

RUNNING SHORTS

Running and Dogs

By Ken Johnson

All of us who run or walk the streets and trails are occasionally confronted by loose dogs. In my 25 years of running, I have been confronted a few times, but have never been attacked. Some others I know have not been so lucky.

First of all, here are the rules. Residents of the city of Huntsville must abide by the Running at Large code. They cannot let their dog run loose. Violation is a Class C Misdemeanor and is punishable by a \$100 fine, plus court costs. No such law exists for Walker County residents living outside of the Huntsville city limits, except that other towns in the county may have their own leash law.

Huntsville State Park is governed by state law. All dogs must be on a leash at the park. Violation is a Class C Misdemeanor and is punishable by a fine up to \$500, even for the first offense.

Some rural subdivisions may have a leash rule built into the deed restrictions, however, violations would be enforced by the Homeowners Association, not by the Sheriff.

Regardless of whether there is a leash law or not, owners could be held liable for the actions of their dogs if they knew of their aggressive nature or should have known. An attack by a loose dog could result in the owner being on the wrong end of a law suit.

Depending on the circumstances, any breed of dog, regardless of size, may become aggressive. Owners and runners and walkers need to keep this in mind.

Here are some tips for runners and walkers.

Try to avoid a confrontation with a loose dog. Stick with a route that you have found to be usually free of loose dogs. If you are running and see a loose dog up ahead, turn back or change your route for that day and avoid the confrontation.

If you are approaching a leashed dog from behind, make sure the dog's master knows you are passing by and keep a safe distance between you and the dog.

If you end up confronting a loose dog, the first thing you should do is stop running and try to keep your distance. In many cases, the dog will not be aggressive and you can walk a safe distance past the dog and then start running again. If the dog is barking at you, talk to the dog calmly and gently, do not stare into the dog's eyes, turn sideways and move away slowly. Resume your running when you are well out of the dog's territory and the dog retreats.

Dogs do not always bark before they attack, so you have to be prepared for the worst. If you are attacked, try to put something between you and the dog, such as a tree, fence, bench or an auto. Try to place yourself out of reach for the dog. Hopefully, the dog's master or another person will come to your aid. If charged, put something between you and the dog's mouth, such as a jacket or stick. If attacked, curl up in a ball and protect your face, neck and head.

When you are running in an area where you may confront aggressive dogs, always carry aerosol pepper spray. Aim for the dog's eyes. When the dog is temporarily disabled, make your escape.

If you are bitten, always report the incident to law enforcement. Report loose dogs within the city to the police or loose dogs Huntsville State Park to the park police.

Let's make the streets of Huntsville and Walker County a safe place to drive, bike, walk and run.