

Battle Of The Squeaky Toys

Alexandra Sargent-Colburn matches wits with her ferret Puma in a battle over squeaky toy dominance.

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The sound of these squeaky toys never fails to call Ping and Puma from their hiding places, but what happens when Puma hides them?

I have a number of useful household gadgets. One end of my kitchen island is weighted down with mixers and processors, grinders and even an espresso machine that makes frothed milk. I have a washer, a dryer, a dishwasher. I am especially fond of my vacuum cleaner. But honestly, there are two things that I just cannot function without. Both are humble rubber novelty dog squeaky toys. Yes, the squeaky toys that call Ping and Puma. One is an orange dinosaur with devil horns, the other is a pale blue sea monster draped with lots of rubber seaweed. Neither cost more than a dollar, and both are indispensable.

Why is it that ferrets are slaves to the squeaky toy? My Puma cannot hear one without running to it, it is a compulsion. If you squeak it down near the floor, she invariably grabs it in her teeth and shakes it as if she's trying to kill it. I can actually pick her up by the squeaky toy with her teeth clamped in it. Just squeaking the thing gets her in a violent frame of mind. Woe betides the person with bare feet who squeaks the squeaky toy and doesn't pay attention to which direction Puma may be coming from. If she can't reach the squeaky toy, she attacks the human squeaker's feet! Puma is especially charged by the sound of the pale blue sea monster, but the orange devil dino does the trick, too.

Ping is a little different. He is actually capable of sleeping through the call of the squeaky toy upon occasion. I have to go all around the house to his best sleeping spots, squeaking, squeaking. It may take three or four minutes but the sound at last cuts through his psychic fog and wakes him up. Suddenly a little head with slightly ruffled fur pokes out from under the sofa as if to say, "Hey, whass goin' on?" And then I can easily scoop him up. He does not always run to the squeaky toy as Puma does, and he never bites the human squeaker's feet. For Ping, the orange devil dino with the higher pitch seems to be the most attractive.

Interestingly enough, both ferrets are so drawn to the power of the squeaky toy that even when they sneak out through the forbidden house doors and into the outside world, a few squeaks lure them right back in! You'd think they wouldn't fall for it, but they do — every time. Such is the awesome power of the squeaky toy.

Squeaky Toy Trouble

There is a problem with the squeaky toys, though. Puma, especially, likes to hunt for them. I have to be very careful about where I leave them or when I return to that spot there are ... no squeaky toys. If I look around, I'll see Puma all puffed up and smug, grinning a ferocious ferret grin at me. Then she will zip beneath some massive piece of furniture, confident that I cannot possibly catch her. And I can't! Not without the siren call of the squeaky toy. It is virtually impossible to draw Puma out into the open without one. Sticking my unprotected hand and arm beneath the sofa to pull her out is to invite unappealing flesh wounds. Ping is much easier to pull out from beneath furniture, but if he isn't awakened with squeaks it's anyone's guess about just which massive piece of furniture he's holed up beneath. No squeaky toy? No ferret.

I shouldn't resent Puma for stealing and stashing the squeaky toys, but I do. That's just the kind of person I am. She doesn't make it easy for me. The toys wind up hidden inside the frames of sofas or beneath enormously heavy armchairs. Sometimes she hides them inside the black plastic drainage tubes that connect to her cage and wind around the living room ceiling. There is more than 20 feet of tube to search, and a squeaky toy doesn't usually make much noise unless you squeak it! I have to shake the tubing with a broom, and listen for the faint rubbery bounce that lets me know a squeaky toy is inside. Then I have to dismantle the tube. Oh, joy.

Outsmarting Puma

The other day I was completely stumped. The ferrets were loose in the house in "secret hardened locations" like Vice President Dick Cheney. They were dug in. Gone. And so were both squeaky toys. I had a vague recollection of being in a hurry and leaving the toys on top of the cage. Not smart. Puma can climb up the side of the cage when she wants to, and she had. The squeaky toys were gone. I could not find them anywhere. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. It was Puma, watching me from beneath the antique writing desk, enjoying my discomfort. Puma knew full well where the

squeaky toys were, and she wasn't telling. Nope.

I sat down on the yellow sofa and fumed. You could have fried eggs on the top of my head. I was being made a mockery of, by weasels. Once again! I sat and I thought. And thought. Then a brilliant idea occurred to me. What else is Puma irresistibly drawn to beside little rubber dog toys? Only one thing — an open door, the door to the forbidden outside. Hah! I had her. But I had to be canny. Puma is not stupid. Relentlessly cunning and sometimes bloodthirsty, but not stupid.

I got up and Puma quietly padded along behind me. She made sure she stayed just farther away than I could possibly lunge. She followed me into the living room, and hid beneath the green velvety sofa. I pretended to ignore her, but I could see her eyes, shining, watching my every move. I bent over for my shoes and started putting them on. She came a little bit farther out from beneath the sofa, her ears up and curious. I picked up my jacket and shouldered into it. She was now half way out from beneath the sofa, but I was pretending not to notice.

I walked slowly to the front door, and picked up my purse. I jangled my keys. Puma left the cover of the sofa, measuring the distance to the front door. I slowly turned the door knob, and cracked the front door open an inch...two inches...And then Puma made her mistake. She sprinted for the front door with everything she had, as if she were a little foot long steam locomotive, wheels just a blur of forward motion and power. Chugga-chugga-chugga! And I reached down as fast a sneaky primate can reach down and I grabbed her! (A few million years of snatching bugs out of the long grass of the African savannah has honed this primate skill.) Puma never even saw it coming. She was well and truly captured, and, oh was she mad! She had fallen for it hook, line and sinker. The shoes, the jacket, the purse, the keys ... Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Caught!

I finally found the squeaky toys tumbled together beneath the yellow sofa. The yellow sofa is in the same room as the ferret cage, so Puma had the pleasure of watching me find them. I held them up where she could see them clearly, and she narrowed her eyes in a dangerous way. The score stood once again Primates 1, Mustelids 0. For now, for now. She is even now planning her revenge.

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Alexandra Sargent-Colburn lives in Massachusetts with fish, ferrets, a cat, a husband and a neurotic dog. The ferrets are in charge.