

The Gift of Koda

Feb. 2009

As I was getting ready to leave for work this week, I patted the bed and said, "Come Koda, Up" and as I watched him follow my gentle command - climbing onto our bed and laying down with his head on my pillow, it really hit me how far we'd come in the weeks he's been with me...

It was about 10 days before thanksgiving and the following email from Liz Berry, looking for a foster or home for Koda, was the first word I had of him...



*Koda - 1 yr 11 month old intact male. Very sweet, loving dog. Great with other dogs! Would love human & canine companionship. * Koda has been diagnosed with Cerebellar Hypoplasia*

The cerebellum is the portion of the brain responsible for the control of motion. When a puppy or kitten is born with an underdeveloped cerebellum, the condition is known as congenital cerebellar hypoplasia.. Affected animals have tremors and unusual jerky movements or may fall down when they try to move. The symptoms do not get worse as they age. As the kitten or puppy grows it will learn to compensate for its condition but there are usually lifelong signs of a decreased ability to coordinate movement. Almost all dogs and cats with congenital cerebellar hypoplasia can live happily as pets with a little special care to compensate for their disabilities.

Koda deserves a loving home...for his first home just put him outside for they did not want to deal with his motor skill problems. If you have a foster (we need to move him ASAP) or better yet a new loving home..... PLEASE call me!

For me it's always their story that "gets" me and with Koda it was the same...his story simply touched my heart. So I emailed Liz back asking for more info on Koda's condition and she sent me a website link that included the story of Charlie the Cat with CH. While Charlie had coordination problems and walked funny (stiff rear legs and a bit of a stagger), he was a normal, playful cat, loved by his owner and his story also touched me.

When I called Liz and related what I had seen, she told me Koda was somewhat worse than Charlie - that his gait was quite staggered and he often bumped into things and sometimes fell down. Whenever he shook (the normal dog shake), he would rear up and fall over backward, unable to maintain control and balance. In addition to his physical issues, it appeared that he has some limited vision.

His background story included that he was, basically, abandoned in the back yard as his last owners could not deal with his condition. I also learned that his original owner had anguished a great deal over his symptoms - fearful, worried and completely in the dark regarding what was wrong with her little Golden puppy. I am sure she suffered a great deal of fear and sorrow over his condition and her understandable reaction led to his being passed around a bit and, eventually, surrendered to us to find him a home.

Well, I thought I'd at least be able to help foster him for a bit and determine if / how I could help compensate for his disabilities so that he could stay. Heck, as banged up as I am with 3 artificial joints, I'm a gimp myself, so, undaunted, I committed to taking him.

Koda was being fostered with Tamra Howard of Tamerlan Golden Retrievers while he was being seen for a Neurological Consultation and I arranged to go and meet him. Tamra wanted to talk with whoever would foster him to pass on her observations and the ways she accommodated his condition. I am forever grateful for her time and pointers as they really opened my eyes to his needs and proved to be of great value to learning how to help and care for him.

Well, when I first saw him I was completely taken in by his wonderfully happy, Golden attitude, regardless of his condition. He's a little fella, about 55 lbs, Red in color, oversized paws and cute as could be. He walked over to me, staggering but walking nonetheless and tail just a waggin' away. I reached out to pet him and rub his ears only to have him lean into my hand but so much that he fell over when I moved it. That was my first real introduction to the extent of his condition and Tamra showed me that one has to hug him into one's legs and steady him in order to give him some sugar and when I did that he responded to my touch and enjoyed my caress. He began to mouth my hand, which Tamra said he did in play - just like many other 2 y/old Golden would.

I had some kibbles for him but discovered he had trouble eating due to his uncontrolled body movement and head bob. He literally pecked at the food and knocked more to the ground than he ate. His previous owners had simply left him food to peck and eat, hoping he ate enough to gain sustenance. Although I thought he was a bit underweight, he seemed to be in excellent health and didn't seem to have any symptoms of undernourishment or dehydration.

I also had a toy for him but was advised that he really couldn't or didn't play with toys as he could not see so well and could not carry or throw them like a "normal Golden".

Anyway, we walked around with him a bit to get acquainted and so I could get an idea of his motor skill issues and become somewhat used to his movements before transporting him home. We talked about how he needed to be fed and cared for.

As I loaded him into my SUV and prepared to head back home; Tamra commented that she hoped we'd find the right home for him because, as Liz wrote, he was such a sweetie and really deserved a loving home but would need special care. I told Tamra then that unless I just couldn't care for him, he was making his last move... He was going home...

While my mind was at least wondering (if not worrying about) how I would accommodate him, I also realized that his truly Golden spirit and his obviously terminal case of "excessive happiness" had really wrapped around my heart and led me to the decision that, no matter what, unless I simply could not meet his needs (and I was determined to do so), he would be staying with me....he had made his last move.

On the way home he showed his "cuddly side" - first by trying to help me drive but, after I pulled over I got him settled - by maintaining contact with me - by my hand touching him & rubbing his ears - or his head on my shoulder. After a bit, he laid down on the seat, with his head on my arm. He seemed to really enjoy and returned the affection I gave him. I was surprised how well he settled down - rather advanced social skills for a not even 2 y/old male golden. And to be

honest, the way he cuddled to me, first putting his head on my chest, then into my shoulder, further wrapping around my heart sealed the deal - he was going home.

I also realized that the major challenge and decision in front of me was "what next". You see, while everything I read indicated he could have a relatively normal life if I could accommodate his disabilities, I found not one word about what that meant. No tactics or strategy - no specific ideas or suggestions as to how to go about accommodating his limitations and nothing to help with cautions - keeping him safe, in other words.

I did however, have Tamra's insights and I was lucky enough that I would only have to work about 6 hours over the following 8 days so I would have a lot of time home to work with him and, hopefully, learn more of how I could help him be Golden. Little did I know that Koda would help me work that out.

Koda showed me that the best thing I could do was to help him enjoy "normal" activities as he met and "exchanged business cards" (you know, the butt sniff thing) and interacted with my crew (Aspen & Nike and Sammy n Grizzly - all NorCal Rescue Golden). Over the first few days he got to go for walks, run and play, "wrastle", go to the dog park etc.. and while I was worried that he would be hurt - he jumped right in and only wanted to run and play with his new buddies. In addition, the more time he spent in my home, the more he learned the "floor plan" and, therefore, how to get around with less bumping into things, crashing and burning etc..

One thing for sure, he's "got game" like no other Golden I've seen. He's happy, sassy as heck, really playful and just enjoys his little world, of which I am now an important part. The first time he chased me in our back yard, I laughed out load - literally - as his feet seemed to go in every direction and he ran with his head up with a huge smile on his face (see the pic below).

At first I was surprised at myself - thinking I was laughing at his "antics" and therefore, his condition. I quickly realized that what really had me laughing was his spirit and the sheer joy on his face as he ran to "get" me; tackling me when he got close.

Right from the start, I played "Push Over" with him. As he chased me and tried to "get me" I carefully wrestled him around, pushing and turning him around (by pushing on the side of his shoulder or hips) - challenging his balance and stability. No matter how many times I pushed him he'd just keep on coming back for more, staggering after each push, but regaining his balance and coming back for more - getting me with each charge and sometimes leaping into me - sort of tackling me - as he got more excited.

After the first few days - as he became more active each day, running and playing with my others - I wondered if my eyes were deceiving me as it seemed that Koda was becoming stronger and able to run and play with more stability, surefootedness and it also seemed that he fell less. I also noted that he was much stronger when we played "Get Daddy". I discovered that he was growing so strong that I couldn't push him over without really working at it. In addition, my wife was in and out of town and didn't see him for about 5 days and confirmed my observations.

One day he was on the other side of my bed (which is in my family room as I've moved downstairs due to my own disabilities - going up only for showers), and his way to me was blocked. He barked at me a couple times and then climbed up on the bed - struggling a bit but he made it and was really happy with himself - big grin and tail just a waggin. And, as soon as he finished his

climb up, he ran to me completely oblivious to the fact that the bed ended and dropped off about 16 inches to the floor. Luckily, his charge across the bed led him into my arms and not crashing onto the floor. Nowadays, he's on and off the bed often. He climbs up and carefully steps off when he wants to get down - like a normal Golden but in his own unique way too.

He definitely gets around better, walking and running straighter and with more stability and he doesn't run or bump into things nearly as much. Most important, he rarely rear up and over when he shakes - rather he goes into a low "play bow" and maintains balance (sort of). On the few occasions when he does rear up (sometimes during play) he usually will recover with a quick turn / pivot "at the top" that brings him down on his feet. Of course, due to his condition he, runs differently compared to other Golden's - some would describe his motions as a bit spastic. As more time passed, however, I noted that as he became stronger and more stable, his running also became more uniform - for sure still a bit spastic but each step the same as the last - just different from a "normal" dog's running. And he has "Gears" too in that, the more excited he is, the faster he runs and the more he leaps with each step, rather than just running but still with consistent movement within each "gear".

Chasing me and playing "Get Daddy" has become one of our favorite games and training tools. I put some kibble on the ground, which occupies him and allows me to walk away 25 - 35 paces or so. When he finishes munching he comes a runnin' to "get" me. The more excited he gets, the more he leaps and prances rather than just a running - but it's usually in a straight line to me and, nowadays, he rarely falls - even when I move to the side and let him run on by. He makes a full speed turn and comes back to get me with gusto. However, I do have to be careful when he gets to me, as he runs better than he "brakes" and can run into me if I'm not careful - possibly hurting himself or me as he can run pretty fast nowadays. He's improved in this area as well and, while I'm sure he'll never "stop on a dime and give you 9 cents change" he does stop on a quarter (with a turn) and gives you about 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ cents back....

In addition to chasing me, he also loves wrestling with me or the other special needs pair I've fostered since September - Sammy n Grizzly (the pair with seizures). He and the female, Sammy, are regular playmates and her semi-aggressive wrestling "moves" are a significant part of his improvements as she tries to grab a leg and "flip" him to the ground, sometimes throwing a shoulder into him (just as she does with her lifelong buddy, Grizzly, who's a lot bigger than either Koda or Sammy). Koda's efforts to get away or wrestle her to the ground make the whole thing hilarious to watch - and contribute significantly to his progress and improvement. Sammy has also discovered the safety / training harness I put on him (you can see it in his pic) and she'll grab the harness, sometimes by the "handle strap" to hold him in check. It is big-time comical to watch him prance up to her in "attack mode" which she greets with her own "attack" and away they go.

Protecting Koda from the affects of his condition includes the training / safety harness you see in his picture - it provides both a handle to catch him if he's falling and a ready leash - he uses it as a chew toy as well, gee, what a surprise. Additionally it was necessary to cover ALL tile, wood or even cement floors with area rugs or carpets to give him better traction and eliminate slipping. I also looked for and either eliminated or padded "crash" zones...where he could hit his head and hurt himself. I covered my back stoop with padded door mats, put extra area rugs and mats in the family room where we all spend most of our time. A yard or so of pine needles, spread on the lawn outside the back door provide a soft play area (and help with house training).

That first weekend, even though I had a very short week, I agonized over how to leave him when I had to go to work or out for errands etc. Should I kennel him to help prevent him from hurting himself? Should I let him run with the crew? - I was worried about the risks but also fully aware that the more time he spent with the crew, the better he would be - becoming more familiar with the layout of my home and yard and growing stronger and more stable each day. I thought about getting some input but didn't as I knew it really came down to what how much risk I was willing to take compared to how well he was progressing by my giving him the opportunity to be Golden...

Once again, Koda showed me he'd be just fine. Tamra Howard showed me how he would just lay down and chill if "his person" (the person he bonds with) was staying in one area or spot and not moving around. He did the same thing here so I thought I'd try to build on that. When I had to go out, I waited a few minutes at the door before exiting and sure enough, after just a minute or 2, he just lay down and, as I left quietly, he just remained laid down and relaxed, seeming to know that I'll be home shortly. As I wrote earlier, most days now, he'll follow my command to "Lay down" and will go to one of the doggie beds in my family room or, more often, "Come up" and he'll climb up on our bed and lay down.

As far as feeding goes, Tamara shared that the best way she found to feed him was to just hold his bowl for him while he ate and she was right. He finishes quickly so it's really no problem and, by hugging him into my leg with his bowl on my knee he is able to eat with little to no movement from his condition making things difficult. He has learned excellent "kitchen manners" in that he knows he gets his own bowl and, while he dances about the kitchen, encouraging me to finish faster, he doesn't bother any of my 4 others bowls (and they all get theirs first as I hold his for him) until the after meal "lick-about" whereby they all get to lick one another's bowls. He also has learned to share licking a spoon or plate with my others - just like any other Golden...

I also noted that he was very interested in pork rolls (chews) I passed out one evening so I thought I'd give that a try and found the same as with his bowl, hugging him into my knee and holding the chewer let him enjoy chewing one, perhaps for the first time. He just loved it and chewed until I couldn't hold on any longer. Building on that, I found that he can enjoy treaters just like any other Golden - all I had to do was break the biscuit into bits, about sugar cube size, and hold my hand to his chin like a rice bowl. This works really well with kibble bits.

He also showed me that he loves toys too, just needs a little help getting going and, sometimes finding them and then look out cause he's "game". He'll chew and play tug with a rope toy and is learning to like the squeaky ones. The bungee toy I took with me became one of his favorites too - the first night he discovered it, my big male, Nike, grabbed the other end and pulled. Koda pulled right back a couple times and then let go, letting his end "bungie-snap" Nike in the nose, which set him to bouncing in play.

He has bonded quickly and strongly to me and is definitely dependant upon me - "his daddy" as he doesn't have the same sense of "home" or direction as most Golden's do (whereby they learn where "home" is quickly). When I take him for exercise and runs by himself (about every other day) I test him by putting some kibble on the ground for him to peck at and eat and pacing off about 25 paces and wait quietly. When he's done munching he (at first) didn't see me and would head off in whatever direction he decided - and not always towards home. Now he looks around until he finds me, taking a few steps in each direction and, once he sees where I am, breaking into a

"leaping sprint" to me. He also responds quickly to my voice or a whistle and comes a runnin' to get me however I can only shudder at what would happen to him if he were to get out by himself...

He is a loving and affectionate little guy - seemingly no stranger to "gettin' sugar" - even though he was abandoned in his back yard by his former owner. In terms of giving affection, aside from very "awwww-inspiring" and loving cuddles, he's a kisser and his condition makes that an interesting experience as he'll sometimes bob his head while giving me some love - resulting in an "all over" kiss (including my glasses). He'll usually nibble my nose (or ear) while giving me a kiss - which, I'm sure, has nothing to do with his condition and everything to do with his sassy, playful spirit. When he comes up to me from the side to give sugar (when sitting with me on the bed, perhaps), he gives the term "wet willy" a whole new "dimension", if you know what I mean - though perhaps that's too much information for some.

Make no mistake, Koda is definitely a Special Needs Golden who requires extra time and care. In addition to his coordination problems, he has vision issues which I'm still learning to work with by eliminating hazards and not changing furniture around etc. He's so much more special than needy though and he's both significantly less work than I expected and a huge pleasure to have around. He's smart as heck too - learning new things quickly such as lay down, sit and where to go potty - just as you'd expect of any other 2 year old Golden. And nowadays he can sit or stand next to me and get an ear rub or head scratch w/out worrying about his falling over...I usually still lean over to hug him though, just 'cause he deserves it...

It seems to me that his condition, coupled with his sparky, playful and happy personality gives him a "Goofy Factor" of about plus 8 on normal days with periods of +10. Some may think that insensitive but if you ever spend some time with him and look beyond his symptoms that's just what you'll see - a wonderfully, funny, goofy little Golden who loves life and his new home and family.

One never knows what he'll do next, just like a box of Forrest Gump chocolates...such as the morning we headed out back for pee and play time when he decided to share my coffee with me. I was distracted - checking Sammy's ears, perhaps and heard a licking sound at my elbow. When I looked over, sure enough, he was helping himself and enjoying my Crème Brule'e creamer.

The real gift of Koda is the inspiration of his unflinching courage and spirit and his happy Golden aura that is so strong it completely outshines his condition. While many others saw only his disabilities, some of us were able to see through that and open our eyes and hearts to his truly Golden personality. Liz Berry, Marilyn Ormond, Jill Morgan, Barbara Blanke, Tamra Howard (perhaps others) and I were all able to see his true gold...and we all agree what a truly wonderful Golden he is.

Many of you wrote to me with words of thanks and encouragement when I decided to take him in and I appreciate all your kinds words of support. For me it was an easy decision as I work only part time and, I, therefore, am lucky enough to be able to give him my time and, as I give all my Golden's, my heart...He does the rest - and gives so much more in return.

No matter what my mood is or how badly I may hurt on a given day, he lifts my spirits and makes me laugh from the moment he awakens (usually kissing me on the nose or going after my hand or a rope toy) until his little head hits the pillow.

His former owners saw only his disabilities and missed out on a truly wonderful Golden who neither wants nor needs our pity or sympathy;

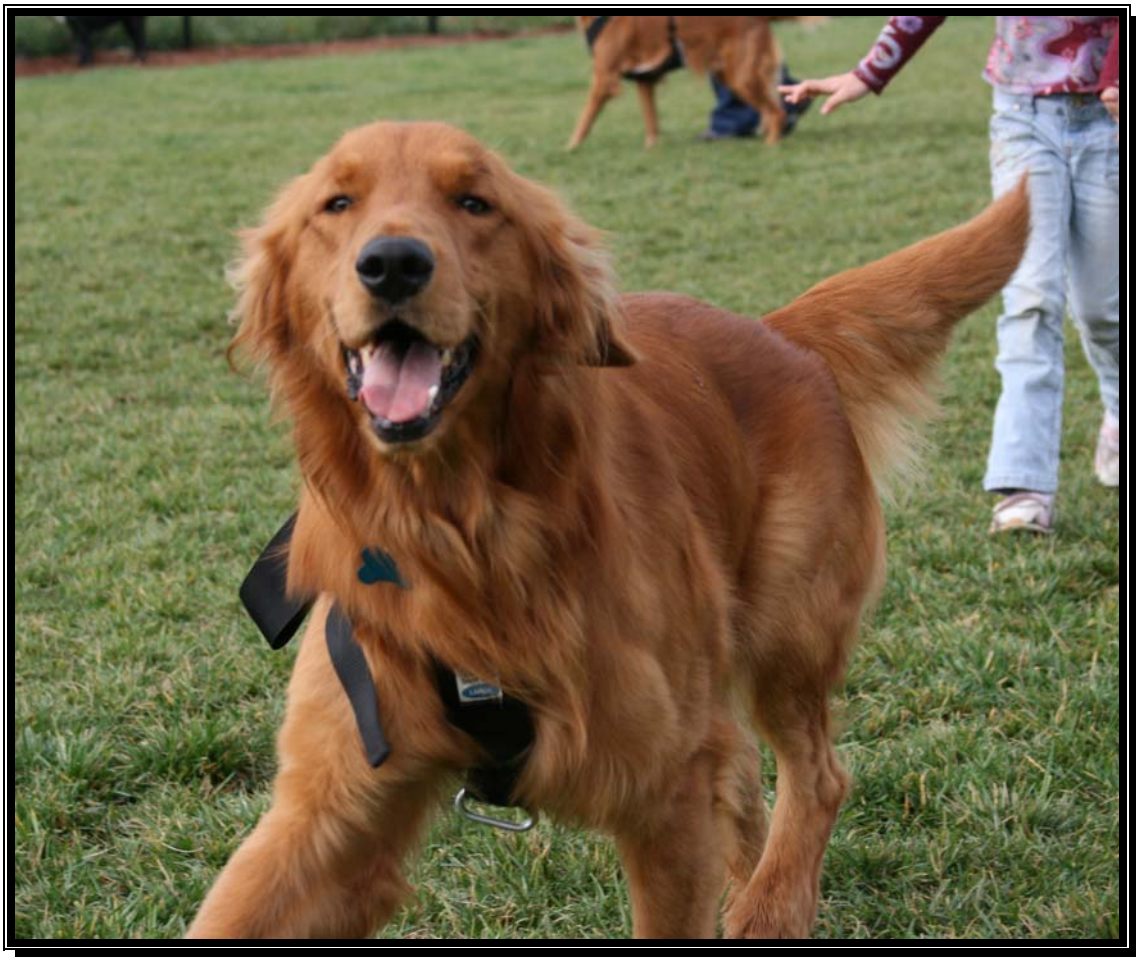
Rather this little fella just wants the chance to play and have fun with his dad & buddies...

See for him, being Golden is not a goal to be achieved...it's who he already is...

*A "PS" to Koda's story is the list of my 4 Golden heroes who contribute daily and significantly to his development and improvement - Nike (7,m), Aspen (9,f) and Grizzly n Sammy (my 10 y/old seizure hospice pair m & f, respectively). He learns so much from them (including going through the doggie door) and chases after them in playful pursuit, wrasslin' whenever he can get a match

They all treat him like a pesky little brother who they love to play with but who, sometimes, gets in trouble and can be a pain. Most significantly - they all, "to the Golden" - have learned that he's part of the family and, when he steps on them, when he trips over them and when he falls on them (even during sleep), he's not a threat to fight, it's just lil brother and, while they don't like it, I'm sure, nowadays, they rarely react much at all...perhaps just moving away...sometimes with a grump, usually not these days.

After all, it's just lil brother and they are all NorCal Rescue Golden's who epitomize both the best of the breed & the joy of rescue...



Playin' Chase Dad!