

Companion Pieces

By **ROBERT STRAUSS**
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

PHILADELPHIA—Jordan Disko was standing in front of a large poster of a large dog wearing what looked like a baby's mittens. The dog did not look all that ecstatic about its paw-ware, but Disko was animated on the subject.

"I have been on an evangelistic bandwagon for 18 months about dog shoes. I call them Dog Martens," said Disko, a vice president of Original Duke's Dog Fashions, and he hands out a 3-by-5 card with 13 "Reasons to Buy Dog Shoes." Among them are "Gives your dog comfort on hiking trips or long city walks," "Protects hardwood floors" and "Looks cool! Color coordinate your dog's outfit with yours and take him along on a jog!!"

That you didn't know the retrievers in your neighborhood were foaming at the mouth for dog shoes was unimportant here recently at the American Pet Products Manufacturers Assn. 39th Annual trade show. The Original Duke's is based in Beaverton, Ore., home of that homo sapiens shoe joint Nike, which no doubt once had a booth trying to hawk running shoes to suspicious buyers and journalists. Who knows? The Duke Dog may one day rank with the Nike Swoosh as an advertising icon.

Though the show, supposedly the largest expo for pet products in the world, featured a plethora of useful items—from collars to bird cages to fish-tank filters—it also provided the opportunity for manufacturers and inventors, large and small, to try to persuade distributors that their offbeat product would become the next cat's meow of the pet product world.

David Rose, for instance, came from Van Nuys, where he runs Pet-Tech Products, with the Cricket Corral, which to the skeptical eye looks like a quart-sized hard-plastic yogurt container with a painted cardboard tube shoved in a hole in the top.

"People who have reptile pets need a place to store the live crickets they feed them," explained Rose. He jammed the cardboard tube into the plastic jar and brought it out with half a dozen crickets clinging on. He flicked the tube and a couple of crickets dropped into the reptile cage, and on to their eventual demise.

Iguanas are hot. Just ask David Morris, whose Premium National Products of Mission, Kan., is pushing ZuPreem iguana food after years of primarily selling to zoos. "It's a burgeoning market. There are a lot more apartment dwellers than there used to be. You can put one of these in a dorm room," Morris said. "And to be frank,

'Jurassic Park' really helped us. An iguana is the closest thing you can have to a triceratops."

Four Paws Products of Long Island is hep to the rage, with products ranging from a reptile claw clipper to a reptile leash and harness (in either black or green) to Repti-Scoop, because even the well-groomed iguana produces guano.

Unfortunately, Californians can't participate in the biggest chic animal trend, the cuddly ferret. Ferrets are illegal as pets in the state, though there's legislation pending to change that.

"But we estimate that there are 500,000 ferrets as pets in California," said Dr. Thomas Willard of Totally Ferret in Ohio, which markets meaty ferret

Fringed jackets for Fido. Pearls for the pampered feline. Even iguanas and llamas aren't left out at a trade show that features just about everything an indulgent pet owner could imagine.

food. "There are 5 to 15 million of them nationwide now. It's a pet for today!"

Pets International Ltd. in suburban Chicago has CritterTrail Fun-nels, a sort of Rube Goldberg-looping bunch of colored transparent tunnels for your ferret to scurry through.

"Ferrets love to crawl into stuff, but you may not want them on your rug, so you give them a trail to go through," said David Hitsman, a company spokesman.

Hitsman said the next high-brow pet

should be the chinchilla. "They are soft and furry with no odor and don't make a sound. Besides, nobody's buying chinchilla coats anymore and they had to find a new market for them."

Looking for something bigger? How about a llama? Hamilton Products of Ocala, Fla., which has long been in the horse accouterment business, now markets Navaho-designed llama halters, the better to walk your pet around the neighborhood. Hamilton is also testing some upscale dog items. The company displayed a suede, Indian-beaded and fringed dog jacket.

Don't expect all these products to be in your neighborhood pet shop immediately, but you get an idea of how the market is trending.

Of course, dogs still rule. Consider the line from Haute Feline & Haute Canine in Minneapolis, which suggests "neckware for Fideaux," a gold-plated set of beads with a filigree heart on which there are two dog bones. Kitty would probably love Perfect Purrls, a pearl necklace with five silver-plated fish.

"My Dog Can Do That!" made in Mount Prospect, Ill., is perhaps the first board game you can play with your dog. You draw cards that ask your dog to do tricks and, if it succeeds, you get to move its marker around the board, hopefully reaching "Hollywood" before your dog has had enough and tears you limb from limb.

"Ah, nothing to worry about. Dogs love this," said one demonstrator. "And cats, pfft! They are too dumb to play."

But not too dumb to find pleasure in the simple. Perhaps the most amazing cat toy here was the Cat Dancer, which is merely a piece of curved wire with five cigarette-shaped pieces of cardboard attached to the end. Its manufacturers in Wisconsin guarantee it will make even the fattest, dullest and oldest cats playful.

One pet inventor not to rest on his laurels is Uncle Milton Levine, now 83, who 41 years ago at his place on Sunset near La Brea first put out the legendary Ant Farm. Uncle Milton and his little buggers are still selling. "They are the perfect pets," said Frank Adler, an Uncle Milton representative. "No vet bills. No walking. Don't get me started."

Uncle Milton is moving up a bit this year with Surf Frog, which will be out in time for Christmas.

Your Surf Frog—guaranteed to grow from tadpole to adult within 30 days—rests on a surfboard on the "ocean" under the plastic dome. When he comes out of the water, he hops over to a roughhewn surf shack or underneath a beach umbrella. Uncle Milton hopes to do for leopard frogs what he has done for red harvester ants: put them in every kid's bedroom, at least for the couple of months before the kids break the plastic casing.



Blocked due to copy
See full page image
microfilm.

Illustration by
KIRK MILLETT /
For The Times