolina Press) and professor of history at the University of Delaware. "It's partly because they [songbirds] are confined and cannot get out and make their own entertainment, so you have to provide their entertainment."

Surely, sticks from the field, ropes from the shed, bones from the butcher, and homemade balls provided opportunities for people to play with their dogs, but true dog toys came later. "It wasn't just a matter of pets not having toys. Most kids didn't have toys. Until the late 19th century, toys were relatively rare," says Grier.

Tweet Dreams

The pet industry began with bird stores in the 1840s. By the 1890s, pet stores opened in major cities, with broader merchandise of both live animals and the accoutrement to care for them. During the 1920s, department stores included pets and pet items in their home sections.

Around this same time, Grier says there were advertisements promoting holiday gifts for pets. In her book, she explains, "Pet supplies and equipment ... were the most profitable aspect of the pet trade; they still are."

While a few industrious people or companies sewed leather balls for sale as dog toys, items we'd recognize did not hit the market until the 1950s, following technological and societal advancements after World War II—better rubber and manufacturing and higher family incomes, for example. "You start to see the development of dog toys, often from the same companies that are making rubber squeaky toys for babies," Grier says.



Humorous mid-20th-century dog toys, such as rubber replicas of men's dress shoes, women's gloves, and brooms, often winked at the potentially destructive nature of dogs.

Love Your Dog?

The first national pet-store franchise launched in the 1960s. The first big-box pet store arrived in the 1987. All this growth, Grier explains in her book, takes root in our consumer-based society, where "ordinary practices such as pet keeping spawned constellations of purchasable objects."

Early retailers marveled at the new breed of pet shopper, or as Grier puts it: "dedicated customers driven to make purchases not only by necessity but by emotion."

That shift changed how pet products, including toys, were marketed. What Grier calls "overtly psychological" ads began to appear in the 1920s.

"There is a particularly innate bond between humans and dogs. We can talk about it through all sorts of evolutionary elements, but a lot of it is deeply emotional. I think the development of toys and our desire to play with those animals is just deeply imbedded in the human psyche," says Lynn Robertson, executive director of McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina, where the exhibition *At Home with Animals: People and Pets in America* was first mounted in 2005.

Robertson explains that the study of "material culture" lets us look into our everyday lives, and that includes all the little things we buy for our dogs. "By collecting them and examining them," she says, "we have a better idea of the function of society as well as its values and the different things that are going on."

[a dog toy timeline]

1870s

Original tennis balls



1890s

Handmade leather balls

1950s

Early rubber toys

1955

Nylabone



Modern yellow tennis balls

1972



1976

KONG (classic)





would buy a ball for their dog, or a bone, and maybe a rope.”

It took about a decade before KONG became a household name. Chuck Costello, marketing director for KONG Company, explains, “At first, a lot of people didn’t grasp the concept” of the Toughie, as KONG was originally called. Rather than struggle in direct consumer markets, Markham instead went to trainers, veterinarians, and other thought leaders. They helped validate and introduce this new toy, which spawned more than 50 spinoff products, including stuffable food and special adaptations for puppies and senior dogs. Variety based on age and size of the dog is an innovation in itself. Most early dog toys were one size fits all.

Since KONG’s mid-1980s flashpoint, the toy market exploded with options of food-delivery toys that allow dogs to forage and work to get the reward. A slower pace of eating via food toys is better for a dog’s digestion compared to wolfing down a bowl-fed meal, says Steve Tsengas, Ph.D., of OurPets Company, which brought the Buster Food Cube to the U.S. market from overseas in 1997, and introduced the Atomic Treat Ball in 2000 and the Groovy line of treat toys in 2005.

Plus, he says, manipulating the toy keeps dogs’ brains young. “What happens is the brain produces a product called neurotrophin, which is like food for the neurons,” he explains. “If you don’t use your brain, if you don’t have neurotrophin, these neurons diminish in size. They don’t die, but they get smaller and smaller.”

It looks like food-delivery toys will continue to flourish alongside toys meant to burn off physical energy, such as long-range fetch made possible by toys like Canine Hardware’s Chuckit and Flying Squirrel.

Puppy Genius

People naturally knew that dogs like to chase sticks and balls. We instinctively knew that they love to tug. But it wasn’t until the idea of enrichment, which began primarily in zoos with captive wild animals, took hold that dog toys evolved.

“At a point, we suddenly figure out they do have emotions. They do have a capacity beyond human training. Then it’s, *Wow*, toys need to look a lot different,” Robertson says. “Now, all of a sudden, we have an obligation to enrich the mental and emotional life of this companion animal.”

Rawhide chews and artificial bones such as Nylabone hit store shelves in the 1950s to address dogs’ instinctual chewing needs. But today’s dog toy market owes homage to Joe Markham, who invented KONG—the virtually indestructible, food-stuffable, modern rubber dog toy that came to market in 1976.

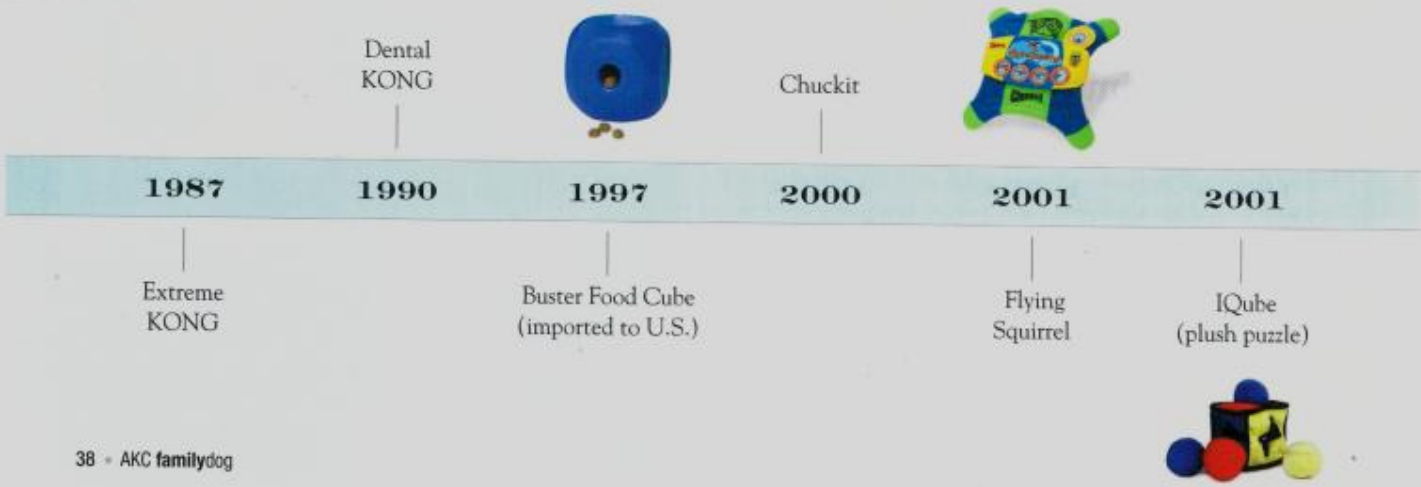
“In my opinion, the company that paved the way for everyone is KONG,” says Alise Shatoff, dog-toy designer and co-owner of Canine Genius, which makes a line of connectable, food-puzzle toys. “KONG changed everything. Before that, people



Brain Teasers

Interactive is the new buzz word. Sure, sometimes dogs just need to chew on something or chase something, but often what they really want is your attention. Playing together is a good way to build your relationship. Rich McCann, who helped bring Wubba to market in 2003 and who recently launched a new line called My Dog Brand, says that five years ago people didn’t talk about “interactive” toys that “develop the bond between dog and owner.”

TOP: COLLIER/DANE LEWIS



"It's the time you spend with your dog, that's really the reward," says Tony Lawlor, senior vice president of JAKKS Pacific, Inc., makers of the AKC line of realistic plush toys. Lawlor adds the company's backyard agility set, a mini-version of the competition equipment, also offers mental and physical stimulation while strengthening the human-canine bond. "You're interacting with your dog, the dog has to think going over jumps and through tunnels and over jumps, and he's also getting exercise," says Lawlor. "It's win-win on every side."

While early dog toys and some modern ones capitalize on inexpensive materials and production methods, McCann wants to focus less on cost, more on quality, including ropes made with vegetable dyes and safer, more durable plush toys, which still dominate the dog toy market. "Plush is the number-one category in the world thanks to impulse buys," he says.

But Tsengas predicts huge growth in thinking-dog's toys. "I believe through the process of evolution that dogs are getting smarter," he says. "So, I think you're going to see increasingly smarter types of toys."

The hardest puzzle toys come from Sweden, where inventor Nina Ottoson created her Zoo Active line of wooden puzzles that require reasoning and dexterity to release food rewards. Some of these puzzles use an indirect action, where the dog must do much more than uncover or release the food reward. They require human participation. They're more for the canine Einstein than the class clown.

Dogs at Play

So, what do dogs get from play? Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D., CAAB, an

animal behaviorist and co-owner of Animal Behavior Associates, in Littleton, Colorado, says dogs play to practice predatory behaviors, and they play as part of their social structure.

"When you're talking about play behaviors based on pre-

The realistic design of the AKC plush toys mirrors the creatures that a dog would meet on a walk in the woods.



Five Kinds of Dog Toys

Chuck Costello from the KONG Company divides toys into five categories. "We feel with the right selection of toys," he says, "you'll have the well-rounded dog."

- 1 Training toys, which help dogs know what's OK to chew on.
- 2 Treat-dispenser/enrichment toys, which help fight off boredom and provide mental stimulation.
- 3 Interactive toys, which build the bond between you and your dog and include items used in fetch and tug, for example.
- 4 Self-amusement toys, which are usually stronger, more durable toys that dogs can play with while home alone. (Always supervise your dog with new toys to determine what's safe.)
- 5 Comfort toys, which typically are plush toys, but can be any item with which the dog bonds and often sleeps.

dation," she explains, "you're talking about chasing things, stalking things, picking things up, ripping them up, and carrying them around."

Hetts agrees that various food-delivery toys make dogs work mentally, but she warns that once the dog figures out a particular toy, then the true thinking part is mostly over. Still, the act of manipulating a toy to get the food out provides some stimulation and a sense of control. That's why Janet Velenovsky, training and behavior education manager at Premier Pet Products, recommends rotating the toys each day. And, she promises, "We're constantly trying to come up with new ones." 🐾

Freelance writer Roxanne Hawn lives near Denver, and competes in agility with her Border Collie Lilly.

