



# Community Page

## Couple helping foster young canine's calling

*Raising potential dog guide plenty of work, but rewards just as great*

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**  
*The Champion*

One glance at Fletcher's shiny ebony eyes and you're hooked.

With his head cocked slightly to one side as he stares at you, his velvety ears dangling, it seems impossible not to fall for this black Labrador retriever.

But as much as it seems his purpose in life is to look cute, Fletcher is actually in training for a much higher calling — one that involves using those dangerously beautiful eyes of his for more than just winning over complete strangers.

One day, if deemed suitable, Fletcher may actually become the eyes for someone who's visually impaired, serving as his or her dog guide. But that's still about a year away — if it happens at all.

For now, Fletcher is content with the early stages of training, which invariably include romping about with his friend Max, a fellow pooch and temporary brother. Fletcher is a foster puppy that arrived at Jean and Doug Falls' rural Milton home in January at the age of 10 weeks as part of the Lions Foundation of Canada's Dog Guides program, based out of Oakville.

He's staying with the Falls family until at least December, when it'll be determined whether he's a candidate for formal training to become a dog guide.

Mr. and Ms Falls have chosen to become Fletcher's foster parents for the first year of his life to help socialize him and teach him basic commands. The more Fletcher experiences of the everyday world, the better.

So he accompanies the couple when they go out, wearing a little saddle-type jacket that reads 'Future Dog Guide'.

Although it's clear Mr. and Ms Falls consider Fletcher one of their own — no different from Max, the family's cross shepherd and border collie — they both admit it's a big commitment they've taken on.

"It's not easy," Mr. Falls said. "It's like having a baby. We have to be around looking after him. He's up at 6 a.m. and wants to go to the bathroom, and then I can get maybe one more hour of sleep. The latest I get up is 7 a.m."

It would be much more difficult if they weren't both retired, Mr. Falls said.

Right now, the couple said they're trying to train some of the enthusiasm out of

Fletcher, in hopes of making him calmer — a necessity if he's to one day guide his master through life.

It's not easy, though. Nearly every time somebody new shows up at the front door, Fletcher deems it his job to be the one-dog welcoming committee, and jumps up against the newcomers, tail wagging.

"It's one of the drawbacks of living rural-ly. If he was downtown around people all the time, he wouldn't be like this," Ms Falls said.

Part of the reason Ms Falls said she decided to become involved with the Dog Guides program is her mother was blind for the last 15 years of her life in England.

A dog guide could have given her much-needed companionship and a greater sense of freedom. "My mother's life was lonely," Ms Falls said.

She added she thought fostering a potential dog guide was something she could do to help others that wouldn't necessarily change her life around.

"We already have a dog, so this was something we could do without a major change in our lifestyle," she said, adding, "I'm not sure I was right — it's more work than we thought!"

Although there's no monetary compensation — Fletcher's food and vet bills are paid for, but that's it — the rewards can be huge for the foster families, Ms Falls said, adding she and her husband weren't prepared for just how quickly they'd become attached to Fletcher.

It didn't hurt that Fletcher arrived bearing the same name as the Falls' oldest son.

"I say we have two Fletchers, and neither one does what he's told," Ms Falls said, laughing.

It'll be a sad day — probably in December — when Fletcher leaves, she said. Of course, that's if he passes the requirements to become a dog guide. If he doesn't, there's a good chance the Falls will be able to keep him as their own pet.

Ms Falls said, it's a win-win situation. Besides dogs for the visually impaired, the Lions Foundation also trains companions for hearing impaired people and those with physical disabilities.

The organization is currently looking for more families to serve as foster parents.

Joanna Sharp, communications co-ordinator with the program, said potential families must have time and patience.



**Doug Guides program foster parent Jean Falls takes young Fletcher out for a stroll.**

Photo by **GRAHAM PAINE**

Although it's a lot of work, she said, foster families gain a lot of satisfaction knowing they're helping someone else.

"Their time and dedication provides freedom and independence to someone who needs it," she said, adding although the families often grieve when their puppies leave, it's worth it when they see their dogs paired with new masters.

About 65 per cent of the puppies make it to the formal training portion of the program, Ms Sharp said, which lasts about six

to eight months before they're paired with their new owners.

Labs are the most popular type of dog for the Dog Guides program, she said, because they switch loyalties fairly easy from one owner to the next.

"Most make transitions fairly easily." For more information on Dog Guides, call 1-800-768-3030, e-mail [info@dog-guides.com](mailto:info@dog-guides.com) or visit [www.dogguides.com](http://www.dogguides.com).

Stephanie Thiessen can be reached at [sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com](mailto:sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com).

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**Cogeco Cable Channel 14**

**Programming Schedule — Tuesday, August 17 - Monday, August 23, 2004**

Tuesday, August 17	Wednesday, August 18	Thursday, August 19	Friday, August 20	Saturday, August 21	Sunday, August 22	Monday, August 23
9,10, 11am & 12:30pm Plugged In!	9,10, 11am & 12:30pm Plugged In!	9,10, 11am & 12:30pm Plugged In!	9,10, 11am & 12:30pm Plugged In!	9,10, 11am & 12:30pm Plugged In!	9 & 10pm Plugged In!	9,10, 11am & 12:30pm Plugged In!
5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm Plugged In!	1:00pm Halton Hills Council - Aug 16	1:00pm Halton Hills Council - Aug 16	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm Plugged In!	4:30pm TV Cogeco Sports: Canadian Girls Peeewe	10:30pm TV Cogeco Sports: Canadian Girls Peeewe	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm Plugged In!
8:00pm Halton Hills Council - Aug 16	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm Plugged In!	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm Plugged In!		Fastpitch Championship	Fastpitch Championship	
	8:00pm Halton Hills Council - Aug 16			7:30pm Plugged In!	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm Plugged In!	

Watch for the start of TV Cogeco's new season in September