

My Buddy for the Summer of 2009 **by Gary Pells**

I released Buddy to the rainbow bridge after a summer of rehab that ended today.

Many would begin this letter by writing "Buddy lost his battle with...".

I'm not going to write that.

Rather I'm going to write about the time we spent together this summer and why it was worth waging that battle...why this is a NorCal success story - no matter the outcome.

During May of 09, Buddy was placed with a family in Napa who were looking for a less active, well behaved Golden who could join the Mrs. at her job in a Napa winery. Buddy seemed a good match. He was the epitome of a gentleman Sr. Golden, age 9 and was a real "home" body. In fact, his previous family noted on his surrender app that he had once walked around the block to be with them when they were repairing the back fence and he'd gotten out.

He worked out well with his new family for about 8 weeks. During that time Koda, Nike and I visited him and found him to be happy, playful and very content. He didn't need to be on a leash at all, even when I arrived and unloaded my pair - he was seated and patiently waiting with his mistress. During our visit he gave sugar and hugs and got hugged back and even strolled into the family pool to retrieve a toy which he brought to me, rolling over in the grass for a belly rub and another hug. Gosh he was a sweetie...

Unfortunately and suddenly, he developed a limp in his left rear leg. Over time and despite treatment, the limp worsened to the point where he could hardly bare weight on his bad leg. His activity level dropped, and he lost weight and muscle mass. Buddy, it seemed, had severe arthritis in his knee - so severe and that the vet advised that Buddy would either have to have the leg amputated or be put down. The family sadly contacted me and I accepted Buddy back.

I took Buddy into my vet and he noted that the knee was severely swollen and Buddy had a temp - both indicating an infection. His blood workup confirmed the infection but looked pretty good all around. A course of antibiotics seemed to clear up the infection, reduced his swelling and allowed him to use the leg (touch down only) and help him get around. He was off his food when he first came to me but he recovered his appetite, seemed to bounce back and was getting around well. His new daily routine included a 1/2 block walk to a grassy field near my home where we would spend time rolling and wrestling in the grass, playing with a squeaky ball or rope toy he liked and getting a good belly rub. I massaged his legs and back as well, paying attention to his bad leg and back.

When Buddy first came to me, I wasn't sure if I would work with him myself or if I should seek a special needs foster. However, Buddy decided that for me the first

morning when he greeted me for a love with my granddaughter Sydney's purple flip-flop (that he had selected as His toy) in his mouth as I woke up and, later on, after I led him to the field we would come to enjoy playing in each day, he led me home w/out any help. He was 3-5 paces ahead of me the whole way and it's not a straight shot, he had to know where to turn (into my cul-de-sac) and which house to go to. He also seemed to have claimed a bed (at least for daytime naps) as whenever I asked him to go lay down, he'd go to the same spot. At night, he liked to bed down next to my bed so he could get a belly rub and touch me as well. He'd keep his head on the bedside or my shoulder (or his paw) while I rubbed his ears, neck and back until he faded off to sleep, slowly lowering his head onto his paws...

Even given his bad leg, he greeted me with woofs, wagging tail with Sydney's the flip-flop in his mouth when I returned home from work each day or an errand. He loved to chase and bounce around with the crew - especially Koda, who became his wrestling partner. He was loving and affectionate but stopped short of licking my face...for a day or so. I'd bet he was taught not to give kisses on the face but he seemed to want to and, after a day or so, he very hesitantly did so... Just a couple licks and I told him he was a good boy. Thereafter he repeated the kisses on occasion - rarely but just as lovingly.

Koda really liked having a new pal to play with. You may recall he's my young fella (2 y/old) with cerebellum hypoplasia who loves to play rough and wrestle. And Buddy was perfectly content to roll over and let Koda "attack" him - almost as if Buddy was a chew toy - then he'd wrap his long legs around Koda and wrestle with him, both growling and barking with tails wagging away. When Koda "popped out" of Buddy's grip and escaped, I'd reach in for a handful and find myself grabbed with Buddy's big paws and pulled into his grasp. He even initiated many of the "bouts" by lying down near Koda, pawing at him to get it started and then rolling over into his "come get me" pose when Koda responded.

When Koda barked at me at meal time (as soon as he hears the kibble hit the bowl, Koda starts barking and dancing around the kitchen), Buddy would bounce around, barking back and, sometimes playfully chase Koda out of the kitchen. When Koda returned, again barking and dancing, Buddy would playfully engage him again, earning both of them a small taste before the bowls were distributed.

Unfortunately the knee infection returned with a vengeance and, given the damage and bone loss, we (my vet and I) decided we faced the same decision - amputation or euthanasia. As Buddy's blood workup was still pretty good and his spirit strong and golden so we scheduled the amputation for 7/7. I would no longer be working (after 6/30) so I would have the time to see him through his recovery and rehab.

Buddy tolerated the surgery well and returned home. He needed very little help getting around - even hours after his surgery. I had a sling to assist him but only used it once or twice in the first hour home. Then he seemed to get around remarkably well on his own. Over the next couple of days he recovered speedily and adjusted to getting around on 3 legs very well. In fact, I had to work to keep up with him on the way to our favorite spot for his daily session of belly rubs and rolling and wrestling in the grass. He chased a squeaky tennis ball, played tug with a rope toy or "bear" with me and, one day, crossed over the road to a small park where some neighborhood children were playing. He was

drawn to the kids and I noted that he was extra careful and gentle with them - belying his growling, wrestling "side".

He recovered well for a few weeks, gaining strength, mobility and even becoming more aggressive at play as more and more of his personality emerged. He'd roll over near Koda and reach out to him, pawing to initiate the wrestling match. He was happy and loving and enjoyed attention. He really fit in well with the crew and it was obvious that he really enjoyed being here.

About 4 weeks after surgery, he began to have a harder time making it to the field, just getting to the edge of the grass. Over the next week or so he struggled more; seeming to be weaker and only making it part way to the field before needing help. I'd fashioned a sling for him from a bath towel that would provide comfortable support and, with that assistance, he managed just fine. It seemed he was able to get around ok at home, going out for potty and playtime on his own and moving about the house at will. He only needed the help for the longer walk to the grass field. So I assisted him each day with the sling and we continued our daily walk and romp in the grassy field.

As he seemed to be ok, just having difficulty managing longer walks on the one leg; I felt a dog cart / wheel chair would provide him the mobility that would allow him to be more active on his walks, hopefully over time regaining strength in his front legs and back and mobility as well. I further hoped he'd have a chance of regaining some rear leg strength as well so as to need the cart less and less. So while I worked with him on his rehab daily, assisting him to the field with the sling and focusing on trying to help him continue to regain strength in his back and front legs (with "tug of war" games using a rope toy), I researched carts and found a company that made one for amputees.

During most of this time, Buddy had a very healthy appetite, was active, alert and happy. He sought attention, affection and playtime and wanted to be close. I was also (of course) taking him to my vet for advice and treatment and when he seemed to weaken more and began to lose interest in his food, (about the first week of August) we checked his blood work and X-rayed his lungs. We discovered he had developed some pancreatitis so we treated him for that but we also discovered (X-Ray) he had developed tumors in his chest (his lungs sounded fine) - so we began treating him with prednisone for that.

He seemed to recover well, regaining his appetite and some mobility so with fingers crossed, I went ahead and requested authorization for the cart. Got the ok and placed the order however, Buddy was once again having some not so good days mixed with better ones. His appetite had grown poor in the mornings but, after a couple of hours he would eat fine and usually he ate his dinner just fine. That changed to the worse with more time in the morning before he would feel like eating and some days he ate very little. He was losing weight and the muscle tone we had gained through June and July. By Saturday, he had weakened to the point that he could barely get around - though he still managed to go outside for potty, never once having an accident inside - but without doubt, he was losing his mobility.

More telling, however - he was weakening and I could see that his golden spirit was fading and, although he wasn't suffering, it was apparent that he was tired and, perhaps, it was time to let him rest.

I took him to my vet who also noted that Buddy's breathing had become labored and he agreed, it was time. So I held him and kissed him and told him he was such a good boy and, as he took his last breath, I said goodbye to my Buddy for the summer of 2009...

I profoundly thank Liz Berry and the NorCal vet committee for supporting my decisions to continue care as long as his Golden spirit shone and giving Buddy a chance.

There may be some who will look at the amount of \$\$ we spent on vet bills and the short recovery he enjoyed before losing him who will criticize the decisions and opine we should have spared Buddy the amputation and let him go to rest earlier on. But that just "counts beans" ignoring Buddy and most important - his Golden spirit. As far as I'm concerned, so long as Buddy had a reasonable chance of a pain free recovery and good quality of life and, more important, so long as his golden spirit still shone in his eyes, he deserved our support.

As with any of my other Golden retrievers who have gone before Buddy, I always have some 2nd thoughts at this point... But those thoughts are always whether I should have given him more time or perhaps tried this or that, hoping to find something that would have made a difference. However, I neither regret nor 2nd guess any decision I made to move forward with treatment and give Buddy the chances we did... My pain is from having to make the decision that it was time to let go.

To me, our efforts - my work and NorCal's support - define our mission as a rescue... We **do** take in the Golden's who are sick and injured or who have special needs and we make every reasonable attempt to rehab them and give them a chance for a happy life.

And we achieved that with Buddy - if only for a summer - but that's what makes his story a success.... His med expenses are our badge of honor. To do anything else would put us in the same category as the local pounds that euthanise...just with a different schedule.

I don't feel as though the effort was for naught, even given the outcome. And that's why I did not write about a lost battle. My summer was spent caring for and working with Buddy to help him rehab and recover. I can think of little else I'd rather have done and know my life is richer from his being a part of it - even though the pain of his loss leaves an emptiness that looms huge like a black hole. Buddy spent his summer loving and enriching yet another family - this time me and my crew's lives and home - with his loving, gentle spirit, often goofy, playfulness, how he loved to wrestle and play "Bear" and his all embracing, wonderfully Golden attitude.

And that's what makes his story a success...not a lost battle.

I miss him so already and I will grieve for him for some time as he touched my heart in that special way only a Sr. Golden can.

I will also remember him fondly...

Often with a smile, sometimes a tear...

...for the rest of my life...

And so this story is also a tribute to my Buddy for the summer of 2009.

Garry Pells &
My Golden Crew - Koda, Nike, Aspen, Grizzly & Sammy 'n' Buddy (in spirit)